

## *The Nature of Mendacity*

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The nicest people are not always the most effective  
politicians

*Denis Healey*

### **The Sainly Perfectionists**

I am naming those, who are opposed to lying in all situations, the perfectionists. John Wesley, St Augustine and Immanuel Kant are famous proponents. When we deal at a later stage with those who do approve of lying under given circumstances, we shall be investigating separately the intentions and the consequences of the liars. Such a task is not called for when examining the performances of the perfectionists because they act as they do in the belief that the repercussions of all lies are automatically always pernicious. As an old English proverb would have it: 'It is even a sin to lie against the devil.' The religious foundations for this kind of totalitarianism, which allows for no exceptions, are well documented. John Wesley stated that those who lie because they think it will generate beneficial results deserve damnation; to the God of Truth, benevolent lies are an abomination. He subscribed to that ancient axiom: 'I would not tell a wilful lie to save the souls of the whole world.' In his autobiography Gandhi gave the impression that he also adhered to this absolutist creed: 'For me, truth is the sovereign principle ... the passion for truth was innate in me ... I never resorted to untruth in my profession.' Christopher Dawson, professor of Roman Catholic Studies at Harvard and one of the (few) modern perfectionists, pronounced: 'as soon as men decide that all means are permitted to fight an evil, then their good

becomes indistinguishable from the evil that they set out to destroy’.

St Augustine was a sinner in his youth before he became an extreme religious perfectionist; fortunately he spelt out his messages in written detail. He wrote to a Spanish colleague to praise him for his zeal in raging against heretics. However, he also reminded him how illogical it was to draw them out of hiding by employing lies. Why, he asked, are we hunting them down? It surely is either so that we may teach them the truth or, by convincing them of error, keep them from harming others: ‘Therefore, how can I suitably proceed against lies by lying? Or should robbery be proceeded against by robbery, sacrilege by sacrilege, and adultery by adultery?’ St Augustine argued that God is not just an enemy of ‘unjust lies’ but of all lies: ‘He who says that there are some just lies must be regarded as saying that there are some just sins. What could be more absurd?’ He propped his vehement condemnation of ‘beneficial lies’ by outlining two hypothetical situations. He instanced a seriously ill patient who inquired about the well-being of his son. If one told him the truth, to wit that he had died, and in consequence the anguished father also dies, people might clamour that the patient had been slain. While St Augustine conceded that he had been moved by such an accusation, he nevertheless refused to acknowledge that telling the truth could ever be described as homicide. He supported his case by formulating a sensitive proposition: ‘If you reject the wish of a “shameless” woman to have sexual intercourse with you and as a result she dies of a broken heart, will then chastity also be homicide?’ St Augustine beseeched the purveyors of benevolent lies: ‘It is not true that we sometimes ought to lie. And what is not true we should never try to persuade anyone to believe.’ This outstanding perfectionist did speak of the occasions on which he had once felt pressured to rehabilitate ‘compensatory aims’, i.e. good deeds executed by bad means. He announced proudly that he had always overcome such temptations because he would have no truck with those who enunciate that lies are ever just. He said that he behaved as he did because, as a matter of principle, his faith knew of no reason to concede the existence of ‘any lie that is not a sin’. Though he never said so explicitly, one may safely infer from his writings that he considered his absolute refusal to lie as

being more meritorious than any means to alleviate the suffering of others. St Augustine proclaimed that he refused to countenance any exceptions to his hard guideline. Yet, he laid down that, despite all he had argued on this subject, one may make deliberately false statements with the intent to deceive if these 'are licensed by divine command or inspiration'.

The quintessence of the reasoning by the following three perfectionists is mainly of a secular nature. Samuel Johnson opposed lying for both bad and good causes because he opined that once one starts to tell a lie, whatever its kind, one is never believed again even when telling the truth. He also refused to tolerate benevolent lying because lying in general tended to destroy the 'confidence of society, weakened the credit of intelligence and interrupted the security of life'. Johnson feared that a well-intentioned lie would, just like an evil lie, spread the disease and affect adversely the body politic. His biographer did not agree with him. James Boswell maintained that every servant with any degree of intelligence understands that announcing to visitors that his master is not at home is not an affirmation of a fact but a customary phrase to indicate that the master does not wish to be seen; therefore there can be no bad effect from such a lie. Johnson would have none of this; he was not prepared to allow his servants to say that he was not at home when this was untrue: 'a servant's strict regard for truth must be weakened by such a practice. A philosopher may know that it is merely a form of denial but few servants are such nice distinguishers. If I accustom a servant to lie for me, have I not reason to apprehend that he will tell many lies for himself?' I have not come across any other perfectionist who is so obsessed with the evil of lying that he advocated, as Johnson did, cruel punishments for mendacity. Since many liars are 'so insensible of right and wrong, they might properly be awakened to a sense of their crimes by denunciations of a whipping-post or a pillory'.

Critics of the Scottish-German philosopher Immanuel Kant attacked his extreme perfectionism because 'it would make any society impossible' as it was not practical always to tell only the truth; furthermore it, was perverse to tell the truth when this harmed others. The fanatical Kant responded that lies always harm somebody — if not a partic-

ular person then humanity in general: 'To be truthful in all declarations is a sacred and unconditionally commanding law of reason that admits no expediency whatsoever.' Kant not only sneered at what he called the 'supposed' right of altruists to lie but went beyond this. He was prepared to share the truth even with people who had no right to know the truth. Kant stated explicitly that he would not exonerate any kind of lies just because of their ensuing virtuous consequences: 'It is a formal duty to tell the truth to everyone, however great the disadvantage that may arise from it.' One infamous illustration produced many negative reactions from contemporary commentators; even today few discuss Kant's other contributions to philosophy without mentioning it. He declared proudly that if a man, who planned to kill a given person, came to his house and asked him whether the intended victim was there, he would reply faithfully 'yes' (if such was the case). He strove to display unashamedly his conviction that it was better for the intended murder to be carried out than that he, the honest philosopher, should willingly participate in the evil act of lying.

American infants are already told in their cradles about the saintly first president of the US. By the time they go to school they will have learnt by heart what little George had said: 'I cannot tell a lie, Pa; you know that I cannot tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet.' Some historians claim that no such event took place. This may be so but national-political legends exert a powerful didactic influence and one may therefore deal with this celebrated saying even if it is historically flawed. The boy did not elaborate (not even when he was an adult) what had motivated him to be a perfectionist; he certainly did not bring religion into it. I have been particularly struck by his repeating the word 'cannot'; it appears to suggest that young Washington suffered from a mental and/or physical impediment that prevented him from uttering a lie if and when he might opt to do so. Normal persons have the choice to tell the truth or to lie. If they withstand the temptation to lie and choose to tell the truth, which could be painful or costly, one may applaud them for their heroic morality. But in the case of little George his genes or some other factors, over which he had no control, were responsible for his incapacity to make such a choice — his famous utterance implies that he was so programmed as not to possess

the internal power to utter an untruth. A person, blind from birth, can honestly assert that he has never seen the sun rise; this is an unfortunate fact of life which, however, does not make him a hero. If George *could* not lie, then he is hardly a model for those of us who are able to choose whether to lie or tell the truth. (St Augustine has related how he had been in positions where he was tempted to lie but managed to withstand the temptation). But whatever has occasioned George's behaviour pattern, an important feature was brought to light, one which in my view is not creditable for a president of the United States. Little George, the youthful perfectionist, wanted it to be known that his make-up was such that he could not lie; we are expected to sing a song of praise for an individual with such an upright character. I question his probity. Never to lie – not even to save your country? Not even to convert heathens to Christianity? Not even to promise justice at home and abroad?

By commencing this book with a few remarks on perfectionists may misleadingly indicate that this is due to their weighty importance. The opposite is the case. While I could not have avoided mentioning their existence, they are today a tribe of little quantitative significance. I wrote about them at the beginning to clear the decks. My thesis is exclusively concerned with non-perfectionists. Today there is almost unanimous agreement that lying is at times desirable and morally justified. There are of course sharp differences of opinion on how, and under what circumstances, mendacity may honourably be employed.

### **A Restrictive Definition**

Voltaire announced solemnly: 'If you wish to converse with me, define your terms'. It is in fact highly unrewarding to embark on a book which commences with a detailed definition. I have done so at my peril by delineating the core of lying at the start before specific aspects of lying are laid out. My search for an elaborate working definition was forced upon me for otherwise I would have had to call for divine guidance as St Augustine did when he wrestled with the concept of time. He prayed: 'For so it is, O Lord my God, I measure it; but what it is that I measure I do not know.'

**A sane person is a liar<sup>1</sup> when he disseminates significant messages, factual information and forecasts that he considers to be false. Lying is the plausible and purposeful deception of others by acts of commission and omission.**

People lie explicitly and implicitly, orally and in writing. They act a lie non-verbally by gestures and the tone of their voices. They feign grief and pain. They lay false trails. Davenport-Hines has unearthed a doctored picture of Dorothy and Harold Macmillan sitting close together on a bench. They were an estranged couple but the sad Conservative leader did not want the public to know it. In fact they were seated with some distance between them. To gain reassuring publicity, the middle of the photograph was cut out. Dorothy and Harold were presented to the electorate as a harmonious pair. Christina Michalos<sup>2</sup> has described how a royal photographer doctored the picture of the Earl of Wessex's wedding; he replaced Prince William's unhappy expression with an aesthetically pleasing smile.

Lying is a personal endeavour. Governments, parties, churches and corporations are never mendacious. Only individuals, acting alone or in concert with others, carry out the actual lying though the impact of lies is frequently enhanced if the disseminators play a prominent role in notable – and particularly in respected – organizations.

'Where there is error, may we bring truth' is a phrase in a renowned prayer by St. Francis of Assisi. Per se, it is a valid avowal though it has a precarious implication: it sustains the widespread disposition to describe all who utter inaccuracies as liars. With very few exceptions every lie is indeed a factually flawed assertion. But, in the methodology which I am employing, it does not follow that all errors and inaccuracies are automatically lies.

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- [1] Giannetti would have it that animals too are capable of lying and has furnished some amazing illustrations. A stratagem, said to be employed by certain primates to avoid the physical aggression of threatening males, is to pretend to be hurt by, for example, ostentatiously limping. When the potential aggressor is nearby, the monkey limps but as soon as he disappears from the scene, the monkey again walks normally; if the threatening creature returns, the monkey suffers a sudden 'relapse'. Though the temptation, to include such clever animals in my definition, was great, I have resisted it.
- [2] 'When The Camera Does Lie', *The Times*, London, July 20 1999.

What about persons who inadvertently relate the truth while being convinced that they are setting forth an untruthful account? As their motive was to deceive, I classify them as paradoxical liars.

According to English law and most moral critics a successful plea of genuine ignorance<sup>3</sup> clears some communicators of untruths from the charge of lying. Such a defence obviously does not apply to individuals who are, and/or have proclaimed themselves to be, experts on specific subjects. But even such persons are not necessarily guilty of lying when they prognosticate about future happenings. The head of the German government, Helmut Kohl, declared in 1988 that he personally would not live to see the unification of Germany. He misled his listeners through his incompetence as a forecaster but this does not prove that he set out to deceive. His compatriot, Karl Marx, predicted with certainty the progressive impoverishment of the proletariat. He too should not be called a liar though his widely disseminated prediction did not come true. One may safely assume that he believed in the validity of his erroneous glimpses into the future.

Oscar Wilde asserted that the highest development of lying – to wit, something he heartily approved of – was ‘Lying in Art’. He has been followed by many others who refer to sculptors, painters, writers of fiction as liars but, as well-intentioned liars they are deemed to deserve being praised and not castigated. According to my conceptual approach, artists are imaginative professionals who, unlike photographers, are not charged with the task of describing events or individuals in a factually correct fashion. They are

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[3] Eysenck’s pertinent, though probably now antiquated, example of ignorance: ‘A large-scale study in the US was carried out on the relation between cancer in the womb and circumcision – the hypothesis being that wives of circumcised husbands are less likely to contract this disease because of greater hygiene practised by circumcised men. Many thousands of women were investigated and asked about their husbands’ penile status; hundreds of hours were spent on computers, which transformed the data into digestible statistical fodder. When far-reaching conclusions were arrived at from these results, a psychologist asked quite innocently whether many of these women actually knew whether their husbands had been circumcised! After much ridicule had been heaped upon his head, a special investigation was organized to answer this question and it turned out to be “no”. Quite a few had only the haziest notion of what circumcision meant – some thought it meant wholesale amputation. Many women had never seen their husbands in the nude and had no idea whether they had or had not been circumcised.’

not liars when they employ their talents to create 'inaccurate' replicas. As the public do not expect them to be truthful (in the orthodox sense), they cannot be said to be deceitful. Of course 'poetic and artistic licensees' should also escape scot-free.

An American general once denounced the Soviet Union: 'They lie intentionally, he said, unable to suppress his anger.' Margaret Thatcher would have it that 'You don't tell deliberate lies but sometimes you have to be evasive.' The words 'intentionally' and 'deliberate' are in this context tautological. By definition, all lies are told to deceive. There are unintentional errors — lies are never unintentional or non-deliberate.

A deception only qualifies as a lie when it is purposeful. The liar must have in mind a definite objective, e.g. to enrich himself, derive pleasure from self-aggrandizement, obtain spiritual satisfaction from promoting a cause dear to him, etc. In the absence of a definite reason for seeking to deceive others, the individuals who spread inaccurate information may justly be denounced for their ignoble deeds but they are not liars. In the following example the perpetrators were guilty of laziness but not of planning to deceive. In his autobiography Douglas Jay recalled the dismay that he encountered after joining *The Economist* in 1933. He found that the journal's authoritative index of wholesale prices included data that were made up in the office. When the true figures could not be obtained in time for the printing deadline, the journalists made them up. Jay was too charitable to describe this furtive exercise as mendacious and suggested that the compilers of the index 'had been guessing the figures'.

My definition is only concerned with substantial lies. This excludes, inter alia, the simplification of technical messages prepared for non-experts and minor adjustments of statistics. (This is akin to the *de minimis* rule where judges pay no heed to petty inaccuracies or minor unlawful acts). When Werfel wrote *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, he knew full well that the Armenian defenders had held out against the Turks no longer than 36 days. But to make his book more impressive, he chose a wrong figure. '40' is an often cited symbolic number in the Bible where, for example, it is related that Moses had stayed on Mount Sinai for forty days and Jesus had spent forty days in the wilderness. Though, conse-

quently, his title was inaccurate, Werfel still does not deserve to be castigated as a liar.

Only significant falsehoods qualify as lies. This, therefore, excludes the wearing of Robin Hood garbs, bluffing during a game of poker, relating fairy tales to infants and other playful activities.<sup>4</sup>

To function effectively as a liar, the deceiver has to be credible and his falsehood must be plausible. In the following four examples the individuals, who spread mendacious messages, were not liars because their audiences surmised that they did not mean what they said.

(a) When the Speaker of the HoC is asked to reprimand an MP for using unparliamentary language, he often responds with: 'I did not hear this.' The Speaker, guilty of uttering this untruth, should nevertheless not be accused of lying as the HoC is very familiar with this formula which conveys to the offender that his reprehensible conduct was noted but not deemed to be so serious as to warrant a formal reproof.

(b) In Teheran's central bazaar a vendor swears 'on the life of my wife and seven children' that his last-mentioned proclaimed price is the 'final offer'. This is of course not an honest exclamation for he reckons that the potential buyers, surrounding his stall, are fully aware that he would be happy if the bargaining continued.

(c) My colleague is bound by convention to invite me to his daughter's wedding. He does not really want me to come and has no illusions about my inclination to be there. Under these circumstances I am not to be dubbed a liar when my reply refers to 'our distress that a previous commitment prevents my wife and I from having the pleasure to participate in the happy celebration'.

(d) On the eve of the first Gulf War, France was suspected of being a lukewarm member of the anti- Iraq alliance. When an associate of President Mitterand, Michel Vauzelle, arrived in Baghdad, the world speculated that France was negotiating unilaterally with Saddam Hussein. Vauzelle denied that he had a message from Mitterand for the Iraqi authorities.

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[4] Bernice Kanner has pleaded that when mothers tell their children: 'you get sties in your eyes from peeing in the road' or 'if you don't wash behind your ears, potatoes will growth there', these are not really lies. She is right.

Laughingly, he insisted that he was in Baghdad as a tourist. This diplomatic falsehood should surely not be called a lie.<sup>5</sup>

How does my definition regard people who are bullied or even tortured and as a result feel impelled to make expediently false declarations? Many serious analysts maintain unyieldingly that lying can only be a 'voluntary' activity. My methodological stance treats all untruths, including those which are articulated under threats and/or tortures, as lies – provided the falsehoods verbalized by the victims are sufficiently plausible to have a desired impact on the tormentors. I surmise that torture is a mitigating feature which the heavenly archangels take into account when preparing their dossiers but, in my terrestrial elucidation of mendacity, lies are lies, whether induced by the perils of death or personal malevolence or altruism.

The credibility of those who disseminate lies varies with time. A mendacious trick that misleads one generation may be shrugged off by a succeeding, more sophisticated, one. The women, who first wore brassieres with built-in padding, were then specified to be liars. It was said that this novel invention was meant to deceive, particularly men, in that it made the proud owners appear to have larger and more shapely breasts than nature had provided them with. Initially, these artificial aids, giving brassiere-wearing women a voluptuous figure, were called 'gay deceivers'. But by the time tens of millions of women were wearing them, the cheating had ceased and the wearers no longer deserved to be described as liars as had been the fate of the pioneers. (Homosexual emancipation had also made it necessary to change the nomenclature: they are now called 'falsies'.)

Many distinguished luminaries in the social sciences uphold the seemingly attractive notion that individuals can lie to themselves. Thus Nietzsche has argued that the most frequently exposed lie is the one said to oneself. Self-deception is a self-contradictory, absurd incongruity for it does not entail the deception of others. An economist, who has concluded that the Albanian economy is booming but appears

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[5] Gordon Brook-Shepherd relates how in 1938 the British ambassador Sir Neville Henderson was instructed to register a protest against Germany swallowing up Austria. Herman Goering, then acting head of the German government, countered this with an official explanation: Hitler had merely crossed the border into Austria 'to visit his mother's grave'.

on the radio to say that Albania is afflicted by a deepening recession, is clearly a lying charlatan. But if he utters this falsehood standing in front of his bathroom mirror, he invites pity but should not be connoted a liar.<sup>6</sup>

To sum up: several attributes must prevail before an uttered falsehood is described as a lie. Two important features are (a) the belief of the disseminator that he is indeed spreading an untruth and (b) his intent to deceive. A group of borderline liars must at least be mentioned though I fear that a strict interpretation of my definition bans them from the club. Is it a perverse oxymoron when a person, imbued with the evil design to deceive, uses the ruse of telling the truth in order to convince his sceptical audience that in reality he is lying? His disclosures are aimed to make his listeners think that what he is communicating cannot be the truth because it would be out of character for him to let his adversaries know what is the truth. He conjectures that his audience would conclude that the opposite of what he is revealing is the truth. In 2002, on the eve of the second Gulf War, the top spokesmen of Saddam Hussein announced that Iraq did not at that point of time possess dangerous, mass-destructive weapons which could be used with immediate effect to halt the advance of any invading force. The astute dictator was convinced that these denials (and his own unsavoury past) would merely confirm, in the eyes of his enemies, that the opposite was the truth. That indeed proved correct. By telling the truth he sought to deceive and in that respect he succeeded. His premise proved accurate. Ought we to call him a liar?

### **The Three Modes**

There is a deep conceptual gulf between those who lie for selfish, frequently material, objectives and those who lie for altruistic motives which is one of the main themes of this

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[6] The sophisticated, though untypical, example, cited by Giannetti, is very enticing but I do not believe that it invalidates my generalization: 'To avoid arriving late at appointments, I put my alarm-clock forward by 30 minutes, so as to compensate for my natural lateness. The secret of this tactic is NOT TO REMEMBER. As long as I manage to forget that the information I am receiving is false, all is well. But, if I begin to remember the truth, every time I consult my clock, I begin to make the relevant "discount" and am back to square one.'

book. Liars make use of one of three techniques. Category A incorporates all the direct, undiluted forms of transparent deceptions. It includes the claimant who cheats the welfare state by collecting benefits for his five non-existent children. He is neither better nor worse than the scientist who publishes fraudulent research reports, allegedly based on meticulous interviewing, or the academic who displays 'findings' derived from experiments that were never carried out. Politicians and businessmen also belong to this category when, for nefarious reasons, they woo customers and voters by issuing spurious statistics. So is the commercial practice of certain Asian manufacturers who export goods to Europe with labels that denote (say) Austria as the country of origin.

Category B embraces oblique and sophisticated falsehoods which, intellectually, are more complex than the straight lies of category A. Hitler and others have opined that the bigger a lie, the more credible it is. This may indeed be so when fables are told to simpletons but otherwise it is not a valid generalization. To entice sceptical audiences to believe in the factual accuracy of subtle falsehoods, it matters greatly whether the liars can proficiently dress them up in plausible costumes. Tennyson realized the attraction of such a strategy which is why he warned that 'a lie which is half a truth is ever the worst of lies'. Throughout the ages this line of thinking has been taken up by moralists; several have proclaimed that 'a half-truth is a whole lie'. Astutely effective liars therefore insert some true features into a statement which, overall, is mendacious in substance. Thus a company's chairman, eager to find an excuse for the heavy losses suffered under his tutelage, may assert that these were brought about by the imposition of a new tax: the government is to blame. His explanation is indeed true — but only to a minor extent. 20% of the losses are indeed accounted for by the new tax but 80% are attributable to his incompetence — the chairman is a clever liar.

When government statisticians are ordered to set aside their calculations, which show that the RPI rose by 12% and told to announce instead that the increase was merely 2%, this represents straight lying by the politicians and the collaborating civil servants (category A). When, however, politicians 'cook' the index by subsidizing a few weighty items — thus making the fluctuations of the RPI unrepresentative

of the general rise in inflation — the perpetrators are practising an entangled deception which belongs to category B. The statisticians should be granted absolution and the guilt for cheating the public must be borne by their political manipulators. The erstwhile president of Lockheed was guilty of an elegant, but wilful, deception by draping an untruth in sanctimonious language. This captain of industry was summoned to defend at a Congressional committee the bribes which Lockheed had paid to bolster its exports. He did not deny the soundly established facts but expressed his displeasure at the obnoxious word 'bribery' that had been used to describe what he termed an 'honest sales technique'. Congressmen were told that he would very much prefer it if they referred to the apposite expenditure as 'gifts', earmarked to engender 'a general climate of goodwill to foster our sales'.

The practice of dishonest traders who deceive buyers by means of forged certificates-of-origin was classified above as straight lying. A parallel, but in essence a category B deception, was carried out by a famous UK distributor of electronic products; the firm was found guilty by a court of 'passing off'. It operated with such original ingenuity as to earn for itself an outstanding place among the country's highbrow corporate liars. In the 1980s the British public deemed the quality of many Japanese consumer goods to be among the best in the world. This perception was exploited by the foxy managers of this chain store in a perverse fashion. They did not lie explicitly by attaching MADE IN JAPAN labels to the goods which they marketed. Instead, they chose to deceive their customers by selling the articles, produced outside Japan by non-Japanese companies, under the (specially created) brand name MATSUI and bedecking the articles with a logo that resembled the rising sun. Successfully, they thus sold goods manufactured in Singapore, Yugoslavia, Italy and other countries as Japanese products. To ensure that their implicitly mendacious message was also fully understood by even the most stupid customers, they advertised this merchandise under the slogan of 'Japanese Technology Made Perfect'.

Category C encompasses refined forms of passive lying that entail the suppression of the truth and/or the non-disclosure of relevant facts. (I disagree with the many who have gone on record to opine that these sins, if indeed they

are to be denoted as sins, are less odious than the dissemination of positive lies.) The suppression of truth constitutes a lie if it harms people who are entitled to know the truth – the entitlement is determined by subjective value judgements. The current history school books of Japan and Germany do not glorify Emperor Hirohito or Adolf Hitler but many of them are composed by passive liars who either omit altogether, or have toned down considerably, the negative features which typified the pre-1946 policies of their respective countries. If the children are being deceived, it is not by what is in the school books but rather by what is missing.<sup>7</sup> The official encyclopaedia of the USSR used to be regularly revised in accordance with political criteria. When luminaries, who had been venerated in old editions, were crassly vilified in subsequent editions, this exemplified straight lying which typified Soviet culture. Much more sinister and effective was the contrived mendacity that consisted of omitting altogether from current editions the mention of former national heroes who had officially become enemies-of-the-people. Photos of (the dead) Lenin, surrounded by his old comrades, were doctored. The pictures of commissars, the memory of whose historical achievements was to be expunged from official publications because they had either been shot or exiled to Siberia, were just blotted out. This became known as airbrushing. More sophisticated still was the substitution of a picture of a current leader to replace the erased image of one of Lenin's disgraced comrades.

### **Mendacious Vocabularies**

Euphemisms are employed by polite individuals who want to cloak an unpleasantness or avoid saying things that might embarrass others. Those who have an axe to grind describe murderers as either 'tormented killers' or 'freedom fighters'. Contraception is labelled 'family planning'. Keynes and his acolytes, so implied William Hutt, were Machiavellian liars. They advocated inflation which could, however, not be sold openly to the electorate: 'But an inspired insight enabled the

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[7] In this respect, the Japanese were always more prone to suppress the truth than the Germans. But only in the twenty-first century did their Ministry of Education go so far as to approve a new history textbook which, despite protests from Korea and China, omitted altogether mention of any Japanese wartime atrocities.

Keynesians to perceive that, if called something else, for instance “the maintenance of effective demand”, it became respectable’. Euphemistic gadgets are also employed to obfuscate the truth. In learned journals political scientists do not hesitate to treat mendacity as a professional attribute of democratic politicians. Yet the word ‘lying’ hardly ever appears in academic writings. The shy professors boycott this obnoxious term and consequently it is rarely listed in the indexes of their books. Undoubtedly, they recall the days when their nannies impressed upon them that even when a blatant lie is uttered, good children do not explicitly call the sinner a liar. Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the meaning of words. If anyone has nothing better to do, he could collect all the different literary guises under which the English-language words ‘liars’ and ‘lies’ make their appearance. They would probably exceed two thousand, thereby reflecting the emotionally-loaded attitudes surrounding this subject. The lists below are only samples of the much larger numbers that could be garnered from literary storehouses but even my scanty contribution illustrates the sensitive nature of the theme we are investigating. Very few of the cited words constitute genuine (neutral) synonyms. The overwhelming majority have a tendentious function. Thus the sting of lying is made more painful and repugnant when those, who seek to demonstrate their deep abhorrence for a given piece of mendacity, choose an even more loathsome nounal substitute and/or select a repugnant and offensive adjectival qualification. Those who regard the word ‘lying’ as unsuitable – in particular when the mendacity is backed by benign motives – anaesthetize the horrors of the tabooed expression by opting for covert embellishments, i.e. ameliorating nouns and gracious adjectives. Hence, ‘good’ mendacity is apparelled in attractive garbs; ‘bad’ mendacity is dressed up so as to emerge even more obnoxious. Both kinds are represented in my lists.

An author, labouring on a book on the craft of disinformation, had planned to title it *The Lie Makers*. He was persuaded to publish it as *The Truth Twisters*. The preparation of false forecasts by shameless economists has been analysed by Chiang who mentions en passant that the business of contrived forecasts is to be censured on moral grounds. Yet he has not used the obvious taboo word. He employed a clever

euphemism, 'artificial' forecasts, that was intended to leave no stain on the swindlers who set out to cheat their ingenuous audiences. The memoirs of the Chief Secretary of the Treasury Joel Barnett illustrate this politician's penchant for soft expressions. In his chapter, headed 'Fiddling the Figures', readers are told much about cheating and lying but, alas, these two striking words do not surface. He gives a good reason: 'I know that there were a variety of ways the figures could be "fiddled", and if purists dislike that world, "adjusted" would be an acceptable alternative.' In the Bible mild phrases frequently appear when blunt and direct expressions are called for. According to Luke it was at the Last Supper that Jesus told his apostle Peter: 'the cock will not crow tonight until you have three times over *denied* that you know me'. And so it came to pass. When Jesus was arrested and Peter followed at a distance, he was denounced thrice to the authorities as being one of Jesus's men. But he lied and disowned his Master three times, saying: 'I do not know him'.

In 1985 Robert Armstrong, representing the British government in an Australian court, made history by highlighting several suspicious euphemisms. Under cross-examination he denied lying but conceded that he might have 'misled' the court; on another occasion, he again rejected the charge that he had been guilty of lying but agreed that he had been merely 'misrepresenting the facts'. At one point in the proceedings, when the judge responded angrily to Armstrong's denial that his answers had been misleading replies, he conceded that his responses 'did not say all'. The judge jeered: 'we may have fallen into an exercise of semantics'. When the British government's senior civil servant was asked about a letter, which he admitted was composed by him, his reply was weird: 'It does not contain a lie ... it (gave) a misleading impression.' The judge demanded to know what is the difference 'between a misleading impression and a lie'. He was told that a 'lie is a straight untruth' which led the judge to mock unkindly: 'What is a misleading impression — a sort of unbent untruth?' Armstrong replied in a sensational fashion: 'It is perhaps being economical with the truth.' This phrase has since been immortalized. When Alan Clark, as a minister of the Crown, gave evidence to a commission of inquiry in London, where

his testimony was challenged, he aped Armstrong by saying that he had been 'economical with the actualité'.

Parliaments in the English-speaking countries are deemed to be holy places where one may hint implicitly that a colleague was a liar but must not say so explicitly. Despite the salty outburst of a Texan Congressman, who once called Poindexter (the National Security Adviser) a 'lying son of a bitch', such language is usually not tolerated on Capitol Hill. In their perceptive study, Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus would have it that in Washington 'where deception is admired as an art, lie is perhaps the last dirty word'. In the HoC there are very severe conventions. When Duncan Sandys, a defence minister, exclaimed: 'that is a complete lie!', he was forced to recant which he did; he then maintained that what his opponent had said did not 'correspond with the truth'. All intelligent schoolboys in Britain know that Winston Churchill circumvented the ban on the forbidden word by calling attention to 'a terminological inexactitude'. There are of course also non-semantic alternatives. While one may not lie categorically in the HoC, it is not against the rules for ministers, who seek to avoid disclosing the truth, to answer awkward inquiries by 'sidestepping' the essence of the question. Matthew Parris, who has delved into the chronicles of the HoC between 1861 and 1992, came up with a bewildering variety of ungentlemanly expressions which were actually uttered. He has listed separately those which slipped through and those that the Speakers had ruled out of order. Among the disallowed profane words were 'bollocks', 'bugger', 'poached bullshit'. Allowed were 'you old windbag', 'does not give a fart', 'snivelling little git'. Parris contrasts this liberal, though inconsistent, scope for abusing one another to the draconian rules which prohibit members of the HoC from accusing their confreres of lying. He has enumerated thirty instances when the Speakers banned euphemisms. Among them were 'perverter of the truth', 'telling porkies', 'resorting to trickiness'. Those remarks, which escaped censure, included 'shameless lack of candour' and 'cooking the figures'.

*Semantic Costumes of [the] Truth*

absolute truth	everyday truths	not telling the truth
adjusting the truth	extravagant truth	not the literal truth
adulterating the truth	filtering the truth	not the real truth
aesthetic truth	flippant with the truth	not the whole truth
an improbable truth	full truth	objective truth
avoiding the truth	gigantic truth	perverter of the truth
battling with the truth	graceful untruth	plain truth
bending the truth	gracious untruth	playing with the truth
bereft of truth	half-truth	poetic truth
everyday truths	historical truth	precious truth
betraying the truth	horrible truth	profound truth
bogus truth	hushing up the truth	refined truth
calculated untruth	irrational truth	revised facts
cavalier with the truth	lack of truthfulness	sacrificing the truth
compound of untruths	less than the whole truth	sanitising the truth
concealing the truth	lurid truth	selective with the truth
decorating the truth	massaging the truth	shadings of the truth
departing from the truth	mincing the truth	stretching the truth
deviated from the truth	naked truth	the clouded truth
disagreeable truth	negligent with the truth	truth in masquerade
dismantling truthfulness	not exactly true	twilight of the truth
disrespect for the truth	not loyal to the truth	withholding the truth

Some Pertinent Phrases

advertisers lie as fast as a dog licks a dish	all relevant details were not disclosed
an accurate but selective answer	an officious lie is a benign lie
badly misrepresenting the facts	bending one's belief to convenience
beyond the confines of veracity	conning him into believing he had won
creative engineering in veracity	deliberately concealing from view
diverging from established facts	drawing a red herring across the trail
duplicitous assurances were given	embellishing lies by picturesque fantasy
factually unproven facts	found guilty of the act of imprecision
his memory distorted the truth	his memory exaggerated what happened
I am a man of unclean lips	It is not a lie but an untruth
leading us up the garden path	lied his way out of danger
lied out of both sides of his mouth	lied out of necessity
manipulating facts to fit the argument	not as honest as he ought to be
not conforming with reality	picking a figure out of the hat
pulling the wool over the readers' eyes	put on a false trail
she concocted a transparently false alibi	she tells enough white lies to ice a cake
speaking with a forked tongue	taking liberties with slanting
they improved their academic degrees	what a goodly outside falsehood hath!
with the best intentions, he did not tell the truth!	

*The Literary Robes of Lies, Liars and Falsehoods*

a born liar	a perfectly magnificent liar	abominable lies
a thumping lie	a worthy lie	accomplished lies
adjusting history	adjusting true results	agreed lies
an incomplete answer	bad lies	bare-faced lies
bear false witness	beautiful lies	beguiling the public
benign lies of politics	biased reporting	big falsehoods
big fat lies	big thumping lies	black lies
blameless lying	blatant lies	blatant fiddling
boundless liar	calculated mendacity	camouflaging
careful lies	charitable lies	cheating
clever wheezes	cock-and-bull stories	colossal lies
comfortable lies	complete set of distortions	compulsive liars
concoction	consecrated falsehoods	consistent lying
consummate lies	contemptuous falsehoods	convenient fiction
conventional lies	cooking intelligence	cooking up a story
counter-factual claims	creative accounting	creative lies
crucial dishonesty	culpable exaggeration	damnable lies
deadly lies	deceptions	deluding the listeners
departure from reality	depraved lies	despicable lying
dirty lies	disinformation	disingenuous advocacy
dissembling falsehoods	double-dealing	double falsehoods
downright lies	dressing up facts	duplicity

elaborate lies	embroidering the story	equivocating
excusable lying	extravagant with honesty	fabricator
false perspective	falsification	falsity
feigning	fabulist	factual misrepresentation
fibber	fictitious stories	foul lies
fudged figures	furtive circumlocution	gentle falsehoods
gerrymandering statistics	good lies	great lies
hairy lies	half-the-picture	harmless lies
holy falsehoods	hoaxes	horrible lies
humane lies	hysterical lying	imposture
imprecise accounting	improving the results	impudent lies
inauthenticity	inaccurate data	incomplete testimony
inexcusable lies	injurious falsehoods	insidious lies
inspired lies	instinctive liars	inventive lies
inveracity	inveterate liars	it's only a fiddle
just lies	justified false propaganda	lack of openness
lying like a trooper	lie like mad	lied through his teeth
lied my way out of danger	living a lie	lordly lies
ludicrous falsehoods	lying disposition	lying out of politeness
made-to-order evidence	magnanimous lies	make-believe
making up stories	manipulating the facts	masked falsehoods
massaging figures	meritorious lies	minor porky
misinformation	misleading descriptions	mischievous falsehoods
misrepresentation	mock candour	moral lies

naked lies	natural born liars	necessary lies
neurotic lies	noble lie	non-figures
not really correct	obscuring the real facts	odious lies
omitting vital details	open lies	outright lies
partial account	pack of lies	painless lies
palpable liar	pardonable lies	paternalistic falsehoods
pernicious lies	plausible mendacity	prevarication
prefabricated lies	premeditated lies	permissible lying
pious deceit	polished confessions	polite fiction
pretending postures	privileged lying	quibbling
real lies	reckless liars	righteous lies
romancer	sacred lies	sanitizing reality
saving lies	shameless lies	shamming
selective about the facts	sheer fabrication	sick lies
sincere lies	slanting real happenings	social lies
solid lying	somewhat dishonest	spin-doctoring
spurious stories	subterfuges	swindlers
swearing falsely	swinish lies	tactical errors
tall stories	tampering with honest data	tell porkies
tendentious compilations	terrible lies	thrown off the scent
tissue of lies	token figures	twisting the facts
twisted reporting	two-faced conduct	unadulterated falsehood
uncandid	underplay	ultimate lie
uncomfortable assertions	useful falsehoods	utilitarian lies
verbal rogues	well-intentioned lies	white lies
window-dressing	whoppers	wicked lies
worthy falsehoods		