

What Makes a Lie a Lie?

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“Thou schalt not speke fals witnessyng
ayens thi neiybore.”

(Wycliffite trans., 1395).

Augustine on lying

- “There is a great question about Lying, which often arises in the midst of our every day business, and gives us much trouble, that we may not either rashly call that a lie which is not such, or decide that it is sometimes right to tell a lie, that is, a kind of honest, well-meant, charitable lie.” (*De mendacio*, 1).
- “But none doubts that it is a lie when a person willingly utters a falsehood for the purpose of deceiving: wherefore a false utterance put forth with will to deceive is manifestly a lie. But whether this alone be a lie, is another question.” (DM, 4).

Anselm of Canterbury on whether God could will a lie to be just

- “A statement, ‘What God wills is just and what he does not will is unjust’, is not to be understood as meaning that, ‘If God wishes anything whatsoever that is unfitting, it is just, since it is he who wills it.’ For the argument, ‘If it is God’s will to tell a lie, it is just to tell a lie’, is a non sequitur.” (*Cur Deus Homo*, 1.12).

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The reason God can’t do this is because of freedom of will: God is not free to will to lie.

Anselm of Canterbury on freedom of the will

- Freedom of will is not “the power to sin or not to sin. . . Indeed if this were its definition, neither God nor the angels, who are unable to sin, would have free will, which it is impious to say” (DLA, ch. 1).
- Freedom of will is the ability to preserve rectitude of will. “As long as they willed what they ought, they had rectitude of will” (DLA, ch. 3).

Anselm of Canterbury on lying willingly

- Student: “How can one be said to lie unwillingly when he lies to avoid being killed, something he only does willingly? For just as he unwillingly lies, so he unwillingly wills to lie. And he who wills unwillingly to lie, is not willing that he wills to lie.”
- Teacher: “To will something for its own sake, e.g., as we will health for its own sake, is different from willing something for the sake of something else. . . [Thus, he is] willing to lie for the sake of his life, not willing to lie for its own sake. . . In this way, one who lies lest he be killed, is said to lie against his will, not willingly, and of necessity, given that he cannot avoid the falsehood without the penalty of death. He who lies in order to save his life is improperly said to lie against his will, because he willingly lies, and he is improperly said to will to lie against his will, because he wills it precisely by willing it. For just as when he lies he wills himself to lie, so when he wills to lie, he wills that willing.” (DLA, ch. 5)

Augustine on whether lying requires intent to deceive

- “But it may be a very nice question whether in the absence of all will to deceive, lying is altogether absent. Thus, put the case that a person shall speak a false thing, which he esteems to be false, on the ground that he thinks he is not believed, to the intent, that in that way falsifying his faith he may deter the person to whom he speaks, which person he perceives does not choose to believe him. For here is a person who tells a lie with studied purpose of not deceiving, if to tell a lie is to utter any thing otherwise than you know or think it to be. But if it be no lie, unless when something is uttered with wish to deceive, that person lies not, who says a false thing, knowing or thinking it to be false, but says it on purpose that the person to whom he speaks by not believing him may not be deceived, because the speaker either knows or thinks the other will not believe him” (*De mendacio*, 4).

Augustine on whether falsity is sufficient for lying

- “Whence if it appear to be possible that a person should say a false thing on purpose that he to whom it is said may not be deceived, on the other hand there is this opposite case, the case of a person saying the truth on purpose that he may deceive. For if a man determines to say a true thing because he perceives he is not believed, that man speaks truth on purpose that he may deceive: for he knows or thinks that what is said may be accounted false, just because it is spoken by him. Wherefore in saying a true thing on purpose that it may be thought false, he says a true thing on purpose to deceive. So that it may be inquired, which rather lies: he who says a false thing that he may not deceive, or he who says a true thing that he may deceive?” (DM, 4).

Augustine on whether lying need be a sin

- “For the question is not now which of them sinned, but which of them lied: as indeed it is presently seen that the latter sinned, because by speaking a truth he brought it about that a person should fall among robbers, and that the former has not sinned, or even has done good, because by speaking a false thing he has been the means of a person’s avoiding destruction” (DM, 4).

Augustine on the combinations of falsehood and intent to deceive

- For if a lie is an utterance with will of uttering a false thing, that man has rather lied who willed to say a false thing, and said what he willed, albeit he said it of set purpose not to deceive. But if a lie is any utterance whatever with will to deceive; then not the former has lied, but the latter, who even in speaking truth willed to deceive. And if a lie is an utterance with will of any falsity, both have lied; because both the former willed his utterance to be false, and the latter willed a false thing to be believed concerning his utterance which was true. Further, if a lie is an utterance of a person wishing to utter a false thing that he may deceive, neither has lied; because both the former in saying a false thing had the will to make a true thing believed, and the latter to say a true thing in order that he might make a false thing believed (DM, 4).

Aquinas on formal vs. material truth

- “If these three things concur, namely, (a) falsehood of what is said, (b) the will to tell a falsehood, and (c) finally the intention to deceive, then there is falsehood—(a) materially, since what is said is false, (b) formally, on account of the will to tell an untruth, and (c) effectively, on account of the will to impart a falsehood.”
- A falsehood without will to tell a falsehood is not a lie: “the essential notion of a lie is taken from formal falsehood, from the fact namely, that a person intends to say what is false”. A truth with the will to tell a falsehood is a lie: “one utters falsehood formally, through having the will to deceive, even if what one says be true, yet inasmuch as this is a voluntary and moral act, it contains falseness essentially and truth accidentally, and attains the specific nature of a lie” (*Summa Theologiae*, Part II, Q. 110).