Introduction

The beginning of the book of Genesis suggests that the temptation to lie is as old as the history of human wrongdoing. The serpent lied to Eve, and both Adam and Eve immediately tried to hide both themselves and their sin from the Lord. Shortly thereafter, we are told, the first homicide, of Abel by his brother Cain, was covered up with a lie: "The Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' 'I do not know,' he replied. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'" (*Genesis* 4:9). Lies and deception are thus intertwined with sin and wrongdoing from the very beginning, according to the venerable tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus says, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (*John* 8:44). Thus Jesus traces lying as a cause and a consequence of sin even further back than the creation of Man, to the rebellion against God by Satan, whose "first language," according to this tradition, is that of the lie.

Nor have we ourselves escaped from the thrall of lying that enslaved both our biblical ancestors and the devil. In his Tanner Lectures on the morality of lying, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre outlined some social science data on the frequency of lies in our everyday life. One study showed that people "tell about two lies a day, or at least that is how many they will admit to"; another "reported in 1991 that 91 percent of Americans lie regularly."[1] In particular, MacIntyre notes that not only are many of these lies told to friends and relatives; many of them are believed to be *permissible* by those who tell them.

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Truthfulness, Lies, and Moral Philosophers: What Can We Learn from Mill and Kant?" in Grethe B. Anderson (ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 16 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), p. 319.

The idea that some lies are permissible is hardly unusual. It seems undeniable that both police officers and espionage agents use lies as tools of their trade, for the protection of the realm. The practice is relayed sympathetically by those who present fictionalized accounts of both the police and of spies (though the work of John LeCarre is notable for its depiction of the negative effects of a lifetime of lying and deception on the character and social relations of spies). Most citizens assume it to be a justified part of the defense of the common good. Undercover journalism that involves lying exposes corruption and is widely praised for its social value. And lies have been endorsed as a part of statecraft by, for example, Winston Churchill, who said in 1943 that "in wartime truth is so precious that she should always be accompanied by a bodyguard of lies."

At more personal levels, we think it acceptable to lie to spare the feelings of loved ones, to protect ourselves from the harms threatened by others, and sometimes simply to get what we want. Catholic theologian Paul Griffiths goes so far as to say, in the opening sentence of his book arguing *against* lying, that "Lies bind the fabric of every human life."[2] He goes on to note, using Wittgenstein as his example, the nearly alien manner in which those who refuse to lie are viewed; they are regarded as "retarded, insane, or saintly."[3] And those whom we rightly consider to be heroes – those who saved Jewish lives from the Nazis, for example – often used lies for the sake of the goods they served. We even look to the Bible, despite its strong injunctions against lying, and its linkage of lying with sin, to support our praise of the lie, pointing to Rahab the harlot, who saved the spies of Israel from their persecutors, or the Egyptian midwives, who saved innocents from Pharaoh's wrath. To suggest that lying was wrong in these instances would seem to cast unjustified aspersions on those of upright character, some of whom (Rahab and the midwives) were praised by God Himself!

At a theoretical level too, most contemporary moral philosophers concur in holding that lies are, on occasion, and perhaps frequently, morally acceptable. The justifications may depend on broad theoretical frameworks, such as utilitarianism, the view that the greatest good for the greatest number is to be pursued; or they may work primarily at the level of intuition, reporting (accurately) that our intuitions support lying in a variety of circumstances, and therefore taking this permission as a datum to

[2] Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Deception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), p. 11.
[3] *Ibid.*

be respected in further moral thought.[4] The same is true of contemporary theological thought. Some Christian theologians working in the just war tradition defend lying in war and in espionage on grounds similar to those brought forth to justify the use of lethal force in a just war.[5] Others point to the fallen human condition and conclude that in our post-lapsarian state, lies may, and sometimes must, be used "medicinally."[6]

Through all such positions offered in defense of one or another form of lying in one or another set of circumstances, one kind of lying has received the most attention as occasionally justified and as grounds for making an exception to the rule that one should *in general* refrain from telling lies. This is the lie for a *good cause*, or, as its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century (and beyond) Catholic proponents were to put it in their moral theology manuals, *ex justa causa*.[7]

"Good cause," however, is somewhat ambiguous. I believe we can identify three different, albeit often overlapping, kinds of good cause in service of which lies are thought by many to be acceptable or even obligatory. The first are good *personal* causes. One might lie to save a friend or family member from anguish, and some would find this permissible. As the personal goods that will be served by lying, or threatened by refraining from the lie, become increasingly great and exigent, the thought that a lie would be permissible or obligatory becomes more pressing. Accordingly, there is almost a universal consensus today that lies to someone bent on murder, or lies to the Nazis seeking hidden Jews, are permissible and, according to many, obligatory.

A second kind of good cause is *political*, in the sense that the good served is the political *common good*. Lies in service of such goods are

[4] See, for example, Peter Kreeft, "Why Live Action Did Right, and Why We All Should Know That," CatholicVote.Org, February 18, 2011. Available at: www.catholicvote.org/why-live-action-did-right-and-why-we-should-all-know-that/

[5] David Decosimo, "Finding Augustine's Ethics of Public Lying in His Treatments of Lying and Killing," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 28 (2011), pp. 661–697; Darrell Cole, "Whether Spies Too Can Be Saved," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (2008), pp. 125–154.

[6] The Eastern tradition on "medicinal" lying is presented in Boniface Ramsey, O.P., "Two Traditions on Lying and Deception in the Ancient Church," *The Thomist* 49 (1985), pp. 504–533; I discuss it in Chapter 3.

[7] As John Henry Newman notes, various forms of non-lying but potentially deceptive forms of speech and action were held by the moral theologians to be justified for a good cause, but some went further to justify what was called a *falsiloquium*, a falsehood, for a good cause. Such theologians were loathe to call the justified *falsiloquium* a lie, but I argue in Chapter 1 that this is what they were. In substance, those who argued that a just cause could justify a *falsiloquium* were arguing for the same view as those who today hold that lying can be justified for a good cause. For Newman's discussion, see John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), appendices 7 and 8.

thought to be the rightful province of those with *responsibility* for that common good: military and law enforcement agents, for example, and those with executive authority, such as the President of the United States. As with lies to the Nazis, lies by those with such offices are thought on occasion to be not simply permissible but obligatory. A president, general, or police officer who does not lie when significant aspects of the common good are at stake is not adequately fulfilling his or her responsibilities.

A third cause I will designate as *social*. This is the sort of cause that is pursued by reforming and occasionally revolutionary movements, such as the civil rights movement, or the movement of resistance to Soviet and socialist oppression that ebbed and flowed in Eastern Europe until it came to a climax, for example, in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989; a related form is pursued by those who believe that society is mistaken, as a matter of fact or morality, about some matter of great social importance. A difference between a social cause and a political cause, as I am construing them, is that the former is pursued by those without political power, often, though not always, against those with such power. Such movements are carried out in the face of opposition – including the opposition of those in authority but typically extending to other parts of society as well – that is either significantly unjust or in error, or is at least perceived to be so. In some extreme cases, the unjust opposition will itself resort to lies, violence, brutality, torture, and terror. May lies be used in response, both to protect a movement's members and to further its goals?[8] Again, many think this not only permissible but on occasion obligatory. And so the doctrine that it is permissible, and even sometimes obligatory, to lie for a good cause has taken shape as an orthodoxy about lying, shared by almost everybody.

It was not always thus, at least as far as moral *thought* about the ethics of lying, and even lying for a good cause, is concerned. Beginning with St. Augustine in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Christian thinking in the West largely converged on the claim that lying is always and everywhere wrong.[9] There are degrees of gravity in the wrong of lying, and not

[8] The question extends, of course, to other tactics as well. May force be used against those using unjust force, and terror against the purveyors of terror? Competing answers to these questions have characterized movements such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

[9] Augustine wrote two influential treatises on lying: *De Mendacio* (On Lying), available at: newadvent.org/fathers/1312.htm, and *Contra Mendacium* (Against Lying), available at: newadvent.org/fathers/1313.htm. Because of the frequency with which I will cite these works, especially in Chapter 2, I will henceforth abbreviate them as *DM* and *CM*, respectively, and provide the reference parenthetically.

every lie is a mortal sin; but Augustine strongly defended the claim that it is nevertheless always unacceptable to lie, for any reason whatsoever, and he was followed in this conclusion by almost every significant western theologian, saint, and pope who spoke or wrote about this issue for at least the next millennium. Augustine's doctrine had theological and scriptural underpinnings, but it was not thought by him or his successors to be exclusively a matter of revelation.[10] Rather, as an implication of the Eighth Commandment, that one should not bear false witness, it was held by Christian thinkers to be part of what Alan Donagan has called "common morality" – that part of morality that can be known by human beings through the use of their unaided reason.[11] Put another way, the claim that lying is always and everywhere morally wrong was held to be a truth of the *natural law*, as well as a truth of *revealed faith*. I shall call this view, that lying is never to be done, the "absolute view" about lying.

The thinkers who articulated and defended the absolute view, an admittedly extreme position, were not blind to its implications for the issue of lying for a good cause. St. Thomas Aquinas held, as regards what I have called good personal causes, that "it is not lawful to tell a lie in order to deliver another from any danger whatever."[12] He similarly denied that it was appropriate for public authorities (or anyone else) to tell lies, for example, in warfare: "*No one* ought to deceive the enemy in this way" (*ST*, II-II, q. 40, a. 3, emphasis added). And Augustine, who set the entire tradition on its path of absolutism about lying, was himself provoked to write one of his two great treatises on lying precisely in order to prevent Catholics from lying for the most important, from his perspective, social cause of all, the spread of the gospel. Catholics were absolutely not, he held, to lie in order to infiltrate heretical sects with a view to exposing or converting them.

For centuries, such was the standard teaching of Western Christianity, both in its moral philosophy and theology. (As we will see in Chapter 3, Eastern thinkers have adopted a different approach.) In part because of

[10] Although it is not a focus on this book, it is worth noting in passing that Augustine believed the Scriptural condemnation of lying to be much clearer than any defense of lies that could be grounded in the stories of Rahab, the midwives, Jacob, or Abraham. In addition to *Exodus* 20:16, with its proscription against bearing false witness, he cites *Wisdom* 1:11, "The mouth that lies slays the soul"; *Psalms* 5:6, "You will destroy all that speak leasing [lying]"; *Matthew* 5:7, "Let your communication be yea, yea; nay, nay; for whatsoever is more than these comes of evil"; and *Ephesians* 4:25, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak ye truth."

[11] See Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[12] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 110, a.3, ad.4. Because of the frequency with which I will cite this work, I will henceforth abbreviate it as *ST*, and provide the reference parenthetically.

the pressure of religious persecution and the "good cause" of restoring Catholicism to the British Isles after the Reformation, the doctrine that lying is always and everywhere wrong was subsequently put to the test; various Catholic thinkers attempted to moderate its rigor by proposing forms of reservation and equivocation that, while perhaps honoring the letter of the doctrine, failed to live up to its spirit. Thereafter the Protestant thinker Hugo Grotius tried to preserve absolutism about lying in a different way, by shifting the definition of the lie, so that only a false assertion "to one with a right to the truth" would really count as a lie. Three centuries later, military and political leaders in World War II became convinced that previously accepted convictions concerning just conduct in war had to be abandoned, among them the view that lying was impermissible (as the quotation from Churchill earlier in the chapter evidences). And so, by the 1960s, at which time the conviction that some sorts of acts are never to be done had been lost, not only to secular, but also to many Christian and Catholic thinkers, the idea that there could be a moral absolute against lying had come to seem archaic and indefensible.

Nevertheless, those few philosophers and theologians today who still defend the absolute view are the ones who stand in greatest continuity with both the tradition of natural law thought on the issue and with the traditional Christianity of the West. Such thinkers include the aforementioned Paul Griffiths, who has argued from an explicitly Augustinian standpoint; J. L. A. Garcia, who has argued from a virtue ethics perspective;[13] Mary Geach, whose arguments take the internal norms of assertion as their starting point;[14] and a variety of thinkers influenced by the Thomistic natural law tradition, including Mark Murphy, John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle.[15]

My argument in this book is indebted to the work of all these thinkers, but particularly to the last mentioned group, all of whom, with the exception of Murphy, are sometimes referred to as members of the "new natural law" school of thought. They have defended, over the past several decades, the absolute view of lying, relying on the work of St. Thomas

[13] J. L. A. Garcia, "Lies and the Vices of Deception," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998), pp. 514–537.
[14] Mary Catherine Gormally, "The Ethical Root of Language," in Peter Geach (ed.), *Logic and Ethics*, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 49–71.
[15] Mark Murphy, "Natural Law and the Moral Absolute Against Lying," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 41 (1996), pp. 81–101; John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 5.5; Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus, Vol 2: Living a Christian Life* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1993), pp. 390–411; Joseph M. Boyle, "The Absolute Prohibition of Lying and the Origins of the Casuistry of Mental Reservation: Augustinian Arguments and Thomistic Developments," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 44 (1999), pp. 43–65.

Aquinas but expanding on, or departing from, him in various ways. Their argument has rested centrally on two claims: that lying always involves an intentional violation of the good of personal integrity; and that it always involves an intentional violation of the good of sociality. In this book, I expand on and defend these claims, and supplement them with the Augustinian claims that lying is incompatible with the goods of truth and religion. Careful attention to these four goods, I hold, reveals that the absolute view is true. It is indeed always and everywhere wrong to lie.

Of course, this claim requires a preliminary look at a question that is not, in itself, a moral question, namely what *is* a lie. My earlier mention of Grotius gives a clue to the importance of this query. If lying is false assertion to one with a *right* to the truth, then much that would ordinarily be considered lying is not just permissible; it is not even a lie. If, by contrast, lying involves *any* intentional expression of that which is false, then many uses of speech – as, for example, by actors on a stage – will have also to be considered lies. So in Chapter 1, I address this issue, arguing that a lie does not involve just any kind of "saying," but only *assertion*; and that the definition of a lie contains within it no moral qualifiers such as "*unjustified* false assertion" or "to one with a *right* to the truth."

In Chapter 2, I look at the two most important historical figures for the development of the absolute view; together these two thinkers give us what I will call the Christian case *against* lying for a good cause. The first figure is St. Augustine. Augustine offers three major reasons for adopting the absolute view: theological considerations that lead him to the conclusion that lying is always opposed to God-as-truth; scriptural reasons, for he interprets scripture as proclaiming the absolute view in the mouth of some of its major figures, including Christ; and a set of practical and empirical considerations that show how lying leads to more lying and other evils. Augustine also addresses straightforwardly a number of objections to his rigorous view, showing that they are flawed, or that they rely on one or another kind of misunderstanding. I look especially at Augustine's theological and empirical arguments, which make a considerable appeal to our common sense about the effects of lying, and at his responses to objections. I focus as well on the way that Augustine's arguments are oriented toward the issue of lying for the good social cause of promoting the gospel. As I have noted, he believed that *lying* for that cause would inevitably corrupt both the cause and its adherents. Augustine displays, I argue, much wisdom on this matter.

In Chapter 2, I also discuss St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was greatly influenced by Augustine, but I believe he presented a more theoretical

and principled account of the wrong of lying than did his predecessor. In Aquinas we find a concern both with integrity (hinted at in Augustine but not fully developed) and sociality as goods that are always damaged by the lie. St. Thomas is thus a crucial source for developing the absolute view, and I argue that he has been misunderstood by those who think his argument that lying is wrong rests on a claim that it is an abuse of the natural function of speech.

Augustine and Aquinas represent, in my view, the best of Christian thinking in opposition to the practice of lying for a good cause. But even in the early Christian Church and most certainly in recent centuries, there have been Christian defenses of the lie of necessity. In Chapter 3, I present the Christian case *for* lying for a good cause by tracing the views of three figures: John Cassian, an early Eastern father; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran theologian who was executed by the Nazis; and Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Christian realist whose thoughts on the nature and norms of statecraft exerted considerable influence over American politicians and intellectuals during the Cold War. While the argument of the remainder of the book is a defense of the absolute view, these three figures provide what I think is the strongest Christian case for lying for a good cause, a case that in interesting and important ways overlaps with my own case for the contrary view.

The absolute view about lying takes shape, historically and theoretically, in a larger context about moral absolutes more generally. According to this broader picture, there are absolute moral norms, and these norms pick out certain action types, without internal reference to moral properties such as "unjustified," and predicate of these action types that they are never to be done. According to this view of absolutes, it is not the case that these actions can only be done when the stakes are great, so as to preserve a great good or avoid a great evil; rather, having recognized that a possibility for action is of the type picked out by a moral absolute, a mature moral agent judges that this action is not to be done for any reason whatsoever.

In recent decades, the claim that there are moral absolutes has come under significant attack. In secular philosophy, utilitarians and their consequentialist descendants have rejected the idea that some things are never to be done. This rejection is a logical consequence of the foundational principle of utilitarianism that *whatever* will bring about the greatest good is precisely what a moral agent has an obligation to do. Not only secular philosophy, but also Christian moral theology has been affected by utilitarian strands of thought. In Catholic moral theology, in particular, the approach known as proportionalism denies that acts considered

in themselves can be known to be morally wrong, and asserts that the rightness of acts, as opposed to the goodness of ultimate intentions, is a function of the amount of premoral good or evil they bring about: essentially, the doctrine of consequentialism.

In Chapter 4, preparatory to presenting my most systematic arguments against the permissibility of false assertion, I look at the doctrine of moral absolutes. That there are such, and how they are to be understood, was the subject of what I consider one of the most important documents published by Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, *The Splendor of Truth*. In Chapter 4, I look closely at that encyclical both with a view to defending philosophically the natural law view about moral absolutes and to showing that, at least for Catholics faithful to the teaching of their Church, the question of whether there are such absolutes has been authoritatively answered. In that chapter, I also return to the question of the definition of lying, raising a final objection from the Grotian standpoint that the work of John Paul II enables us to rebut.

In Chapter 5, I make my defense of the absolute view. Relying on the findings of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I show that lying, described without internal reference to normative properties, always violates the goods of integrity and sociality, and that it is incompatible also with the goods of truth and of religion, that is, the good of a sound relationship with God. For these reasons, lying is something never to be done. The absolute view will have been substantively vindicated.

Still, the defense of the absolute view, and the necessary clarification of the nature of moral absolutes, will not clear the scene of questions and difficulties, not by a long stretch. One such question is the focus of Chapter 6. What does my view have to say about the question of *justice*? Many of those who deny that there is a moral absolute against lying nevertheless recognize that lying is often unjust; and yet my defense of the absolute view does not rely on that claim. So I undertake, in Chapter 6, to look at the relationship between truth-telling, lying, and justice. Doing so ultimately allows us to get to an understanding of what it might mean to have a "right to the truth," an important issue, even if that phrase should be no part of a definition of the lie.

The history of moral thought about lying, and especially the tradition of thought upholding the absolute view, has always been concerned with the question of what one can say, or do, short of lying, that might nevertheless be misleading or deceptive. Prominent in that history, for example, though not always to the credit of defenders of the absolute view, is the discussion of equivocation and mental reservation, and the ongoing

debate about whether these might be permissible forms of deception that did not involve lying. In Chapter 7, I look at the casuistical questions surrounding the absolute view: When is deception permissible, and what forms of verbal and nonverbal deception are, and are not, lies?

Chapter 8 returns to the issue of lying for a good cause, in each of the three senses I have mentioned. Against moral absolutism, the case of lying to the Nazis has been advanced as the most obvious case of justified false assertion possible, an instance of lying for a good personal cause. I will begin the chapter by addressing this paradigm case, a case in which there are great goods at stake, and in which there is as little "right to the truth" on the part of the Nazi as there possibly could be. I will argue that the situation of the Nazi calls for a radical response that does not involve any lying.

I then turn to the question of lying for political causes. Here, I address two objections. The first is that, whereas lying might always be wrong for a private person, political authority can make a moral difference. Thus, the objection continues, the ethics of lying should parallel the traditional ethics of killing, according to which it is always impermissible for a private citizen to intentionally kill but not always impermissible, and sometimes obligatory, for a public authority intentionally to kill. I argue against the legitimacy of this move, *both* where lying is concerned *and* where killing is. I then turn to the objection that lying is *indispensable* in public life and argue that even if this is true in a certain way, it is not a truth such as to justify a public servant's ever lying.

Finally, I turn to the issue of good social causes. From an Augustinian standpoint, I argue that lying for such causes runs contrary to the ideals of such causes, and to make this case, I draw on the writings of prominent dissidents from Soviet orthodoxy, in particular Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. These thinkers may not have been proponents of the absolute view as such, but their writings give witness to the truth of the Augustinian view that good social causes are corrupted by lies and dishonesty. But I argue that this truth cannot be adequately sustained without embracing the larger absolute view that I defend throughout the book.

My conclusions, if correct, and if widely embraced, would clearly have a significant effect not only on our daily life, which MacIntyre and Griffiths both suggest is suffused by lies, but also on our more momentous struggles for the sake of the good. Refusing to lie to save others, to achieve political goods, or to reform unjust or erroneous social practices and beliefs could not be done without real sacrifice. Yet my argument in this book is that this is the right sacrifice to make, and that refusal to make that sacrifice in fact undermines the very goods that are thought to justify lying in the first