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0521459788 - A Pack of Lies: Towards a Sociology of Lying
J. A. Barnes
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Defining lies as statements that are intended to deceive, this book considers the various contexts in which people tell lies, how they are detected and sometimes exposed, and the consequences for the liars themselves, their dupes, and the wider society. The author provides examples from a number of cultures, with distinctive religions and ethical traditions, and delineates domains where lying is the norm, domains that are ambiguous, and the one domain (science) that requires truth-telling. He refers to experimental studies on children that show how, at an early age, they acquire the capacity to lie, and draws attention to the lack of studies showing how they learn when it is appropriate to do so and when it is not. He reviews how lying has been evaluated by moralists, examines why we don't regard novels as lies, and relates the human capacity to lie to deceit among other animal species.

In this judicious, and often witty, account, Professor Barnes concludes that although there are, in all societies, good pragmatic reasons for not lying all the time, there are also strong reasons for lying some of the time.

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Towards a sociology
of lying

J. A. BARNES

Australian National University



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My first thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby.

BROWNING

'Childe Roland to the dark tower came'

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Preface

I cannot hope to list all those who have helped me in writing this book. To do so would entail producing an almost complete muster of my relatives, friends and colleagues, all of whom have had something to say on this topic. I maintained for so long that I was writing a book about lying without being able to demonstrate tangible signs of progress that I soon acquired the reputation, not of becoming an expert on lying, but of being already a liar, at least in respect of my academic pretensions. This long delay, however, gave me the opportunity to benefit from the innumerable suggestions made to me about what questions I should tackle, what sources I should seek to tap, and what conclusions I might be able to draw. When at last I began to write I was already halfway towards my goal. I must thank the graduate students who participated in my course on lying at Flinders University in 1990 for stimulating me to begin writing; I am most grateful to Riaz Hassan for giving me the opportunity to discuss this topic with them and to Jillian Litster for trying out some of the ideas that emerged. I must however also express my debt to Jerzy Zubrzycki for having, many years earlier, doxed me in as an expert on a topic about which I then knew nothing, thus starting me on the trail leading to this book.

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Moyal, Grant Noble, Nicholas Peterson, Charles Piot, Robin Pope, Skip Rappaport, Margaret Rose, Loyal Rue, Bambi Schieffelin, Timothy Shopen and Charles Richard Snyder drew my attention to papers and books in linguistics, philosophy, sociology and anthropology and answered numerous queries; Paul Ekman and Jack Goody helped with obtaining access to sources, as did Anton Ploeg. He and Stephen Mugford commented on draft chapters, and Wes Whitten kept me in touch with the world outside the social sciences; Anthony Barnett, Marjorie Bull, Fay Goddard, Jo Habib, Frances Michaelis and Peter Underwood kept their eyes open for relevant material. The tea room in the Coombs Building of the Australian National University has long been a fertile ground for gleaning stimulating ideas and erudite information; among the many fellow tea-drinkers to whom I am indebted I must mention in particular Lisbeth Haakonssen, Ken Inglis, Harry Rigby and Barry Smith. Likewise I am very grateful to Frank Jones and my colleagues in the Sociology program for their congenial and stimulating working environment which I have enjoyed for many years. Geoffrey Hawthorn has been most encouraging and helpful in getting the book into print. Jessica Kuper has been a great help in overcoming the unavoidable difficulties of communication between Australia and Britain.

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