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Book Review: Lying: An Augustinian Theology Of Duplicity

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Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity, by Paul J. Griffiths. Brazos Press, 2004. Pp. 254. \$24.99 (paperback).

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Griffiths's book provides an exposition and explanation of Augustine's theory about the morality of lying. Although he endorses Augustine's view that lying is never morally permissible, Griffiths does not claim to have a compelling argument. His aim is to "seduce" the reader to see the attractiveness of Augustine's view: "This book is argumentative, but it is not an argument. It is instead an attempted seduction" (p. 20). The second half of the book offers "Augustinian readings" of nine other texts that address the morality of lying; these texts include Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, Kant's "On a Supposed Right to Lie . . .," and Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lie in the Extramoral Sense."

Augustine defines lying as "deliberately duplicitous speech, insincere speech that deliberately contradicts what the speaker takes to be true" (p. 31).¹ According to Augustine's definition, which Griffiths endorses, lies need not be false statements nor need they be intended for to deceive anyone. Augustine's definition is much broader than standard definitions of the English word "lying," which include the requirement that the statement is intended to deceive others. Some definitions of lying also include the requirement that the statement in question is false. An obvious question is whether Augustine's definition is too broad. I am strongly inclined to think that a lie must be a false statement and that duplicitous statements that are true cannot be lies. However, since many others report conflicting intuitions and since at least some dictionary definitions of "lying" do not stipulate that a lie must be a false statement, I won't press this point.

Griffiths is well aware of the worry that Augustine's definition is too broad. He asks whether it doesn't imply that telling a joke constitutes lying. He rebuts this objection on the grounds that jokes aren't statements. He appeals to examples of jokes that tell stories without purporting to be true—"An Englishman, an Irishman, and a Scotsman went into a pub . . ." (p. 35). This is a good argument as far as it goes, but a wide range of utterances that are intended to be humorous or ironic seem to involve making statements that one doesn't believe. I have in mind such things as my wife saying of my botched attempt to decorate a cake, "that looks beautiful," when we both know that the cake looks awful. Griffiths might be able to get around this by denying that such utterances are statements (or assertions), but he would need to give an account of the notion of a statement or assertion.

Augustine's very broad definition makes the absolute proscription of lying even more difficult to defend than it would be given a narrower definition. It is not clear why duplicity that doesn't represent itself as non-duplicitous and is not intended to deceive anyone is even *prima facie* morally wrong, much less absolutely wrong.

According to Griffiths, Augustine's view that lying is always wrong will strike one as absurd unless one is a Christian. (Griffiths also allows that Augustine's view strikes many or most Christians as absurd.) Griffiths offers two distinct arguments in defense of Augustine's absolutism. Augustine's

(and Griffiths's) background assumptions for these arguments are that: speech is a gift from God and that humans were created in the image of a triune God.

Griffiths's first argument is that to lie is to reject God's gift of speech and misappropriate something that belongs to God.

Lying speech is owned, controlled, taken charge of, characteristically and idiosyncratically yours. True speech is disowned, relinquished, returned as gift to its giver. . . . To lie is to reject the gift of speech by attempted appropriation. To speak truly is to accept the gift of speech by adoration. . . . To expropriate, in one of its meanings, is to take to oneself by theft what really belongs to someone else. . . . All this, in Augustine's understanding, is what you do when you speak the lie. You take to yourself and make your own what really belongs to God, and you do so out of a misunderstanding of what you are and what you take to be your relation to speech. (pp. 85–86)

Griffiths does not formulate plausible moral principles that allow him to draw the conclusion that lying is always wrong. It is not clear what constitutes rejecting or misappropriating a gift from God, nor is it clear why doing so is absolutely wrong. The circumstances of human life are such that we are often forced to choose between incompatible goods and some goods can only be preserved by lying. Suppose that my child's life is a gift (to her and me) from God and that the only way I can preserve her life is by lying. Here we might say that I am rejecting God's gift of the child by keeping my hands clean and refraining from lying rather than lying to save her life. Suppose also that our lives and talents are gifts from God. What follows from that? Does it follow that failing to develop one's talents to the maximum and failing to extend one's life as much as possible are always wrong? The moral principles that underlie Augustine's and Griffiths's view are unclear and far from self-evident. Griffiths needs to speak to these points. It is not clear why the proper receipt of the gift of speech and language requires that we refrain from lying in all possible circumstances.

Here it seems natural to fall back onto some kind of divine command or divine will theory of morality. Augustine might claim that God wills and commands that we never lie. One problem for Christians who hold this view is that there seem to be passages in the Bible in which the authors of the scriptures condone lying. Griffiths gives a strong reply to this objection and his biblical scholarship is most impressive. But, even if we grant him this rebuttal, he has not given *strong positive* reasons for thinking that God disapproves of or forbids all lying. Christians must hold that their views about the morality of lying and their commonsense moral beliefs are fallible, and should therefore be open to revision in light of gaining better knowledge of God's will and purposes. Augustine and Griffiths are correct to claim that, given the existence of infinite goods and evils in the afterlife, appeals to finite earthly goods sometimes promoted by lying do not definitively settle questions about the morality of lying. But even if we grant (as I would be prepared to grant) that God's will might conceivably justify an absolute prohibition against lying, Griffiths's confidence in divining God's will about lying is seriously misplaced.

Christians clearly *are* committed to the love command of the *New Testament* ("Love your neighbor as yourself") and the golden rule. It is not obvious why these principles imply that lying is always wrong no matter what, nor is it clear why they don't sometimes imply that one ought to lie. Consider a case of lying to an enraged and intoxicated man who is about to grievously harm a loved one, an act that he will almost instantly regret. The only way to prevent him from doing this is to lie to him. Both the golden rule and the love command permit this; I am even inclined to think that they require it.

The second and closely related argument that Griffiths repeatedly employs throughout the book is that the act of lying involves a "performative contradiction." Speaking with respect to lying and "other attempts to reject the divine gift," Griffiths writes:

they are performatively incoherent. That is, they deploy, and thus implicitly affirm, something that at the same time they explicitly reject and deny. Speech is a gift given, and a condition of its use is that it is received as such. But the lie is a use of speech that rejects precisely this condition by attempting, incoherently, to own speech as if it had been created from nothing by and for the speaker. This is performative contradiction. What issues from it is an act that appears to be an act of speech but is really something else, really an absence of speech cloaked in words. (p. 93)

I don't understand this or find it the least bit convincing. Sometimes people tell altruistic lies that they know to be contrary to their own self-interest. Such lies do not always "incoherently [attempt] to own speech as if it had been created from nothing by and for the speaker [my emphasis]." (The reader should examine Griffiths's other statements of his argument that lying (always) involves a performative contradiction (see pp. 99, 142, and 196).)

Griffiths's Augustinian readings of other texts are digressive and impressionistic but nevertheless quite interesting. These readings are based on very impressive scholarship and breadth of knowledge. The Augustinian readings of Kant and Nietzsche on lying are very well done and the latter makes good use of postmodernist sources.

Griffiths is keenly aware of how very counterintuitive his Augustinian view is. He writes:

you're the navigator in a warplane carrying a nuclear bomb; you know that the pilot has received orders to drop the bomb on a city. . . . [I]f the bomb is dropped on the city at least a million people will be incinerated. The pilot asks you for the coordinates that will get him to the drop-site. You think that it would be profoundly wrong to drop the bomb on a city . . . and you know that the only safe and sure way available to you of preventing this eventuality is to give the pilot the wrong coordinates—that is, to speak duplicitously to him. If you refuse . . . he'll know that something is wrong and will figure out a way to get himself to the target without your help. . . . A million innocent lives against a lie. (p. 230)

Griffiths has not seduced this reader. The two main Augustinian arguments he endorses are seriously flawed. Nonetheless, there is much of interest and value in this book which I would recommend to anyone with an interest in Augustine or the topic of lying. The book displays a remarkable and very eclectic scholarship and breadth of knowledge. It is generally very well written, although the lack of an index makes it less useful to scholars than it would otherwise be.

NOTE

1. Augustine's definition clearly implies that making a statement that one believes to be false constitutes telling a lie. It's not clear what he would say about cases in which one makes statements that one doesn't believe to be either true or false, as is characteristic of bullshit.

Christianity and the Soul of the University: Faith as a Foundation for Intellectual Community, ed. Douglas V. Henry and Michael D. Beaty. Baker Academic, 2006. Pp. 192. \$24.99 (paperback).

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Scottish tartans, as everyone knows, are woven according to a design that has been handed down within a Highland clan from time immemorial. One can imagine the shock felt by many, then, when historians discovered that these designs were actually invented by an enterprising eighteenth-century *English* textile merchant. As the old song warns, what everyone is liable to assume "ain't necessarily so." Indeed, all too often, what everyone *believes*, nobody really *knows*.¹ Such is the case with the much-touted fundamental antagonism between faith and reason. The present deeply ingrained notion of a perennial conflict between respectable scholarly inquiry and robust Christian commitment was, if not invented, then certainly popularized only a little more than a century ago by the publication of Andrew Dickson White's *History of the Conflict Between Science and Theology in Christendom* (1896). The contributors to the volume presently under review uniformly reject this prejudice of our age; however, rather than making it their task to debunk this myth (a task that others have ably accomplished), the essays in this volume represent the fruits of a revival of reflection on the positive and constructive role that Christian faith can play in informing scholarship, specifically by unifying the life of the Christian intellectual community.

Christianity and the Soul of the University is the product of a sustained conversation that was initiated in connection with a conference of the same name, held at Baylor University in March 2004. Noting "the properly communitarian character of the well-formed Christian college or university," the editors express the contributors' shared vision that "[i]n the best of circumstances, church-related higher education instantiates an existentially committed way of Christian life in community, grounded in dependence on others and on a range of theologically shaped practices and virtues