

Intelligence in Public Media

A Philosophy of Lying

Lars Svendsen, Matt Baggeley (trans. from Norwegian) (Reaktion Books, 2022), 122 pages, notes, index.

Reviewed by Mike R.

A Philosophy of Lying bills itself as a “comprehensive investigation of lying in everyday life.” The intelligence profession is not under the microscope, but the book raises a number of issues that practitioners might find worthy of further reflection or exploration. While the author has occasional missteps, his material could easily form the basis for discussion in an intelligence-themed TED Talk or classes on intelligence ethics or leadership.

The author, Lars Svendsen, a philosophy professor at the University of Bergen in Norway, is not as well known to US readers as fellow Scandinavian Sissela Bok, the Swedish-American famous for her award-winning 1978 work, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. But what Svendsen lacks in name recognition, he makes up for in delivering a product readily accessible to the lay reader. Although Svendsen might have felt obliged to infuse the slim volume with serious citations for the sake of his academic reputation, he clearly wanted to make it enjoyable for a wide audience. *A Philosophy of Lying* would be as much at home at the beach or in a college seminar. He plays to modern sensibilities by calling upon plenty of nontraditional figures, including, on the small screen, the animated character Homer Simpson and *Mad Men* protagonist Don Draper.

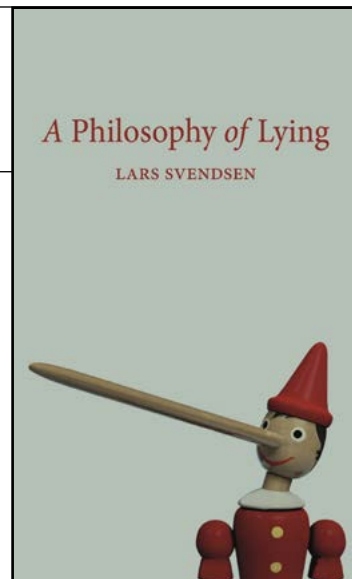
While the author conveys a range of views on lying as expressed by luminaries across the ages, he makes clear his own sentiment right from the start. Svendsen believes lying is wrong but understands the need for exceptions; likewise, he advises—for one’s mental health and our ability to live in a society—acting as if everyone is telling the truth even though it can lead to disappointment. “[You] are wise to mostly assume that people are telling the truth for the simple reason that in general they do. You will be fooled every now and then, but it is better to be fooled occasionally than to go through life with a chronic distrust of other people.” (11)

The book roughly divides into two parts. The first half is definitional and foundational, the second more practical. In the opening “What is Lying?” Svendsen establishes

“truthfulness”—requiring both accuracy and sincerity—as the gold standard. He places three concepts on the opposite side of the ledger, of which lying is just one.

- “Truthiness,” the 2005 “Word of the Year” associated with comedian Stephen Colbert, is one of lying’s key compatriots. Gut feelings overrule facts and logic: “The idea is that if something *feels* true, then it is true.” (16) In a “truthy” world, one can never pin down the truth; its notion is meaningless.
- A close relative is “bullshitting.” Whereas lying deviates from truthfulness in its lack of sincerity, and truthiness in its lack of accuracy, a bullshitter simply does not care. Drawing on examples from 1984’s Winston Smith toiling away in the Ministry of Truth to former President Donald Trump, the author notes that sometimes the truth is irrelevant; whether objectively true or false, what matters more is the effect.
- Having dispensed with two legs of the tripod, Svendsen settles on lying as the more interesting subject to pursue, describing it as follows: “To say something you do not think is true in a context where others can reasonably expect you to be telling the truth.” (30)

“The Ethics of Lying” is the book’s most academic chapter, a sort of “Philosophy 101” that readers can skip over or skim with little impact to their enjoyment of the rest of the work. While missing an opportunity to reference an obvious humorous touchstone in the form of the 2009 movie *The Invention of Lying*, starring Ricky Gervais as the first person to develop the ability to fib in a world of otherwise brutal honesty, Svendsen makes clear that not even the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant was as dogmatic as frequently portrayed. Despite



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professing a duty to be truthful, “Kant believes that we are not always obliged to convey our innermost thoughts. If we always said exactly what we were thinking, we would find each other unbearable.” (41) Fans of former Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, whose fondness for a certain line from scripture wound up etched in stone at CIA’s Headquarters, will also feel on familiar ground when Svendsen closes out the chapter by speaking, in his own words, of truth’s critical role:

If I lie to you, then I am blocking your access to reality and this applies to both white and black lies. By doing so, I am depriving you of your freedom. No matter how much goodwill my white lie is based on, I am denying you an insight you could have gained from your surrounding or from yourself. The truth could have set you free. (57)

The second half of *A Philosophy of Lying* applies the subject’s central tenets to a few particular facets. “Lying to Yourself” raises unstated but obvious questions for operational practitioners, and all those not at liberty to freely disclose their intelligence affiliation, of whether one can be true to oneself if so much of one’s life involves telling lies to others. Does leading a double life lead to self-deception? The author cites La Rochefoucauld: “We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves from other people, that in the end we disguise ourselves from ourselves.” (71) Svendsen asserts that the more one lies, the “more inclined to believe that what you are saying is true.” (72)

He relates self-deception concerns to our consciences as well, citing the extreme case of Lt. William Calley of 1968 My Lai massacre infamy during the Vietnam War. Calley was shocked to be charged with mass murder when he thought he was being a good soldier: “It couldn’t be wrong or I’d have remorse about it.” (67) Can intelligence officers called upon to break other nation’s laws in the performance of their duties be counted on to be scrupulously aboveboard at home? It is a tall order, yet that is exactly what is asked and expected of these professionals.

“Lies and Friendship” might strike a chord with anyone who has ever wondered, “Did I just get ‘case officered’?” What happens to one’s relationship when the other party is deemed a fraudster? According to the author, “Friendship is entirely conditional on there being mutual trust. If you don’t trust other people or they don’t trust you, friendship is impossible.” (74) It puts an interesting spin on that survey question that was once a litmus

test of an organization’s health: “Do you have a best friend at work?” Without ever saying “need-to-know,” the tensions in requiring colleagues to limit what they say to each other are brought to the surface as well. Both parties must be open with one another, Svendsen argues; sharing secrets, rather than keeping them closed up, should be the rule. But for those hoping for a clear way forward, he can only acknowledge the difficulty:

A secret is shared on the condition that it isn’t passed on, but what do you do if you seemingly have to choose between revealing the secret or lying to someone else? You would obviously experience a conflict of duty, and I don’t think the problem has a general and satisfactory answer. (75)

The friendship conundrum has a special resonance for those in the business of asset recruitment. To the degree that one adopts false pretenses to achieve an objective, there is a risk that it can all come crashing down. Svendsen calls upon research showing that the more an individual realizes that they have been deceived, the greater the severing of a connection that will occur with their deceiver:

[The] better the fraudster played the role, the more provoked we are, because it weakens the connection we initially assume exists between someone’s right and ability to play a role. In short: it weakens the trust we have that someone really is who they are presenting themselves to be. This is especially upsetting when someone has played the role of your friend. (74)

It is one thing for an intelligence officer to feign interest in a sport or hobby to sidle up next to a target. But what is the reaction when things go awry—as they inevitably do from time to time—upon finding out that an alias was being used; that one was not from their purported organization; or that they hailed from a different country? Is it safe to discount the impact of tactical lies told in the name of strategic truth, or will they always come at a cost, even when things go well?

Svendsen’s largest chapter, “The Politics of Lying,” focuses on the nation-state level, where the microcosm of individual lying takes on macro overtones. He begins by quoting someone close to home, a former Norwegian leader: “Sometimes a prime minister has not only a right but a duty to lie.” (83) And although he does not dwell on deception, per se, he highlights the famed Italian author

of *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli, as among those claiming that “in politics one must always be prepared to lie and deceive when it is to one’s advantage.” (85) The author sees such behavior often aligning with Max Weber’s ethics of responsibility, acknowledging that at times one has to break the rules for a higher purpose: “For Weber, the ‘responsible’ politician is someone who acts immorally and feels burdened by it.” (90) In other words, lying is sometimes necessary, but the individual should at least feel a tinge of guilt.

Looking at societies where lying has become commonplace, Svendsen cites a World War II-era writer who served as inspiration for famed author Hannah Arendt: “The totalitarian regime is based on the primacy of the lie.” (91) Whether speaking of Nazi concentration camps or life under the grip of the Soviet Union, reality becomes blurred through efforts at state control, and a “giant echo chamber” is created. (93) Turning to contemporary Russia, Svendsen opts for understatement, describing Putin as having “a relaxed relationship with the truth.” (104)

In a subsection on “Lying in Modern Politics,” the author points up assertions by President Jimmy Carter who said that he would “never tell a lie,” (96) and notes that President George Washington continues to be revered for similar mythical professions about cutting down a cherry tree as a child. Virtuous as these attributions may be, Svendsen relates, both proved false. The cherry tree episode reportedly was planted by an early Washington biographer who plagiarized it from a Scottish work. President Carter’s press secretary Jody Powell admitted lying was in fact necessary at times in the White House, such as in the case of not revealing military plans to attempt to rescue American hostages held in Iran in 1980.

Svendsen also raises several topics with an intelligence or national security connection that unfortunately leave the reader in need of a saltshaker to temper the findings. He claims, for instance, that “there’s no doubt that the Bush administration lied to justify the invasion of Iraq.” (97) But one of the argument’s two pillars, a supposed relationship between Saddam Hussein and Usama bin Laden, even though embraced by some, did not underpin the ultimate US rationale for going to war, and the intelligence never supported such a strong assertion. The other pillar, claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, contravenes his own logic; writing elsewhere in the book that to qualify as a lie one has to consciously assert

something known to be false, it is hard to see how a belief then widely held by the White House (and numerous allies), even though subsequently proved false, could be considered lying.

The author takes liberties as well in citing the September 1941 engagement between the destroyer USS *Greer* and a German U-boat to show that the US commander-in-chief lied about German actions for ulterior motives. While there were questions over what exactly happened, paralleling the later 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident leading to stepped-up US involvement in Vietnam, to say that “Franklin D. Roosevelt lied to the American people in order to ensure the United States’ participation in the Second World War” oversimplifies a more complex and nuanced event. (99)

Svendsen also writes of “playing the national security card” when the underlying motive is seen to be something else. In the classic example of Watergate, he speaks in general terms of President Richard Nixon’s efforts to “cover up incompetence, corruption, or some other criminal act,” yet curiously omits reference to Nixon’s specific attempt to enlist CIA to block an FBI investigation by claiming national security was at issue. (101) From the same era, he describes the Pentagon Papers episode as one of secrecy “not so much to prevent the enemy from acquiring knowledge as it is to stop its own population from getting it.” (90) While both incidents involved the intersection of politics, the law, and claims of national security, omitted is the fact that in one of these classified information was at stake. Nonetheless, a sullied history in this regard leads Svendsen to call into question the degree to which a populace can trust that its leaders are being truthful; “How can citizens know that a government with the option to lie does so only when national security is at stake?” (103)

Closing out his work, the author returns to themes of the pervasiveness of lying and of lie detection. Studies would have us believe that lying is rampant, occurring in some 25 percent of all our interactions, yet he writes that this is misleading. The average is heavily skewed: “A minority are responsible for most of the lying, while the majority account for very little of it.” (115) And because most people speak the truth and expect it in return, liars can be enormously successful taking advantage of this predisposition.

Is there a way, then, to take steps to ensure one is not being lied to? Svendsen dismisses most techniques or “tells,” such as the avoidance of eye contact, arguing that the behaviors speak more to perceived trustworthiness—a separate issue from being a liar or a truth-teller. While acknowledging some correlation between lying and voice modulation and eye dilation, even this slight benefit is for naught in the bigger scheme of things:

People who are trained to expose liars get slightly better at identifying them, but at the same time they become slightly worse at identifying people who are telling the truth, which makes them no more accurate in general. It is tempting to say that their training hasn't made them experts at distinguishing between honest and dishonest people, but has simply made them more suspicious. (116)



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Further Reading

Joseph Gartin, review of *Through a Glass Darkly: The Ethics of Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence*, by Cécile Fabre, *Studies in Intelligence* 67, no. 1 (March 2023).

John Harington, review of *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, by Sissela Bok, *Studies in Intelligence* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1984).

John P. Langan, S.J., “National Interest, Morality, and Intelligence: Search for Reconciliation,” *Studies in Intelligence* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1983).

———, review of *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, by Sissela Bok, *Studies in Intelligence* 29, no. 2 (Spring 1985).

David Robarge, review of *Fair Play: The Moral Dilemmas of Spying*, by James Olson, *Studies in Intelligence* 51, no. 1 (March 2007).