

Lying and Communication – Lying as an Anti-Communicative Act

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A lie is considered by some to be an ordinary means of communication. However, we can hypothesize that this is not so. Communication by its very nature brings people together – it is a community-building tool¹. Its basic requirement is the message of truth. Accepting that the source and guarantee of proper human relationships is the truth², it will be difficult to consider a lie, which is in opposition to truth, to be a tool for communication.

The explicit ruling on this issue, however, calls for a more thorough view into the nature of a lie, its origins and effects, which shall be the subject of this study. In addition, such actions will be analyzed that cast doubt on the nature and effects of information, especially in the context of communication. These will be the so-called defensive speech, jokes and literary fiction.

1. The Nature and Basic Effects of Lies

A lie is incompatible with the objective state of affairs, meaning that it is an assertion divergent from the truth³. It is an act of deliberately bringing someone into error; at its core is the offender's free decision to express thoughts contrary to his own conviction on a given matter⁴. This drawing attention to the lack of conformity with the message sender's convictions is very important. The liar in fact says what is untrue not because he (or in any other way transmits, also non-verbally) does not know the truth, but because – as will be discussed – someone to whom he transmits this message will accept as truth what is not. And he does so with the knowledge and intention of convincing someone that he knows the truth.

It is worth noting the fact that a lie is not a single reality, but has diverse forms, from covering up the facts to ambiguity, flattery and deliberately misleading someone. Its effects are also diversified and graded, including the moral guilt

¹ Cf. L. Korporowicz, *Komunikacja*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 9, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, Lublin 2002, col. 513-515; T. Reroń, *Komunikacja społeczna*, in: *Jan Paweł II. Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, ed. J. Nagórny, K. Jeżyna, Polwen, Radom 2005, p. 264-265.

² Cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical "Veritatis splendor"*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican 1993, 99-101; L. Łysień, *Prawda*, in: *Jan Paweł II. Encyklopedia nauczania społecznego*, ed. A. Zwoliński, Polwen, Radom 2005, p. 397-403.

³ Cf. M. Wyróstkiewicz, *Kłamstwo*, in: *Jan Paweł II. Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, p. 258.

⁴ Cf. R. Rubinkiewicz, *Kłamstwo. W biblii*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 9, col. 177.

incurred by the liar. This, however, not only depends on the kind of lie, but to a large extent also on the intentions of the liar and real effects arising from the absence of truth⁵.

It is worth noting that a lie is not passively blocking someone's access to the truth – it does not constitute an obstacle, which the person lied to has a chance to get around. It is something more – it is an activity that not only keeps the person lied to from knowing the truth, but somehow pushes him into the realm of untruth. In fact, the liar presents some bit of information as being true. Getting to the truth, therefore, is not dependent on cleverness, skills or knowledge of the person lied to (as is, for example, in the case of manipulation), but the truth is completely hidden and protected from the recipient. This is therefore an active, sophisticated and premeditated action. Its assessment also needs to be very radical, which results from the theological and moral interpretation of the human act.

Since a lie is an action, it can be regarded as a human act. Considering it from this point of view, we should divide it into three basic elements that comprise the sources of a moral action. These will help us assess the moral value of such an action (*actus humanus*)⁶.

The subject of lies – and thus the effect in a natural way resulting from the undertaken action – is untruth generated by the liar. This – because of the importance of truth in human relationships – is always wrong. The intention is also bad, which has as its goal – which will be discussed in detail – to acquire something that a person does not deserve, and therefore, in observing justice, could not have achieved. If these two elements of an act are bad, then the whole act is morally wrong, regardless of the circumstances under which it was carried out⁷. Here it should be added that according to the point of view of moral theology, a lie belongs to the category of intrinsically evil acts (*intrinsece malum*)⁸.

The nature of a lie and its moral evaluation clearly indicate that it cannot be regarded as a tool for communication. Always, in itself and in a natural way, it destroys the person who comes in contact with it, as well as inter-personal relationships. In reality, it is an anti-developmental act performed against the community. Therefore, it cannot be a tool for communication, since such a tool – from

⁵ Cf. A. Derdziuk, *Kłamstwo. W teologii moralnej*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 9, col. 181; M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Czy można usprawiedliwić kłamstwo?*, „Katecheta” 57(2007), no. 4, p. 49-51.

⁶ Cf. S. Nowosad, M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Czyn ludzki*, in: *Jan Paweł II. Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, p. 129-132.

⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical “Veritatis splendor”*, 80-82; Nowosad, Wyrostkiewicz, *Czyn ludzki*, p. 131.

⁸ Cf. Derdziuk, *Kłamstwo*, col. 182. More cf.: John Paul II, *Encyclical “Veritatis splendor”*, 79-81; Nowosad, Wyrostkiewicz, *Czyn ludzki*, p. 131; M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Kiedy czyn jest zły i jakie to ma znaczenie?*, „Katecheta” 56(2012), no. 12, p. 61-63.

its very nature – supports community building processes, and ultimately generates the integral development of the human person⁹.

2. Concerning the Effects of a Lie

The primary effect of a lie is that it displaces the truth in the life of individuals and society by trying to replace the truth. Man is deprived of all the values that are associated with the truth. The effects of a lie are spread over the entire life of a society in which lying functions.

A lie is a denial of proper social relationships – it is the unfair treatment of another person by a liar, as one who should not be told the truth. It is usurping the right to some good – which may be, for example, information, but also other benefits, which the liar wants to gain by distortion of the truth – which in fact the liar does not deserve to have. If he in fact deserved it, there would be no need to resort to such a radical method which is lying. This is a clear example of injustice resulting from lies. Using lies in social life appears to be a factor in generating structures of evil, which we will mention later on.

A lie – due to the fact that it is an act, therefore, like any other act – does not merely comprise a private matter for the liar, because it has an impact on society. In the case of stating untruth, we can notice a more direct relationship with social life. A lie is always directed towards the person who the liar is misleading. It destroys trust and severs the basis for appropriate relationships. It limits the right to information, making it difficult to communicate, leading to suspicion and disbelief. Therefore, it clearly dissolves, and sometimes even destroys the structure of society. This in turn is essential to the proper functioning of the human being and behaving in a way leading to integral development¹⁰.

Here, it is worth emphasizing one more theological and moral issue. “The basis of your word is truth, and eternal is each of your righteous judgments” (Ps 119, 160). In this biblical passage, the truth is seen as the foundation of certainty, constancy, uniqueness (as the judgments of God are eternal), and also justice in one’s personal life, where it appears as righteousness. The choice to lie is the rejection of all these values.

⁹ Cf. Korporowicz, col. 513-515; Reroń, p. 264-265; M. Wyróstkiewicz, *Ekologia ludzka. Osoba i jej środowisko z perspektywy teologicznomoralnej*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2007, p. 126-132.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Nagórny, *Posłannictwo chrześcijan w świecie*, vol. 1: *Świat i wspólnota*, Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, Lublin 1997, p. 62-74 and 101-154.

3. In Search of the Origins of Lies

Keeping in mind all that was mentioned above, it is hard not to ask why people lie. An attempt to answer this question is a very difficult undertaking. We can succinctly say that “there are as many reasons for lying as there are lies”. We should ask sociologists and psychologists for more detailed information. However, based on the experiences of the sciences, whose representatives were just mentioned, and anthropological knowledge, we can pluck out a few general reasons that stand at the root of a particular act of lying.

Generally speaking, we can say that people do it because of the good that they want to obtain. It is worth noting that it is a good that they do not deserve. If in fact they did deserve it – something we will mention later – there would be no need to resort to lying.

The most basic breakdown of lies, which can be made in this context (meaning due to the intentions of the liar) can be divided into two groups. The first are those where the authors wanted to gain something for themselves, and the knowledge of the truth by someone else would make it difficult (at least potentially) to obtain it. The second group of lies are those whose purpose is to tease someone. The motivation can be a kind of envy. This is not primarily (that is, by the way) in order to gain something for yourself, but to harm another person. It is a situation that is basically opposed to love, and therefore incompatible with Christian morality and human nature as well. In this case, we could speak of a specific pathology of the acting person (a “normal” human being would not permit something to occur that is against his nature, because he would have known, or at least he would somehow feel that it is destroying him). The genesis is therefore some kind of disorder. Of course, there are situations in which the success of one person (or group) is naturally associated with the failure of another. This should, however, be seen in terms of the challenges that need to be overcome. If they do not cope with the challenge, this means that what was sought is simply not deserved – that someone else was a more suitable candidate. Appealing to a lie confirms this situation. Indeed, if the liar was a suitable candidate, he would not have to use a lie, as already pointed out.

In both of the above presented schemes, the point is that the liar puts their own interests over and above the interests of someone else, the person they are lying to. Ultimately, it is placing yourself first over another person. It is therefore an expression of selfish attitudes.

In addition, as mentioned above, an important reason for lying appears to be an incorrect hierarchy of values. This is not always the result of bad will, but a cognitive error. Man often chooses the apparent good, not being aware that even though it is really good, it is of a lower order. We are talking about, for example, the so-called “peace of mind”. Without a doubt, this is a state which in itself is

not bad. It can be characterized as good¹¹. However, if you need to achieve it by means of a morally wrong act, then such an action (not the object itself) becomes sinful. Placing this in the context of communication, we can notice that often people decide to lie (or at least allow it fairly easily) just to achieve something good (such as “peace of mind”) and because of this good, they recognize that such “bypassing the truth” is authorized. It must be made clear that such a judgment is wrong. According to the fundamental principles of moral theology, the end never justifies the means¹².

Another reason why people lie can be impulsive action. This concerns a kind of mechanism that causes a man to almost unthinkingly make (a very) quick decision¹³. The anthropology of moral theology, however, leaves no doubt as to the potential immoral actions underlying impulsivity, which can be prevented by virtue. This means, therefore, that at the source of lies is not so much impulsivity that is natural to man but the lack of virtue. It comes down to neglect in working on one's own development and being open to the Holy Spirit, who supports the development of a virtuous life¹⁴.

Searching for the origins of lies, and constantly keeping in mind that ultimately it is the personal choice of every liar, it is worth noting that we can notice the circumstances favorable to lying. In this context, it is impossible not to note the existence of evil structures that somehow push a man to lie¹⁵. For example, we can mention some good projects that could not be achieved in a climate of absolute transparency – not because of a problem with the subject of such actions, but because of the effects that could be detrimental to someone who has the right to decide about the existence or not of this exemplary project. Often this lack of benefit is related to the fact that a decision maker is ailing in something, and the truth would reveal this ailment.

Up to this point, concerning what we have said about the origins of lies, we need to add one more argument, extremely important from a theological point of view. The point is that a lie is the work of Satan, who – as Scripture teaches – “is a liar and the father of lies” (J 8,44). This cannot be underestimated. Awareness of the existence of the devil should be an argument for constantly being aware, to

¹¹ Cf. s. Nowosad, M. Wyróstkiewicz, *Dobro moralne*, in: Jan Paweł II. *Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, p. 147-149.

¹² Cf. Nowosad, Wyróstkiewicz, *Czyn ludzki*, p. 131.

¹³ Cf. W. Hoffmann, M. Frieze, *Dwie dusze w moim ciele*, “Charaktery” 14(2010), no. 11, p. 48-49.

¹⁴ Cf. A. Derdziuk, *Cnoty*, in: Jan Paweł II. *Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, p. 117-121; M. Wyróstkiewicz, *Jak powstają cnoty i wady oraz co mają one wspólnego z rozwojem człowieka?*, „Katecheta” 57(2013), no. 12, p. 52-56.

¹⁵ Cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical “Sollicitudo rei socialis”*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican 1987, 36.

care for and work on one's behavior. This should also be the reason for deepening one's relationship with God. The more certain it is, the less opportunity is given to Satan. It would be good if confessors would remind penitents about this. Knowledge on the matters that have been discussed so far is not enough. In contrast, everything is possible with God who strengthens us (cf. Phil 4,13).

4. Authorized Distortion of the Truth

From what has been said so far, it is clear that talking about an authorized lie is a mistake. Since it is evil, we cannot consent to it. In addition, the Church clearly teaches: "Every person is called to sincerity and truthfulness in acting and speaking. Everyone has the duty to seek the truth, to adhere to it and to order one's whole life in accordance with its demands"¹⁶. Making more specific this thesis, it adds: "A Christian must bear witness to the truth of the Gospel in every field of his activity, both public and private, and also if necessary, with the sacrifice of his very life. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith"¹⁷. So there is no agreement to lie, even in the face of death.

There are, however, in life – as it seems and as can be observed – such situations when to achieve some good or to save core values – such as life or property or other goods making up the core of human rights – a person lies. Is such a lie lawful? Can you lie out of fear for self or others? Can you lie to an aggressor to save your life? Can you lie to a thief to save an honestly earned good, to which he has no rights? For example, can a police officer lie to a criminal for the benefit of those he holds hostage, that if he releases them there is nothing to be afraid of? These are just some examples of the questions that many people face in life, or which they must face when others cause such situations.

4.1. Defensive Speech

In a situation when a person becomes the victim, which does not necessarily mean physical assault, but an attempt to obtain information that does not pertain to others (e.g. professional secrecy, but also an ordinary secret entrusted in confidence about one's own or someone else's finances, something not required to pass on to someone on the street, like someone who insistently and without respect for the principles of social coexistence asks for change), one can apply the so-called defensive speech, or defense. This is analogous to the category of self-defense. It

¹⁶ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 521, http://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 522. Cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical "Veritatis splendor"*, 91-94.

allows one to avoid the absurd situation when the person being attacked would be placed in a worse position than the aggressor¹⁸.

Defensive speech, whose concept is outlined above – according to some moralists – is not a lie, though it resembles confusion in that it is hiding the truth¹⁹. And since it is not a lie, it does not entail the consequences of a lie. Whether it is a lie or defensive speech is not the message, but the situation in which a person was forced to disclose information not belonging to another person who demands it. It should be noted, however, that only the person using it knows if this is actually the mentioned defensive speech or a real common lie hidden behind the “veil of an alleged attack”. It is not so difficult to see that there may occur abuse resulting from the subjective discernment of the situation. We should therefore emphasize that the use of the category of defensive speech is only possible when one has to deal with an aggressor. A person who lies for any other reason, even when it comes to real fear, but not due to aggression, must know that justification according to this key is lying to themselves, and therefore some kind of “auto-lie” that works by a person blocking themselves from getting to know the truth.

We must keep in mind that a lie is always a lie, no matter the circumstances. It will always result in effects natural to itself. It cannot therefore be stated that saying what is not true to an aggressor is not lying to him. It is actually a lie. An important issue here is not to prove that it is not a lie (because this cannot be proved), but to consider the case of moral responsibility which a lie causes and the guilt it incurs.

4.2. Jokes and Literary Fiction

A separate category distorting the truth are jokes. By joking we can portray reality differently than it really appears and this is not a lie. However, for this to happen, all the participants in the dialogue must understand that it is a joke. The creator of a joke must have supreme moral certainty as to this state of affairs. In the case of even the suspicion of misunderstanding, he should disambiguate his speech. Otherwise, this becomes a lie, with all the consequences for the liar and others. We can see that it is easy to go from joking to the position of a liar – the road from a joke to a lie is easy and short. One must therefore be vigilant; we should approach jokes in a responsible way.

It is important that the joke be an actual joke. The idea is not to try to make a joke out of lies, using favorable conditions for doing so – so as not try to justify oneself, that one was joking when they actually wanted to lie, and at this point in

¹⁸ Cf. Derdziuk, *Kłamstwo*, col. 182; J. Nagórny, *Obrona – zasada słusznej obrony*, in: Jan Paweł II, *Encyklopedia nauczania moralnego*, p. 367-370.

¹⁹ Cf. Derdziuk, *Kłamstwo*, col. 182.

time circumstances turned out in such a way so that they can convince someone (or themselves) that they were joking. As we can see, in this case, it is a double lie (they previously lied, and now they are lying by saying that it was just a joke. In the latter case - as noted, but it is worth making this point - it may involve the above mentioned "auto-lie"). Therefore, the intention of the author's information is important, and it does not matter if someone says he was joking, but if in fact it was so. Only he himself can answer this question.

Also, literary fiction is not lying. This means presenting some content as a fact in the situation when in reality it did not take place. This category applies to literature, education and preaching. But here also – as in the case of a joke – the matter must be unambiguous. Consent to literary fiction is not consent to distorting reality, but in relating something that did not happen, though it could potentially happen. In special situations, such as works of science fiction, this information should be clear to the recipient.

5. Towards a Synthesis

A lie, without a doubt, is a great evil. This analysis confirmed and illustrated this thesis. It clearly demonstrated that a lie attacks people on various levels of existence (e.g. the intellectual, mental, spiritual and moral) and destroys the person who in any way it touches: both the liar and the person lied to, as well as those who live in the "climate of lies", the obvious basis for the structures of evil (although the degree of destruction is different and depends precisely on the way one is in contact with a lie and the degree of contact with it). It has a negative impact on the society in which it functions. It destroys appropriate inter-personal relationships, meaning that it makes society lose the qualities of an authentic community (*communio personarum*), becoming more and more a group of people living next to each other but not trusting each other, who care mostly about their own ad hoc business. The latter thesis clearly exposes the truth that using lies in conversations gives only the guise of communication, which is naturally to be a source of people coming closer together.

Apart from a person destroying themselves (his humanity), this also includes – which is important in the context of communication – reconciliation in intrapersonal relationships (within ourselves – which is clearly evident in the situation of auto-lies) and other people; the liar destroys their relationship with God and establishes it with Satan. Without a doubt, we can agree with the thesis that it appears as a conscious and voluntary "fraternization" with Satan, or – to put it bluntly – rejecting divine sonship for "sonship" with the devil²⁰. Here we can see

²⁰ Cf. Wyrostkiewicz, *Czy można usprawiedliwić kłamstwo?* [Can a Lie Be Justified?], „Katecheta” 57(2007), no. 4, p. 50.

a kind of evil spiral. A lying person comes close to Satan. This closeness in turn permits more easily succumbing to the temptation to lie.

There is no doubt that lying is an example of some kind of anti-communication. It is in fact a reality (action) which on the surface resembles an act of communication. Due to its nature, which is not to build up a community, but the realization of self-serving, unauthorized purposes, it does not deserve to be called a communicative action.

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Summary

A lie is incompatible with the objective state of affairs, meaning that it is an assertion divergent from the truth. It is an act of deliberately bringing someone into error; at its core is the offender's free decision to express thoughts contrary to his own conviction on a given matter – the liar in fact says what is untrue not because he does not know the truth, but because someone to whom he transmits this message will accept as truth what is not. And he does so with the knowledge and intention of convincing someone that he knows the truth.

However a lie is considered by some to be an ordinary means of communication, we can conclude that this is not so. There is no doubt that lying is an example of some kind of anti-communication. It is in fact an action which on the surface resembles an act of communication. Due to its nature, which is not to build up a community, but the realization of self-serving, unauthorized purposes, it does not deserve to be called a communicative action.