

LIARS AND LYING PSYCHOLOGICALLY CONSIDERED

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HAPPILY for us, our topic makes no call for our being statistical with regard to it, else, remembering the famous mot with regard to the intimate relation between lying and statistics, we should be found to be demonstrating, in our first sentence, that which we have set out to evaluate psychologically. Neither does our title demand that we be Sunday-schoolish with regard to our topic. It merely asks that we be scientific. That surely is task enough. To be neither armed against nor enamored of lying as one comes to the study of this theme is to achieve that state of mind which makes possible an impartial study of it. It is well to look at lying and liars with that cool impartiality that one uses in going through a museum. Equipped then with an educated conscience in the interest of clarity rather than for condemnation; motivated by a large curiosity; unimpeded by a moralizing churchianity, one can proceed to evaluate lying and liars. The temptation is to proceed to enlighten him. But this is not our present task.

Remembering our first caution against becoming statistical with regard to our topic, we shall attempt no quantitative tabulation of those who have, in many cases, been too hastily designated by the deprecatory term of liar, lest we turn from the psychology of our topic to its practice. Nevertheless, it will be necessary to become near-statistical, in an incidental sort of way, for the further progress of our discussion. For it is hardly possible to deal with the nature of lying without taking some note of the fact of it.

Again, happily, it is not necessary that we go beyond generalities in this respect. Like the poor, the liar is ever with us. Like wheat, lying exists wherever man is found. Were we here dealing with the ethnology of lying, an interesting field for investigation would demand our attention. Not enough study has been given as yet to the geographic distribution of lies and liars throughout the world. It is enough for us to know that lying is not indigenous to any race or soil, though it might be modified by both. Lying, we shall find, is a modifiable thing. It calls for more than an isothermic explanation. It is an activity not peculiar to the tropics. It is so pervasive that none remains untouched with regard to it. Here

beggar, bishop, and business man are touched with a common fact, though, be it noted, they do not by any means, arrive at a common level. When it comes to lying there are diversities manifold.

This is not to say, however, as many in their haste have said, that "all men are liars." They who so speak are unwittingly making the statement true so far as they themselves are concerned. It is good to remember that though lying is found almost everywhere, the liar is not so widely distributed. Because a man was a liar yesterday, that does not make him one today. The practice of Christianity would be increased and the sense of confusion lessened, if all men knew when to speak of the liar in the past tense. There are few confirmed liars; there are many circumstantial ones. With the majority of men, lying is a thing of happenstance rather than a thing of habit, except, of course, in that interesting realm of understood fictions in which we all move, more or less, giving to something other than the truth the gloss of it. Science doth make liars of us all. Still do we speak in pre-Copernican ways of the rising and setting of the sun. All the obvious truths of our fathers have been shown by science to be not so. But the world in general refuses to change its mental fixations in regard to these things. Men still talk of things as they look, knowing that they are not as they look. With regard to these matters we have agreed to let truth wait on our convenience. It is a curious fact, accepted even by good people, that they will accept a partial truth in place of the whole truth so long as it is a concession rather than a catastrophe.

The mention of this distinction brings us to the moral crux of the whole matter. To many this is the only thing that does matter. These are they who are prone to think of all kinds of lying in terms of the same condemnation. Ruskin in his day drew attention to the fact that "we are too much in the habit of looking at falsehood in its darkest associations, and through the color of its worst purposes." Since then, however, psychology has come to power. It will not treat our lyings so. Lying is not all of a piece. Before the psychologist came to reveal the gradated ways in which men admixture truth, practical experience had given men a clue to this discernment. Lies were described as "black" or "white." The distinction will hardly serve for a scientific classification, but it does serve as a hint that all lies are not of the same nature. Children have a happy way of arriving at the same conclusion.

I recall, as a lad, that we had a way of saying among ourselves that "twenty fibs make a lie." I see that the dictionary at my desk defines a fib as "a softened expression for a lie." Unfortunately many theologians of the past thought it better not to admit of any softening when it came to speaking about lying. It was something to be utterly condemned. It was an abomination to the Lord. One sentence was sufficient to enwrap all lies. Now that I have studied them as well as their teachings I have another illustration of where a man's fear touches the expression of his philosophy with hypocrisy. Lies, crushed to earth, will sometimes rise again because of the truth they contain. The task of the psychologist is not to inveigh against lying, but to investigate it.

Following this procedure, he arrives at many interesting facts. Becoming accustomed to the darkness, assuming that this is the appropriate synonym for all forms of lying, one comes to see that there are many kinds of lies other than those which have been classified as black or white. Richard G. Cabot some time ago sought to classify all lies in a threefold division: the lie artistic, the lie belligerent and the lie philanthropic. It is an interesting but hardly an inclusive classification. How varied lies can be one need only consult "Roget" under the heading of "Falsehood." Having done this it will be seen that lying, in one form or another, at some time or other, is practiced by the large majority of men.

The thing which interests the psychologist with regard to this matter is to know what it is that makes men the liars they happen to be. The reasons are many, depending sometimes on the fact of circumstance, at other times, on the fact of one's character. Man is a denizen of two worlds. He lives in the things of the spirit, and also on the plane of sense. For the lubrication of his mundane life he has found it necessary to live according to convention, as well as conviction. Or, rather, we should say that it has become his conviction that at times he must live according to convention. Politeness makes a friend of falsehood and calls it accomodation. Difficult questions are answered ambiguously. Truth must be short measured lest it give offence. The advice of an ancient counselor is made to read, "A man must be first peaceable, then pure." One of the strange anomalies of the virtuous life is that the virtues are always undercutting each other. There is a sense in which men, at times, have to become liars for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

On the other hand, as that discerner of human conduct, Roger Bacon, noted, men often become liars for the pleasure of it. He says: "A lie doth ever add pleasure. Doth any man doubt that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the mind of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves?" Because so many folk have a greater love for the dramatic than for the divine: desiring a thrill more than the truth, lying finds place and power.

It is interesting to note that, in this connection with the dramatic that which is other than the truth often carries with it no sense of moral stigma. It is accounted proper to cultivate the sense of exaggeration before one cultivates the sense of ethical clarity. In nursery rhyme and fireside lore, our parents taught us the way. They nourished the habit by the aid of myth, legend, and fairy tale. And now that we have become men, we find in ourselves a love of fiction. We give a license to the poet which we deny to the man of prose. Which is to say that we have come to the emancipating belief that theoretically strict truth may be a chief good in life, but in practical life it is amenable to circumstance. If we are ethically inclined we comfort ourselves by seeking to have a conscience approved before men. Which means that we have distinguished between a pure conscience and a puritanical one.

Well would it be for society if all lies were fancy born. But that is not so. Many, unfortunately, surge up through the subsoil of passion. Then men and institutions are in peril. A conflagration is abroad. It is as if a poison was injected into the arterial life of society. Of all forms of lying, none needs more attention than this in our day. During the last decade, we have been treated to a debauch of lying in this respect as to almost engulf civilization itself. Under the now hated word, propaganda, corporations and governments have taken to the habit of giving people what they want them to hear. For the ethicist this is one of the major problems of our time. For the psychologist it is one of the most interesting. By a subtle interplay on the major fears and faiths of men, their reasoning processes are crushed or perverted. Under the guise of enlightenment the emotionalizing process goes on and men respond, like dumb beasts, to the call of the dictator.

The last group of 'lyings' to which we give attention is that group which, strangely enough, have their birth in the loyalties of men. Here are born "the patriotic lie of the historian, the provident lie of the politician, the zealous lie of the partisan, the merciful lie of the friend, and the careless lie of each man to himself." The moralist has had much to say about the wickedness of these things. "Sinful it is," he says, "when men slay the truth for the sake of love." The psychologist, in his own un-moral way, is interested in that men are so often the forsakers of truth for the sake of love. It is a curious fact that the loyalties of love so often lead men into the lyings we have just mentioned. Yet the explanation is simple. So long as men allow their emotions to outrun their ethics, so long will lying be resorted to in the long run. What the future of lying will be is hard to say. To the religionist and the ethicist, the psychologist has much to offer, as we have seen. He has also something to suggest, namely, that the primary step necessary to a more truthful order of things is that among the religionists themselves there shall be less lying about lying.