The case for progress
by Glenn Altschuler, Ph.D.

The Truth About Lies
A thought-provoking account of attempts to define lying and its implications.
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Review of The Devil Wins: A History of Lying From the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment. By Dallas G. Denery II. Princeton University Press. 331 pp. $29.95

In the early fifth century, Augustine of Hippo, the North African bishop, categorically declared that all lies were sins. Men who live according to truth, live according to God, he declared; those who live according to self, imitate the Devil, "the father of lies."

That said, Augustine struggled to overcome some obstacles to maintain his absolute prohibition against lies. Augustine knew that in the Old and New testaments, liars were not always condemned or punished: Jacob pretends to be his brother Esau; Abraham announces that his wife is his sister; Jesus does not tell the truth about how far he has walked. "Whether we should ever tell a lie if it be for someone's welfare," Augustine acknowledges, "is a problem that has vexed even the most learned."

Indeed, it has. In The Devil Wins, Dallas Denery II, an associate professor of history at Bowdoin College, provides an informative, sophisticated, and thought-provoking account of the efforts of theologians and philosophers from the early Christian era to the Enlightenment to define lies and understand their ethical, social, and political implications.

Biblical exegetes, Denery indicates, often walked "a vanishingly fine, perhaps nonexistent" line between "licit simulation and sheer duplicity, between concealment and lying." Thomas Aquinas, for example, acquitted Abraham by distinguishing between "hiding the truth" and telling a lie. Martin Azpilcueta (aka Dr. Navarrus), a professor of canon law at the University of Salamanca in the sixteenth century, used his theory of "mixed speech" (or "amphibology") to deem silent qualifications to spoken words perfectly acceptable if they were deployed for just causes and did not offend against charity. If a friend asks for money, Dr. Navarrus wrote, an individual may respond "I don't have it," if he adds (to himself – and God), "such that I would give it to you."

Navarrus' contemporaries, Denery notes, were acutely aware of the dangers of amphibology. They declared that the fabric of society would unravel if large categories of lies were rendered "merely venial" and liars were no longer denounced or disciplined.

Although they remained indebted to the idea that human beings fell from a
state of perfection to a state a corruption, Denery argues, many Renaissance thinkers had “difficulty imagining a world a world in which we did not lie, a world that did not need our lies.” No longer defining lies as (inevitably) offenses against God, they claimed that culpability depended on context and whether the liar’s intention was to help or harm.

In the “fallen world” of early modern Europe, where all the world was a stage, deception, duplicity and dishonesty seemed (at least some of the time) to be “natural and naturally useful qualities.” Niccolò Machiavelli was only a tad hyperbolic, Denery suggests, when he wrote to a friend: “For a long time I have not said what I believed, nor do I even believe what I say, and if indeed I do happen to tell the truth, I hide it among so many lies that it is hard to find.” And in The Fable of the Bees: or Private Vices, Publick Benefits (1714), Bernard Mandeville insisted that artful, prudent, self-interested lies were beneficial to society and the economy.

In their assumptions about the human condition, Denery implies, these intellectuals were more world-weary than cynical. Although just about everyone desired sincerity, Madeleine de Scudéry, the sponsor of an influential Paris salon and the author of Conversations on Various Subjects (1680), maintained that to look beneath the surface of things, beyond facades and appearances, to discover something deeper, something real, was to engage in a fantasy that risked “a thousand sorrows.”

In search, perhaps, of reassurance that the Devil need not win, Denery concludes his fine book with Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (1754), Denery notes, Rousseau claimed that lying is an historical event that commenced when human beings entered society. Prisoners of public opinion, we now craft every word and deed, rendering us unknown to others and others unknown to us.

Convinced that “innocence” cannot be fully recovered, Rousseau made a commitment to truthfulness. “It's grounded more on feeling, a sincerity he demands of himself, for himself, “than on the reality of things.” The truthful person, Rousseau adds, must be “jealous of his self-esteem, this is the good that he can least get along without, and he would feel a real loss in acquiring the esteem of others at its expense.”

With Rousseau's critique, and the separation of lying and deception from God, Denery suggests, they “become natural problems, problems with natural causes, and, hopefully, natural solutions.” We can – and should – continue to wonder whether it is ever acceptable to lie, and ask hard questions about the circumstances under which we can tell lies “and feel justified in our hearts,” and when we must tell the truth.