



REVIEW

Lying and Truthfulness: A Thomistic Perspective by Stewart Clem, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023, pp. xiv+213, £85, hbk

The 1994 version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stated: ‘To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error *someone who has the right to know the truth* (2483, italics added)’. In the revised version, the italicised words have been omitted. Or at least they have in the current online versions in Latin and Italian, but not in English. I pointed this out to an Italian friend, mentioning the standard dilemma of what to say to the Nazi at the door who is hunting a Jew hidden in your house. She replied, ‘The Nazi is already in error so I think the meaning of *indurre in errore* is certainly a bit wider and more metaphysical than simply the notion of having to know the truth’. In other words, telling the aggressor a lie would not lead him into error anyway – he is already deeply in it. I tell this story to illustrate the complexity of the moral debate about lying, as our various moral intuitions seem to pull in different directions, while every linguistic formulation needs detailed clarification.

Stewart Clem’s monograph invokes St Thomas Aquinas to sort out the issue. In brief, he contextualises it within an account of the virtue of truthfulness, and he clarifies it by arguing that lies as such are venially, but not mortally, sinful. When the Nazi knocks at the door, we may have no choice but to sin, either seriously, by betraying the Jew, or venially, by lying to the Nazi. In the fallen world in which we live, the sins of others, individually or collectively, can put us in situations where we cannot avoid sinning ourselves. Our venial sins, however, may be ‘miniscule’ and are at any rate easily forgiven.

Clem sets the scene first by describing and rejecting (at least as incompatible with Aquinas) a range of alternative responses by Christian ethicists to the question of whether lying can ever be justified. The next chapter provides historical context, summarising the patristic and medieval debate (before St Thomas), with a focus, unsurprisingly, on St Augustine. (Following conventional analysis, he underplays the developmental dimension of Augustine’s account, which actually brings him nearer to Aquinas than Clem realises.)

The following two chapters provide the core of Clem’s account through a careful analysis of Aquinas on the sins of speech and on the virtue of ‘truthfulness’ (Clem uses *veracitas* in the relevant chapter title, although Aquinas himself usually prefers *veritas*). A key point is that the sins which offend against the Eighth Commandment are sins of speech that involve not lying, or not mere lying, but specific injustices to a neighbour, such as lying in court, insult (*contumelia*) or slander (*detractio*). Lying is treated elsewhere, as a failure in truthfulness, which in its turn is a ‘potential part’ of justice. Importantly, this does not mean that all lies are offences against justice. Truthfulness is a virtue ‘insofar as it is conducive to the bonds that make us human’. Lies are bad because they are sins against this virtue.

The tradition inherited a category of 'jocose' lies. Clem argues that for Aquinas this does not include jokes, which are best understood as (sin-free) figurative language. Rather, St Thomas integrates Aristotle into the tradition by interpreting these lies as boasting. (This is intriguing: arguably the most common, though neglected, reason for telling lies is to make oneself look better than one should look.)

A precise account of Aquinas' understanding of truth prepares the ground for explaining his definition of a lie as an assertion intended to deceive the hearer about *what the speaker believes* (rather than about the subject of his speech). This 'assertion' need not involve words: dissimulation is also a kind of lie.

On this basis, and with the help of modern philosophers of language, Clem then moves beyond Aquinas to argue powerfully that equivocation is also a form of lying. The truthfulness of an assertion depends not only on the words themselves but also on unarticulated assumptions shared by competent speakers of a language. If in reply to his persecutors' question, 'Where is Athanasius?', Athanasius were to reply, 'He is not far from here', that, in Clem's view, would be a lie. This is because the normal conventions of speech, on which Athanasius would be relying, make his sentence imply, 'I am not Athanasius'. A principled Dutch Christian thought she was avoiding lying by telling the Nazis, 'The Jews are under the table', when they were in fact hidden under the floorboards beneath the table. On Clem's account, she was guilty, even if forgivably so, of lying.

Clem then summarises eight 'Thomistic theses on lying' and provides fifteen brief examples to illustrate these. He gives the impression of aiming to provide neat solutions to dilemmas over which people have agonised, in theory and in practice, for many centuries. His 'solutions', however, are unlikely to close the debate. For example,

(i) It is arguable that in normal cases of lying, the liar intends to deceive the hearer not about the contents of her own mind, but about the external world. If Fred says, 'Did you steal the biscuit?' and Mary lies, 'No', Mary wants Fred to understand *not* 'Mary doesn't believe that she took the biscuit', *but* 'Mary didn't take the biscuit'. This point is related to a wider question of whether the primary location of truth is in spoken communication or in private thought.

(ii) If lying is morally bad 'because it is opposed to *veracitas*', then what about actions that 'oppose' other virtues such as gentleness or care for creation? Is *all* use of force 'venially sinful'? Is *all* use of plastic or petrol? If not, what is distinctive about lying, that every example of it counts as a sin? Relatedly, is the claim that no circumstances can change 'the *species* of a *contra mentem* utterance into something other than a lie' substantial or merely linguistic?

(iii) If the underlying purpose of the virtue of truthfulness is social, then cannot respect for those deeper purposes sometimes justify a lie?

(iii) What is it about language that makes many people find equivocation (in hard circumstances) more acceptable than a direct lie?

(iv) Does it make any significant moral difference to other sins of speech if an untruth is told? (If not, why are they categorised by Aquinas as 'false witness'?)

The biggest difficulty, at least for Catholics, is that few of us would accept that 'Athanasius' or the Dutch lady acted in a way that 'weakens charity ... manifests a disordered affection for created goods ... impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of the virtues and the practice of the moral good ... merits temporal punishment' (*Catechism* 1863, description of venial sin). Suppose, however, that Clem is right that we are likely,

in a fallen world, regularly to face dilemmas in which we cannot avoid sinning. If so, this seems more like the beginning than the conclusion of a significant moral debate.

Academic conventions perhaps exercise a subtle pressure which makes Clem dismiss a little too quickly alternative accounts that do greater justice to certain of our complex set of intuitions about lying. His excellent final chapter, entitled 'A Thomistic Theory of Bullshit', illuminates more pernicious social pressures. He describes the vice of 'truth indifference' and shows subtly how this can become 'a social and structural habit, a principle of action, which is habituated in persons and organisations' (an example he gives is advertising). He convincingly appeals for a rehabilitation of the virtue of truthfulness in order to give ethical discourse the resources to confront a culture that cares little about whether people lie or not.

Reading this book may leave you with more questions than you began with. Perhaps that is what good philosophy should do.

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