

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGLER.
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XXII. (No. 8.)

AUGUST, 1908.

NO. 627

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THE MONIST

A QUARTERLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Philosophy of Science

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MARY CARUS.

"The Monist" also discusses the Fundamental Problems of Philosophy in their Relations to all the Practical Religious, Ethical and Sociological Questions of the Day.

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A PERFECT LIAR.

Report of a Recent Speech Delivered by Prof. G. T. Knight, D. D., Before
the Twentieth Century Club of Boston.

[Some time ago while glancing over one of the New England newspapers, my eye fell upon the well-known name of one of our honored contributors, Dr. G. T. Knight, professor in the Theological School of Tufts College, who had been speaking on "The Perfect Liar." The rather startling subject and the fragmentary nature of the report made me interested to have a fuller account of what it was by which (to quote the paper) "The saints were shocked, the scoffers were dee-lighted, the mollycoddles sat up and took notice, and a sage reporter of many years' experience went up to the speaker and asked, 'Professor, did you mean what you said?'" I first appealed to Professor Knight, but his speech was not in manuscript, and his notes had disappeared in the hands of one of the reporters. After further inquiry I was lucky enough to come into possession of some notes privately taken by one of the hearers, by means of which I am able to present to our readers this report which, though inaccurate in a few particulars, contains (I am assured) the substance of the Professor's remarks.—P. C.]

AS to the merits of lying, there are two schools of thought, one defending false pretensions on occasion, the other strenuous for uniform truthfulness.

The first is presented in part by Kipling, who in one of the chapters of *Naulahka* writes as follows:

"There is a pleasure in the wet, wet clay,
When the artist's hand is potting it.
There is a pleasure in the wet, wet lay,
When the poet's pad is blotting it.
There is a pleasure in the shine of your picture on the line
At the Royal Academy!
But the pleasure felt in these is as chalk to cheddar cheese
When it comes to a well-made Lie,
To a quite unwreckable Lie,
To a most impeccable Lie!

To a water-tight, fire-proof, angle-iron, sunk-hinge, time-lock, steel-faced Lie!

Not a private hansom Lie,

But a pair and brougham Lie!

Not a little place at Tooting but a country house with shooting, and a ring-fence, deer-park Lie!"

Higher authorities than Kipling may be quoted on that side of the question. Several of Homer's gods were unqualified liars,—or should we say, thoroughly qualified?—though in Plato's opinion a lie could be of no use to the gods. He agreed, however, that it might sometimes be useful to men; and the ancient Greeks and Romans, with or without a theory, were certainly skilled in the practice of deception.

Among Christian authorities the first to defend false speaking, so far as I know, was the great theologian John Cassian. He pointed out that Biblical worthies not infrequently indulged in prevarication unto the glory of God. For instance, there was Rahab who, notwithstanding a serious blemish in her character, did great good by means of a lie; and as a reward was reckoned among the Patriarchs, and the progenitors of our Lord. Whereas if she had told the truth, nothing of all this would have come to pass, but great evil instead. So, again he says, Jacob received the blessing by virtue of a lie. And so in general "one man may be justified by means of a lie; and another may be guilty of sin unto everlasting death by telling the truth."

Of course he recognizes the dangerous character of this doctrine, and says: "A lie is to be so esteemed and so used as if it possessed the nature of hellebore, which if taken in an extreme case of disease may be healthful, but if taken rashly is the cause of instant death." In short, lying may be so necessary to the accomplishment of a good purpose as to be a duty; while truth telling in such a case would be a sin.

The Church, I may say, has not uniformly approved the reasoning of Cassian, but has perhaps equaled the pagans in the practice. In the present day, however, both theory and practice are more openly approved and advocated. For particulars you are referred to a scandalous book recently published by the Open Court Publishing Co. and called *The Praise of Hypocrisy*.

On the other hand, the rival school of ethics, insisting that word and deed should conform to the exact truth on all occasions, includes many of the most distinguished authorities of all historic times. There were Confucius and his greater contemporary Lao-tze,

Socrates and a long line of Christian martyrs who, because they would not compromise their consciences, were put to death, and in the latest centuries such as Kant and the "strict constructionists" in great number.

Without finally deciding between the claims of these two schools, people are now boasting of a real moral advance in that we no longer put men to torture, nor condemn them to hell, for consistently and sincerely holding to their convictions and refusing to belie themselves. But observe the result of this "moral advance": It is one of the ironies of history that since men have ceased to punish sincerity and truth telling, the practice of lying has greatly increased. For, the fiction habit *is* greatly on the increase. Think of "ten new novels a day in the English language," to say nothing of newspaper short stories, nor of what happens in other languages. Think also of commerce and politics, and society and the Church, and the "news" in the daily paper.

Ruskin's classification of customary lies is incomplete, but may help to show the variety of them. He mentions "the amiable lie of society, the patriotic lie of the historian, the provident lie of the politician, the zealous lie of the partisan, the merciful lie of a friend, the careless lie of each man to himself."

I shall not attempt to complete Ruskin's list, however far it may seem to fall short; neither shall I venture to describe the perfection of lying; nor indeed the exact occasion on which it becomes the right and duty of all of us to lie. It is sufficient to quote the authorities, among whom there are three or four well-known defenses of lying. There is that of the lawyers and diplomats, that of the newspapers, and that of the theologian. I do not include the business man, for though he tells a lie on occasion, he seldom has the gall to defend it. In fact, if he is investigated and shown up, he is likely to be ashamed of it. Many cases have resulted fatally, and other men have prudently offered a sop to the public in the shape of a million-dollar church, or a \$20,000,000 university, or the like. Sometimes the result is merely a financial panic and the child-like remark that "Teddy Roosevelt did it."

All explanations and theories, however, pale before that of the Church, which must be regarded as expert in questions of ethics, and which has agreed that we must lie whenever more good can thereby be accomplished than by telling the truth.

To be sure there are some difficulties in the application of this principle. For example: a great occasion of approved falsehood is connected with creed subscription. Unfortunately, however, this

matter is not clearly set forth ; there is a notable confusion of thought which the D. D.'s appear to be unable to resolve. Thus, false professions of belief are commonly defended on the ground that opinions are comparatively unimportant in religion. But, certainly, to show that opinions are unimportant is not the same as to show that sincerity in professing opinions is unimportant. Indeed when one thinks of what the creeds contain, he must agree that *those* opinions at least are mostly unimportant. If they were important, it might then be worth while to profess belief in them, if we could do so with sincerity. But, being as they are, to compel an intelligent man to insincerely declare his belief in them is doubly harmful and entirely unjustifiable—especially when (as in many cases the fact is) the Church requires the same man to declare that he is sincere in his profession, and that the creed which he despises is of such grave import as to be necessary to salvation.

One would suppose that good consciences would instantly detect the quality of this and reject it ; but the pretension and prestige of the authorities and the religious habits of people long accustomed to this kind of thing inhibit the conscience. So the spiritual confidence game, the churchly bunco-steering, is thoroughly successful, with great numbers of willing victims.

Of late, however, a new defense of double speech has appeared, and is said to have received Episcopal approval and to be extensively and gratuitously circulated among the needy. It calls attention to the fact that by the acute dialectic of Cardinal Newman and his imitators, the creeds are capable of being understood in a sense opposite to their original purport. Furthermore, says this ingenious author, creeds are professional affairs not properly subject to interpretation by the inexpert. And just as in law there are "legal fictions," so in the creeds there are "theological fictions," intelligible only to the elect ; and the use of them is not liable to the charge of dishonesty or perjury.

Of course, to the plain man this sounds like special pleading. He suspects any defense which is openly based on acute dialectics and the theory of professional fiction. It all seems to him mere scientific lying. He would say we need not go further in our search for perfection.

The present speaker, as before said, is content to quote the authorities ; and he will close with one more such quotation. It is remarked by the philosophical historians that, whenever a tendency in human affairs approaches its climax, there are always indications of reconstruction. And I am glad to say the times are not alto-

gether without hope. There are signs of improvement. Henry Watterson has lately said concerning newspaper lies: "People have already begun to tire of being misinformed, and will some day insist upon a newspaper that will be less interesting and more truthful, and believe me, when the time arrives, when fact shall be preferred before fiction, there shall be found editors who will prefer to grow rich telling the truth rather than to die telling lies."

He mentions only editors, but he means more. The reporters will surely furnish what their superiors require, even to the extent of reporting the facts. And we know that business men and politicians cater to the public taste. A few at least of the lawyers and diplomats are daring to tell the truth; and finally the clergy, many of whom are on the verge of starvation—whenever it becomes more profitable for them to tell the truth, they can be relied upon.

I believe then a good time is coming, a revival of genuine old-fashioned honesty and sincerity, without impossible standards on the one hand, and without unworthy compromises on the other.