

## AUGUSTINE: THE TRUTH ABOUT LIES\*

**A**UGUSTINE'S examination of lies in his brief treatise *De mendacio* of 395/6 addresses in turn an analytical question (What is a lie?), a metaethical question (What does the wrongfulness of a lie consist in?), and a normative question (What are the circumstances in which lies are forbidden, permitted, or enjoined?). His investigation is subtle and complex, not always easy to follow—rereading it many years later Augustine found it “obscure, entangled, and extremely dense,” *obscurus et anfractuosus et omnino molestus* (*retr.* 1.2.7). Yet it repays the effort required to understand it, for the nuanced richness of his account of lying, as well as for the clear glimpse it offers of the fundamental principles of his moral theory.<sup>1</sup> I'll take up each question in order, with an eye to Augustine's eventual response and the moral principles to which he has recourse in his discussion. His answers to each question are largely, though not entirely, independent of one another.

### 1. The Analytical Question

What is a lie? Augustine works through three proposals before cautiously endorsing a fourth. (I'm rearranging the order of his discussion slightly.) The first runs as follows:

(L1) Larry is lying to Victor when he asserts a falsehood.

The problem with (L1) is that Larry might sincerely believe something false, and pass it along to Victor in all innocence; he may unwittingly lead Victor astray but he has not lied to him (*mend.* 3.3). A lie is more than the mere utterance of a falsehood, or bringing someone to believe a falsehood. Insincerity seems to be a necessary condition for lying. At the very least,

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<sup>1</sup> Mann [2003], the most recent discussion of Augustine on lying, holds that Augustine at best answers only the normative question: “Although Augustine makes it abundantly clear... that he subscribes to the principle that lying is always wrong, he is less forthcoming about *why* lying is wrong. Nor, I shall argue, does he supply a clear account of what lying *is*...” (480: emphases in original). As we shall see, I think Augustine provides clear and compelling answers to the metaethical and the analytical questions as well.

Larry cannot be leading Victor astray inadvertently. The next proposal tries to avoid this:

(L2) Larry is lying to Victor when he deliberately asserts a falsehood. According to (L2), Larry tells Victor something he knows to be false, and does so deliberately; Larry cannot be innocently mistaken on this account.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite this advantage (L2) is still not adequate. Augustine points out that it doesn't cover the Case of the True Lie: someone "may say a true thing and still lie, if he thinks it to be false and says it as the truth, despite the fact that it is so in fact as he says" (*mend.* 3.3).<sup>3</sup> If Larry mistakenly believes that the hammer is in the cabinet rather than the toolbox, and then tells me that the hammer is in the toolbox while believing it to be in the cabinet, Augustine thinks that he has lied despite the fact that he hasn't asserted a falsehood. Whether we agree with Augustine about this case, we can certainly accept his point that what matters for lying is not what is or is not the case, but what the liar takes to be the case or not. Lying is a matter of belief rather than reality.

The third proposal builds on this insight, dispensing with talk of the actual state of the world in an attempt to capture 'true lies' along with their more common brethren:

(L3) Larry is lying to Victor when he (*a*) believes *p*, and (*b*) deliberately asserts not-*p*.

In discussing (L1) Augustine saw that insincerity is a necessary condition of lying; (L3) proposes that it is sufficient as well.<sup>4</sup> According to (L3), Larry is lying when he believes one thing but says another, no matter what the facts of the case may be: "a person lies when he has something in

<sup>2</sup> There is a reading of 'deliberately' in (L2) on which Larry's assertion is deliberate, and he need not know that what he says is false. But this is peculiar (how often do we make assertions accidentally?), and in any event no improvement on (L1), so I shall ignore it.

<sup>3</sup> ... *possit uerum dicere mentiens, si putat falsum esse et pro uero enuntiat, quamuis reuera ita sit ut enuntiat.*

<sup>4</sup> Note that (L3) is very close to the account of lying operative in a good deal of contemporary metaethical discussion: the claim in Fried [1978] that lying is wrong because it violates an (implicit) contractual obligation to tell the truth, for instance, or the rule-utilitarian argument in Bok [1978] to adopt truth-telling as a policy since it makes us all better off. These accounts identify the wrongfulness of lying with Larry's asserting what he does not think is the case. While Augustine is sometimes tempted to this simplistic view (see *ench.* 7.22), the problems he identifies with (L3) and the moral he derives from them show that he knew better, and indeed had a more sophisticated account of lying, as we shall see.

mind and says something else in his words” (*mend.* 3.3).<sup>5</sup> The shift from  $p$  to not- $p$  in (L3) prevents honest error and focusses on the liar’s doxastic attitudes, bypassing the difficulties associated with (L1) and (L2). Yet this won’t quite do either, as Augustine recognizes. There need not be anything objectionable in asserting things you don’t believe, or even believe to be otherwise. Larry the stand-up comedian is not lying to Victor when he begins a story “A Stoic, a Skeptic, and a Cartesian walk into a bar. . .” The comedian is not bound to say only what he believes, and the audience is not expected to believe what he says; the conventions governing the telling of jokes indicate that the speaker is not to be taken seriously—“the comedian’s tone of voice and demeanour clearly indicate that he doesn’t mean to mislead anyone even though he is not saying true things” (*mend.* 2.2).<sup>6</sup> The same point could presumably be made for other kinds of ‘bracketed’ discourse (storytelling, role-playing, figurative or rhetorical language, and so on: see *mend.* 5.7). The moral to draw from these examples is that lies are meant to be ‘taken seriously,’ that is, a lie is intended to *mislead* the person to whom it is addressed.<sup>7</sup> Joking, storytelling, and the like are conversational contexts in which the presumption of belief in what the speaker says is suspended, and therefore what he says cannot be intended to mislead his audience in their belief.

Augustine opts for the obvious change to (L3), building the intention to deceive into the definition of the lie: “The objectionable feature of lying is the desire to deliberately mislead in what one says,” *Culpa uero mentientis est in enuntiando animo suo fallendi cupiditas* (*mend.* 3.3; see also *ench.* 7.22).<sup>8</sup> We can represent this as an added condition:

- (L4) Larry is lying to Victor when he (a) believes  $p$ , (b) deliberately asserts not- $p$ , and (c) intends Victor thereby to come to believe not- $p$ .

Lies deceive—more exactly, successful lies deceive: a lie counts as a lie even

<sup>5</sup> *Quapropter ille mentitur, qui aliud habet in animo, et aliud uerbis uel quibuslibet significationibus enuntiat.*

<sup>6</sup> *Habent enim euidētissimam ex pronuntiatione atque ipso iocantis affectu significationem animi nequaquam fallentis, etsi non uera enuntiantis.*

<sup>7</sup> Lies of course can be addressed to more than one person, but I’ll ignore this complication in what follows.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine uses ‘*animo suo*’ idiomatically as an adverbial phrase modifying *fallendi*, along the lines of ‘*sponte sua*.’ He warns us in *mend.* 1.1 that we shouldn’t look for eloquence in his account, and placing this phrase immediately after ‘*in enuntiando*’ bears out the warning. One twelfth-century manuscript has instead *Culpa uero mentientis in enuntiando est in animo fallendi cupiditas*, the scribe desperately reworking the text.

if it does not succeed in its aim of misleading someone; what matters is the liar's intention.<sup>9</sup> (Attempted murder is not murder, but an attempted lie is a lie.) Bearing this in mind, we can classify lying as a form of verbal deception. Its genus is deception, plain and simple; there can be non-verbal deception, as for instance when my daughter leaves a piece of toast and a half-full glass of milk on the table, counting on me to draw the inference that she has eaten breakfast when in fact she has not. Deception in its turn is a species of manipulation, in which one person deliberately causes another to have certain beliefs.<sup>10</sup>

According to (L4), a lie is an attempt by the liar to cause someone to believe something the liar disbelieves, as the direct result of his asserting it to be so.<sup>11</sup> Augustine by and large endorses this as his analysis of lying. Yet he is careful to note that philosophical problems still remain. In *mend.* 4.4 he presents a pair of cases that are arguably cases of lying but do not fall under (L4). Both are cases in which the speaker is taken to be untrustworthy by his interlocutor.

In the first case, Larry is well-intentioned, deliberately asserting a falsehood so Victor will thereby come to believe the truth:<sup>12</sup>

A man who knows or thinks he is saying something false, says it deliberately in order to not mislead—for instance, if he knows a

<sup>9</sup> As Augustine notes explicitly in *mend.* 3.3. Mann [2003] 483 thinks that his (D4), quite similar to (L4) here, is not Augustine's at all.

<sup>10</sup> There need not be anything morally objectionable in manipulation. Telling someone the truth, for example, is usually a way of causing him to acquire a true belief.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine points out that overt verbal behaviour isn't the whole story; by tone of voice, gesture, body language, and the like Larry might belie the assertive force of his utterance, *e.g.* uttering *p* with heavy irony, or with a nudge and a wink. The important point is what Larry deliberately *signifies* to Victor, which might not match what he says (*mend.* 4.4). This revision clearly allows Augustine more precision where needed; it also makes the boundary between lying and other forms of deception less clear, since it's unclear what counts as significative behaviour—does my daughter's artful arrangement of breakfast detritus count as her 'signifying' that she has eaten? For the discussion here nothing rides on how the question is settled, and I'll talk in terms of verbal behaviour for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>12</sup> *Unum qui scit aut putat se falsum dicere, et ideo dicit ne fallat; uelut si aliquam uiam nouerit obsideri a latronibus, et timens ne per illam pergat homo cuius saluti prospicit, et eum scit sibi non credere, dicat eam uiam non habere latrones, ad hoc ut illac non eat, dum ideo credit latrones ibi esse, quia ille dixit non ibi esse, cui non credere statuit, mendacem putans.* Here and in the next case Augustine speaks of truths and falsehoods; as noted in the discussion of (L2), this is misleading, and henceforth I ignore it. Davidson [1985] also notes the possibility of Larry 'deceiving' Victor in getting him to believe the truth.

certain road is beset by robbers, and, afraid that some person for whose safety he is anxious should go by that road, a person whom he knows does not trust him, should tell him that that road has no robbers, so that he may not go by it, since he'll think there are robbers there, precisely because the other has told him there are none and he is resolved not to believe him, thinking him a liar.

Here (c) of (L4) fails, since Victor comes to believe not what Larry says but rather the opposite of what he says, thereby believing as Larry does. Roughly, Larry has tricked Victor into believing the truth.

In the second case, Larry is malicious, deliberately asserting a truth so Victor will thereby come to believe a falsehood:<sup>13</sup>

Another man who knows or thinks what he says is true, says it deliberately in order to mislead—for instance, if he tells a person who doesn't believe him that there are robbers on that road where he really knows them to be, so that he to whom he tells it may thereby go by that road and so fall among the robbers, because he thinks that what the other told him is false.

Here (b) of (L4) fails, since Larry asserts what he thinks (and thereby “speaks his mind” accurately) even though Victor comes to believe otherwise than as Larry does. Roughly, Larry has tricked Victor by speaking the truth.

Augustine's two cases, despite the differences between them, call attention to one and the same thing: the mechanics of belief-acquisition. He is at pains to emphasize that in ordinary conversational contexts, Larry would be expected to assert  $p$  solely because he believes it and wants Victor to believe it (*mend.* 4.4). Victor, upon hearing Larry assert  $p$ , initially formulates the belief that Larry believes  $p$ , and subsequently comes to believe  $p$  at least in part as a result of his initial belief that Larry believes it.<sup>14</sup> In the case of lying, Larry takes advantage of the way in which Victor acquires his beliefs to manipulate the result. In ‘ordinary lying,’ as we might call it, Larry asserts the opposite of what he himself believes, and Victor acts as he would in any

<sup>13</sup> *Alterum autem qui sciens aut putans uerum esse quod dicit, ad hoc tamen dicit ut fallat; tamquam si homini non sibi credenti dicat latrones in illa uia esse ubi reuera eos esse cognouit, ut ille cui dicit per illam uiam magis pergat, atque ita in latrones incidat, dum putat falsum esse quod ille dixerit.*

<sup>14</sup> This two-stage analysis of Victor's response explains why Augustine sometimes writes as though the problem with lying were that one is mistaken about the liar's mental states, rather than misled about the world (if indeed one is misled). Victor acquires his belief about the world precisely *because* he takes Larry to hold that belief; it is an integral part of the process.

ordinary conversational context, believing what Larry says because he says so. In Augustine's first and second case above, however, Larry correctly takes Victor's process of belief-acquisition to be inverted: Victor formulates the belief that Larry believes  $p$  and, holding Larry to be untrustworthy, thereby comes to believe not- $p$  as a result; Larry takes advantage of the mechanics of this process to trick Victor into acquiring the belief Larry wants him to have. Victor in the second case is not a belief-adopter with respect to Larry but instead, Augustine proposes, a 'belief-flipper' (applying the rule "For  $q$  believe not- $q$ " to Larry's assertions). Matters could easily be much more complicated. Victor might lend only a limited degree of credence to anything Larry says on Tuesdays, except for every fifth utterance for which he flips a coin either to adopt or to reject that belief; Larry could assert one thing or another depending on his beliefs about Victor's acquisition of beliefs; Larry and Victor could have infinitely iterated Holmes-Moriarty interactions,<sup>15</sup> where Larry would assert  $p$  but he believes Victor believes he is trying to trick him, so instead he should assert not- $p$ , but he believes that Victor believes that he, Larry, will therefore assert not- $p$ , so he should assert  $p$  after all, and so on endlessly—the possibilities for Larry and Victor are unlimited, and the hopes for a general analysis correspondingly negligible.<sup>16</sup>

To his credit, Augustine gives us a good look over the edge into this philosophical abyss and then retreats. Whatever we decide to say about his first and second cases, and by extension about more complex cases of belief-acquisition, there is complete agreement that 'ordinary lying' is indeed lying, and Augustine will take it as a paradigm instance for the rest of his discussion, recognizing that "whether this alone be a lie is another question" (*mend.* 4.5). In practice that means a cautious endorsement of (L4) as the best workable account of lying, with a due nod to the complexities and

<sup>15</sup> Or Vizzini's reasoning in the Battle of Wits in *The Princess Bride* (1987): "Now, a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet, because he would know that only a great fool would reach for what he was given. I am not a great fool, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you. But you must have known I was not a great fool, you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me..."

<sup>16</sup> The obvious proposal—Larry is lying to Victor when his saying what he does attempts to take advantage of the way Victor acquires beliefs, to bring Victor to believe what he wants him to—founders on what it is to 'take advantage of' the mechanics of belief-acquisition. In ordinary conversational contexts, Larry relies on Victor to believe something because he says so; is this to 'take advantage'? Why not? And what is wrong with wanting someone to acquire a particular belief? Once the morally loaded language is removed, the obvious proposal seems obviously empty.

depths of the question that Augustine deliberately leaves unexplored.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. The Metaethical Question

What does the wrongfulness of a lie consist in? Modern moral theorists ever since Kant have found this question problematic and have devoted a good deal of philosophical effort to find a satisfactory answer. While replying to those who maintain that lying is sometimes permissible, Augustine insists in *mend.* 5.6 that lying as such is explicitly proscribed by God in the ninth commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness” (*Ex.* 20:16);<sup>18</sup> if the Decalogue not be plain enough, Augustine instances two other Biblical passages that unequivocally condemn lying: “The mouth that lies slayeth the soul” (*Sap.* 1:11); “Thou [Lord] shalt destroy them that speak leasing” (*Ps.* 5:7).<sup>19</sup> These ferocious passages establish that lying is a sin against God, indeed a mortal sin, and hence the most serious transgression of God’s Law possible. It is easy, and tempting, to pass on to the view that for Augustine lying is wrong precisely because God—who is all-good and all-loving, and thus should know, after all—has condemned it.

However, Augustine says only that God declares lying to be wrong, not that God’s declaration is the source of lying’s wrongfulness; it would be an error to infer that Augustine must be saddled with a naïve Divine Command Theory on these grounds.<sup>20</sup> Yet even if the inference does not hold, we might press the question; ducking the issue does not resolve it. Since God

<sup>17</sup> Augustine is also willing to abandon the analytical question since he is concerned with how we are to avoid sin, and no matter how the details of the analysis work out his prescription for avoiding sin is the same: say only what you believe because you believe it and want someone to believe it.

<sup>18</sup> See also *Deut.* 5:20. Lying is an instance of ‘false witness’ since “whoever says something bears witness to what he thinks” (*quisquis enim aliquid enuntiat, testimonium perhibet animo suo*); see n. 14 above.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Leasing’ [*archaic*]: a lie or falsehood, *OED* Second Edition Vol. 7 771B–C (first occurrence in the Lindisfarne Gospels). Augustine labors to prove that these passages mean exactly what they say, and furthermore that Bible stories seeming to countenance lying, *e.g.* the Hebrew midwives’ lying to the King of Egypt (*Ex.* 1:15–21), in fact do not. But our concern is philosophical, not exegetical, and even though his contemporaries were not I am prepared to concede both points to Augustine.

<sup>20</sup> Contrast Mann [2003] 491: “I suggest then, that Augustine’s opinion would be that the types of action explicitly forbidden by the Ten Commandments are intrinsically sinful, that what makes them intrinsically sinful is their being contrary to the commandments of love, and that what validates the commandments of love is that they issue from a perfectly good and loving God.” Even supposing that God’s commands are motivated purely by love, the result is nonetheless a Divine Command Theory; the sargeant might be motivated solely by his overwhelming concern for the private’s well-being, but his

does declare lying to be wrong, we might ask, in the spirit of Socrates in the *Euthyphro*, whether it is wrong because God condemns it or whether God condemns it because it is wrong. Augustine, I think, would not accept the question in these terms. It is instructive to see why not.

A hallmark of Augustine's philosophy is to identify God with Truth: "Jesus saith unto him, I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (*Jn.* 14:6). That's capital-T Truth, *i. e.* that by which truths are true, as Augustine argues in *sol.* 2 and *lib. arb.* 2; this nearly Platonic Idea is concretely embodied for Augustine in "You, God, who are the Truth" as he apostrophizes in *conf.* 10.23.33 (see also 3.6.10, 7.10.16, and 10.40.65). God-as-Truth is a pervasive theme throughout Augustine's writings. God-as-Truth is unchangeable and eternal, and when human beings grasp truths they have faint intimations of the Truth by which truths are true, which illuminates the human mind from within—"the highest and inmost Truth Itself" as Augustine calls it (*mend.* 19.40).

How Augustine came to identify God with Truth, and how the identification came to be so central to his thought, is too complex a question to address here. Nor is it entirely clear how to understand all the claims Augustine makes on behalf of God-as-Truth. Details aside, however, it should be clear that Augustine's identification of God with Truth makes lying especially problematic. Since lying paradigmatically involves getting someone to accept a falsehood as true, the liar deliberately distances himself from the truth; but since God is Truth, the liar is distancing himself from God, the source of all goodness and genuine human fulfillment. Moral wrongness is to set oneself apart from God; lying effects such a separation by its very nature (*mend.* 12.19). As Augustine puts it in the course of an argument to show that lying can't attain any real good (*mend.* 7.10): "Each man distances himself from eternity to the extent that he distances himself from truth," *tanto quisque ab aeternitate discedat quanto a ueritate discedit*. Human nature strives to return to God as its true happiness (the dominant theme of Augustine's *Confessiones*), whereas the liar moves in the contrary direction away from God—a violation of the Divine Order if there ever was one, and hence evil.

The Socratic question, then, is baldly but badly put. God's nature is necessary, and hence God is and must be Truth; as we have seen in §1, lying by its very nature recedes from truth, keeping the liar from union with God, and therefore must be evil. Hence for Augustine it is more accurate to say that God's nature manifests itself in the wrongfulness of

order to the private has to be obeyed because it is an order, not because it stems from any particular motive (or indeed from any motive at all).

lying, and conversely; neither quite ‘explains’ or ‘grounds’ the other, since they are aspects of a single underlying reality. The metaethical question gets its final answer in terms of God’s (ontological) nature and the Divine Order of the cosmos, as indeed it should for Augustine if it is to touch on the ultimate grounds for wrongfulness. It is not perhaps as neat as (say) Kant’s formula that lying is wrong because its maxim cannot be universally willed as a natural law without contradiction, but the sheer depth of Augustine’s account makes it harder to offer the standard objection to most metaethical accounts, namely to ask why we should care about the wrongfulness so defined, say, consistent universal ‘willability’ (if that’s the right word).

In the end, the wrongfulness of lying for Augustine boils down to the fact that in telling a lie the liar sets himself apart from God. This view is deeply embedded in Augustine’s complete philosophical understanding of the world, and could not readily be disengaged from it.

### 3. The Normative Question

What are the circumstances in which lies are forbidden, permitted, or enjoined? Having established what lies are and that they are without exception wrong, Augustine turns to their position in the moral calculus. The wrongfulness of lying entails that it is forbidden, other circumstances being equal, but other circumstances are not always equal and we sometimes have to decide how to trade off one set of evils against another. Telling an innocuous lie (a ‘white lie’) to save the life of an innocent seems like the right thing to do, for example; while lying is wrong, it seems worse to refuse to lie when no particular harm ensues and harm to another is averted. It is a delicate question exactly where lying falls in such moral tradeoffs.

Or so one might think. Augustine, notoriously, thinks otherwise, and argues at length for the following moral principle (the ‘No-Lying Principle’): (NLP) Lying is never morally permissible, that is, there are no circumstances in which it would be right to lie.

Augustine recognizes that (NLP) is not entailed by the general wrongfulness of lying. To his credit, he resists the temptation to infer from the claim that lying is a mortal sin (mentioned at the start of §2) the conclusion that nothing could outweigh it in a tradeoff. Mortal sins may outweigh ordinary sins to the point of incommensurability, but that just shifts the context to tradeoffs among mortal sins alone and where lying stands among them. Instead, Augustine distinguishes lies into several types, and argues for each type that there are no circumstances in which it would be permitted (or *a fortiori* enjoined). The bulk of *De mendacio* is given over to the several phases of Augustine’s extended argument.

The first step, then, is to identify the different kinds of lie. Augustine proposes an eightfold division (*mend.* 14.25): (1) the ‘serviceable lie’ in the teaching of religion; (2) the ‘useless lie’ that helps nobody and harms someone; (3) the lie that helps one person but harms another; (4) the lie that harms only the teller, the ‘liar’ strictly speaking; (5) the lie to please others in smooth talk, our ‘white lie’; (6) the lie that harms nobody and helps someone; (7) the lie that harms nobody and helps someone, though it may involve perjury; (8) the lie told to avoid defilement or degradation. The ordering ranges from most to least objectionable, with (1) the most and (8) the least.<sup>21</sup>

While Augustine has his reasons for this rather Borgesian catalogue,<sup>22</sup> we can simplify matters by considering only three kinds of lie: the ‘innocuous lie’ that produces little by way of harm or benefit, such as our white lies, as in (4)–(5); lies meant to promote an important good, as in (1) and (6)–(7); lies meant to avert harm, either to the liar or to another, as in (2), (8), and arguably the mixed case (3). This tripartite division seems to get the moral lines drawn in the proper places, at least from our perspective, and also matches the distinct arguments Augustine offers against lying.<sup>23</sup>

Take innocuous lies, for example telling someone his grandfather served in the army with distinction (*mend.* 11.18). What is the harm in such a lie, the terrible consequence of adopting this false (but pleasing) belief? Putting aside the harm to the liar, if there be any, Augustine puts forward a pair of arguments condemning innocuous lies. First, if the lies are genuinely innocuous, with only trivial beneficial or detrimental consequences, then by

<sup>21</sup> Augustine should reverse (6) and (7) for the strict ordering, since perjury seems to add wrongfulness to (6) and so make it less excusable.

<sup>22</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, in his short story “The Analytical Language of John Wilkins,” offers a list taken from “a certain Chinese encyclopedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*,” where “it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s-hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.”

<sup>23</sup> Augustine’s eightfold division has a polemical agenda, since it is clearly drawn with an eye to the cases his opponents have made for lying in given circumstances, not to logical completeness—(6) is a special case of (7), for example. But its obvious dialectical character was put aside in the later Middle Ages, and it was treated as a taxonomy of lying in general. The simplification to the tripartite division I’m adopting here, while closer to the spirit of contemporary moral philosophy, does leave out arguably relevant moral properties, the most obvious being Augustine’s rank-ordering of lies.

the same token, Augustine points out, there is no particular reason to tell them! That is, they do not provide any grounds to override the presumption against lying engendered by its wrongfulness; even if the presumption against lying is weak, by hypothesis there is nothing stronger on the side of innocuous lies to overcome it. Second, even innocuous lies show disrespect for the truth. If truth has anything more than negligible value, it has a presumptive claim to be preferred to any innocuous lie; it of course has far greater value, as noted in §2, and indeed deserves respect. Furthermore, they harm the recipient, who “deserts truth to rejoice in error,” and the liar, who “prefers that *he* please people rather than the truth [doing so]” (*ibid.*). Hence there are no circumstances in which innocuous lies may be told.

What, then, of lies that are meant to promote not a negligible but an important good? Augustine’s strategy here is to argue the point for (1), the case in which Larry tells a lie in the service of Victor’s salvation, on the grounds that it would be this if anything to justify a lie. Imagine that Bishop Larry tells Victor, a confirmed reprobate, that the last dying wish of Victor’s mother was that her son enroll in Sunday School for a year; Victor, believing this falsehood, enrolls and comes to repudiate his evil ways, thereafter becoming a priest (saving not only his own soul but perhaps others as well). What is objectionable in this serviceable lie?

Augustine argues that serviceable lies are generally impermissible because they undermine the very truth they are designed to serve (*mend.* 10.17):<sup>24</sup>

Nor do we think any reason at all can be found why a lie should be told in matters of [religion], when according to its doctrine one ought not lie so as to bring a person to it more easily—for once the authority of truth is violated or even slightly lessened, everything will remain doubtful, and unless truths are [first] believed they cannot be held as certainties.

Christian doctrine specifically militates against serviceable lies, Augustine holds, since the ultimate good at which it is directed, salvation, depends on the individual giving complete credence to (unproven) truths, *e. g.* that Jesus is the Saviour; any tincture of doubt would taint “the authority of truth”—in less grandiloquent language, lying would call into question the epistemic warrant of all propositions of the faith, thereby doing irreparable

<sup>24</sup> *Nec ulla omnino causa inueniri posse credatur, cur in rebus talibus mentiendum sit: quando nec ideo in ea doctrina mentiendum est, ut ad eam ipsam quisque facilius perducatur. Fracta enim uel leuiter diminuta auctoritate ueritatis, omnia dubia remanebunt: quae nisi uera credantur, teneri certa non possunt.* See also *mend.* 8.11 for the same line of argument.

damage to the prospects for individual salvation. If Victor knew or even suspected that Bishop Larry had lied about his dying mother's last wishes, he would be far less inclined to give any credence to his claims about Jesus as Saviour, perhaps even repudiating all Christian doctrine as suspect. In the end serviceable lies, no matter how well-intentioned, defeat the purpose for which they are told.

So stated, it isn't clear that Augustine is entitled to his conclusion. First, the damage wrought by serviceable lies need not be irreparable; after proper preparation Bishop Larry might later admit his deception to Victor, trusting that Victor, newly-converted to Christian forbearance and forgiveness, will pardon him, recognizing Larry's honourable motives. Second, we might think the problem is not so much with lying as with being caught lying, quite a different thing; perhaps we should tell only serviceable lies that aren't likely to be found out.

Both objections focus on the consequences of uncovering the serviceable lie. But Augustine's argument does not appeal to consequences. Instead, he claims that the epistemic underpinnings of Christian doctrine would be undermined—that the 'Christian project' of bringing sinners to salvation would be hollow at the core if it were founded on lies, no matter how well-intentioned; Christian doctrine and its representatives would forfeit the moral high ground Augustine thinks they by rights should occupy. Furthermore, since Christianity is a religion based on belief and directed at truth, it would be a bitter irony if it were cognitively flawed from the beginning, whether this were known or not.

Yet even if we grant Augustine this reply, his argument against serviceable lies is strategically flawed. Recall that Augustine took up serviceable lies in order to show that even lies meant to promote the ultimate good (salvation) are not permissible. But his attack on serviceable lies doesn't generalize properly to the case of less ultimate goods, since it turns on the special role belief plays in attaining the ultimate good, which can only be won by faith (a form of belief). Imagine that Larry could afford to feed Victor, an innocent who through no fault of his own would otherwise starve, by telling the waiter the lie that Victor is his brother and thus entitled to the restaurant's family discount rate. Christian doctrine plays no special role here; what is wrong with lying in this instance?

Augustine agrees that Victor's being fed is good, and that telling a lie is a means to that end, but he denies that the goodness of the end justifies the choice of means—not only in this instance, but in general; for if ends could justify means, anything whatsoever, no matter how morally repugnant, could be obligatory in the proper set of circumstances (*mend.* 12.19–

20).<sup>25</sup> If a lie is to be told, it is better that Victor be fed, but it is better not to tell a lie at all even if that means Victor is not fed. The goodness of the result does not change the wrongfulness of the lie; how could it? Good results are better than bad results, to be sure, but neither affects the rightness or wrongness of what should be done: “This is the point on which people stumble, for they submerge the precious beneath what is commonly available” (*mend.* 18.38).<sup>26</sup> In short, Augustine buys into traditional deontological moral theory, maintaining the independence of the right from the good. Even if we do not share his intuitions, the challenge he poses to those inclined to give consequences moral weight is worth pondering. Why think that axiological considerations of value are relevant to deontological principles? If goodness and rightness are distinct dimensions of value, why think they are commensurable?

A standard consequentialist line of reasoning given in reply to these challenges brings us to the third type of lie, the lie told to avert some serious harm, either to the liar or to another. It runs as follows. Put aside cases in which there is a ‘value mismatch’: the wrongness of a lie counterposed to its beneficial results, or conversely the rightness of an action from which flow detrimental harms. Look instead to cases that involve wrong actions and bad results.<sup>27</sup> Suppose Larry is forced to choose one of two lies to tell Victor, where the first choice would cause minor harm to Victor and the second serious harm to Victor and to several other people in addition. The consequentialist reasons that most of us will agree that Larry should choose the first lie rather than the second. But that is to evaluate his choice of actions by reference to consequences, *i. e.* to admit the relevance of axiology to deontology. And that opens the floodgates.

Augustine rejects this line of reasoning. It goes wrong when the consequentialist says that Larry is forced to choose which lie to tell Victor. “If

<sup>25</sup> A similar argument is given in *ench.* 7.22. See Kirwan [1999] for an exploration of Augustine’s anti-consequentialism. Even if one were to accept some consequentialist tradeoffs, it seems clear that the moral scales are not properly balanced in the case at hand. Lying is a mortal sin, and so telling a lie causes the ultimate harm to the liar; arguably no less-than-ultimate good, such as Victor’s physical well-being, could counterbalance such harm.

<sup>26</sup> *Sed in hoc errant homines, quod subdunt pretiosa utilioribus.* Augustine goes on to make the further point that each agent will judge the value of the results in a partial way, so there is no consensus about how to carry out the moral calculus.

<sup>27</sup> Equally we could look at cases involving right actions and good results, but since Augustine is concerned with a particular bad action, lying, we’ll restrict ourselves to bad actions and wrong results. The cases are not completely symmetric for Augustine; see the discussion of dirty hands.

you ask what he *ought* to do, I say he ought to do neither!” (*mend.* 9.14).<sup>28</sup> Now on the face of it, Augustine’s exclamation looks less like a reasoned response and more like an (ungrounded) attempt to reject the problem altogether. But in the context of his moral theory, it is a valid criticism of the consequentialist’s argument, since Augustine rejects the possibility of forced choices. In modern terminology, Augustine’s moral theory is an extreme agent-relative deontological account that incorporates a strong doing/allowing distinction. He does not present his theory systematically but piecemeal in his surprisingly modern treatment of lying to avert harm, in which he works through concealment cases (protecting the innocent from malicious pursuers: *mend.* 13.22–24); lie-or-die cases (*mend.* 9.13) and forced-choice cases (*mend.* 9.13–14); fate-worse-than-death cases (being the victim of male homosexual rape: *mend.* 9.15–10.16 and 20.41).<sup>29</sup> Let’s take a close look at one scenario.

Chris is a believer who falls into the hands of unbelievers. They insist that he tell a lie, forswearing his faith.<sup>30</sup> If he does not, then “before his eyes they will put to death not just any man but his own father,” who is pleading with Chris to tell the lie—worse yet, Chris’s father is as yet “a sacrilegious person whose soul would be snatched away to punishment” if he were killed on the spot (*mend.* 9.13), though Chris otherwise has hopes of his eventual repentance and reformation. Merely by telling a lie he is in no danger of coming to believe, Chris could avert (or at least postpone) the ultimate harm of eternal damnation to his innocent father, a person to whom Chris has special filial obligations. Since his father will be killed for anything short of Chris’s telling the lie (that very lie), his choice seems completely forced; keeping silent is equivalent to his refusing to tell the lie. What should he do?

Augustine is adamant: Chris ought not tell the lie. By not lying, Chris

<sup>28</sup> *Si quaeris quid debuerit, neutrum debuit.*

<sup>29</sup> Augustine’s discussion of concealment and forced-choice cases are oblique references to the ‘collaborationist’ charges levelled by the Donatists. Augustine agrees with the Donatists that Catholic bishops should not forswear their religion, but rejects the further claim that they thereby rendered themselves unfit to consecrate successors.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine treats Chris’s abjuration as essential to the scenario, but logically any lie would serve here, and Chris could just as easily be a pagan threatened by vicious Christians. (Augustine’s portrayal of Chris is meant for rhetorical effect, to recall Christian martyrs, but it plays no role in the argument.) If you aren’t convinced that merely forswearing your faith counts as a lie, change the case so that Chris is required to lie persuasively to some unsuspecting third party, under the watchful eyes of his captors. As noted, nothing turns on the specifics of the lie involved.

himself does nothing wrong, or so Augustine maintains (*mend.* 9.13):<sup>31</sup>

Isn't it simply evident that were he to remain steadfast in holding his view as a faithful witness [rather than lying], they alone who would kill his father would be the murderers, and not he a parricide into the bargain?... It would not make him a party to such a heinous deed if he himself refused to act wrongfully, no matter what others might do as a consequence of his not doing it. For what do such tormentors say but: "Act wrongfully that we might not!"—?

Chris is blameless because the death of his father is not his doing. More exactly, he does nothing wrong in refusing to tell a lie (indeed he is morally obliged not to tell the lie); everything else that happens as a result, including the death of his father, occurs through the agency of his captors. To the obvious objection that 'everything else that happens' is a direct consequence of Chris's refusal to tell the lie, and hence that it *is* because of his doing that his father dies, Augustine offers a withering reply (*mend.* 9.14):<sup>32</sup>

You object: "How is it that he doesn't do it along with them, when they wouldn't do *this* if he were to do *that*?" At this rate we'd break down the door with the burglars, since they wouldn't break it down if we weren't to have shut it; and we murder people along with the bandits if we happen to know that they are going to do this, since they wouldn't commit murder if we were to have prevented them by murdering those bandits ourselves!

In modern terms, the counterfactual criterion is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of moral agency. The death of his father is a result of what Chris does, but it is not something Chris does, any more than a martyr is really a suicide (*mend.* 9.13). He 'allows' it to happen, in the sense that he recognizes that it will come about as a result of his action, but that does not make it his action.

Augustine therefore endorses a strong version of the distinction between *doing* and *allowing*, as we now put it.<sup>33</sup> That is, he holds that different moral weight may attach to what someone does as opposed to what he

<sup>31</sup> *Nonne manifestum est, illo in testimonii fidelissimi sententia permanente, solos homicidas futuros fuisse, qui patrem eius occiderent, non illum etiam parricidam?... non eum faceret tanti flagitii participem, si male facere ipse nollet, quidquid alii propterea fecissent, quia ipse non faceret. Quid enim tales persecutores dicunt, nisi: Fac male, ne nos faciamus?*

<sup>32</sup> *Quomodo, inquis, non cum eis facit, quando illi hoc non facerent, si ipse illud faceret? Hoc modo frangimus ianuam cum effractoribus, quia si non eam clauderemus, illi non frangerent: et occidimus homines cum latronibus, si scire contingat hoc eos esse facturos; quia si nos praeuenientes eos occideremus, illi non occiderent alios.*

<sup>33</sup> The terminology of 'allowing' is rather unfortunate, both in Latin and in English,

merely allows to take place, and in particular it may happen that someone deliberately allows something to happen for which he bears no responsibility, as with Chris in the case at hand. This is *not* to attribute to Augustine the overly simple principle:

(AMR) An agent is morally responsible only for the things he or she does. An agent may be morally responsible for something he merely allows to happen, *e. g.* standing by the water and watching someone whom he could easily rescue drown; he ‘does’ nothing but stand there, yet that does not let him off the hook (*mend.* 9.15; see also *mor.* 26.50). Hence Augustine endorses the stronger principle:

(AMR\*) An agent is morally responsible for the things he or she does, and (perhaps) for things he or she allows.

When are we morally responsible for a mere allowance, an omission? We are responsible in such cases, Augustine declares, when we have an ‘unimpeded’ obligation, that is, an obligation the fulfillment of which does not transgress any moral requirements.<sup>34</sup> The commandment to love thy neighbor is sufficient to generate an obligation to rescue drowning innocents, so long as no other moral obligation impedes the action. If Chris’s captors were to threaten to kill Chris’s father unless Chris were to do something that *is* morally permissible, such as reciting the alphabet, then Chris would be obliged to recite the alphabet, and his refusal to do so would make him culpable along with his captors for his father’s death. In the case at hand, the moral prohibition on lying prevents Chris from being culpable for not saving his father.

The basic scenario is unchanged even if Chris were to be forced to choose among several bad options: lie or be tortured, killed, or worse yet ‘defiled’ (be the victim of homosexual rape). Augustine, as noted above, thinks he ‘ought’ to take none of the options—though there is more to say in reply to

and Augustine, like many contemporary moral theorists, flails about looking for a less misleading way to state his views. As long as we keep it in mind that an agent may ‘allow’ something to happen that he or she thoroughly disapproves of and would prevent if other things were equal, the way the distinction is put doesn’t matter. The distinction between doing and allowing gets Augustine about halfway to the Doctrine of Double Effect, which turns on the distinction between intended and merely foreseen results; the question is whether someone ‘does’ what he foresees to be a result of his actions, but (in some sense) doesn’t intend.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine also insists that the agent is not culpable for an allowance if he detests what happens through his allowance and wanted it not to occur (*mend.* 9.14). But since the explanation of the last clause depends on the event not occurring other things being equal, *i. e.* in the absence of countervailing moral requirements, we can without loss of generality just consider unimpeded obligations.

the question (*mend.* 9.14):<sup>35</sup>

But if the question were raised which of these options he ought to avoid if he can't avoid both but only one or the other, I reply, his own sin rather than someone else's, and a lighter one that is his rather than the heavier one that is someone else's. . . Although murder is more serious than theft, it is worse to commit theft than suffer to be murdered. Thus if it were put to someone that he be killed (*i. e.* murder visited upon him) if he were unwilling to commit theft, then, since he couldn't avoid both, he should avoid the one that would be his own sin, rather than that which would be someone else's.

Augustine is correct to think that this is related to but distinct from his doing/allowing doctrine. According to the latter, different moral weight may devolve on the various agents involved in an event, so that *who* brings an event to pass makes a moral difference. Chris and his captors all bring about the death of Chris's father, even though Chris doesn't kill him and his captors do. More than the value of the outcome is taken into account in assessing the moral worth attaching to the participants. Augustine thus rejects an agent-neutral conception of morality, as we call it, in favour of an agent-relative moral theory. Moral evaluation is not indifferent to the identities of agents. The principle shows up here in Augustine's claim that the agent justifiably avoids wrongdoing on the grounds that he or she would be committing the wrongdoing. For Augustine, agents should not get dirty hands.

Augustine, in fact, endorses an extreme agent-relativity, here seen only as in a mirror darkly. For he holds that our primary moral duty is for each of us to look after his or her moral well-being. Only once each agent has seen to his or her own well-being can the well-being of others be seen to. These two principles—look after yourself, look after others—are in a strict lexical ordering, so that the first has to be satisfied before the second can be applied.<sup>36</sup> The care of one's soul trumps all other-directed considerations.

<sup>35</sup> *Sed si quaeritur quid horum potius debuit euitare, qui utrumque non potuit, sed alterutrum potuit: respondebo, suum peccatum potius quam alienum; et leuius potius quod suum, quam grauius quod alienum. . . Quamuis enim grauius sit homicidium quam furtum; peius est tamen facere furtum, quam pati homicidium. Itaque si cuiquam proponeretur, ut si furtum facere nollet, interficeretur, hoc est, committeretur in eum homicidium; quia utrumque euitare non posset, id euitaret potius quod suum peccatum esset, quam quod alienum.*

<sup>36</sup> The strict lexical ordering of these two principles, as well as their sufficiency, seems to be expressed in *Matt.* 22:36–40.

That is not to say that we have no obligations to others; we certainly do, and they are important, but they take second rather than first place: “Love of one’s neighbor reaches its limit at each man’s love of himself,” *ipsa dilectio proximi ex sua cuiusque terminum accepit* (*mend.* 6.9).<sup>37</sup> The upshot is an agent-centred deontological moral theory that puts strict and absolute rules of individual conduct in first place, and duties to others in second place. Consequences only matter once one’s own moral well-being is properly seen to. Let the world run on as it may; that is God’s concern rather than ours—each of us, Augustine asserts, has enough to do with looking after his own salvation.<sup>38</sup>

Lies to avert harm are therefore not to be told, since they violate the lexically first principle of morality, namely to ensure that one takes proper care for one’s soul. Nor need they be, since the doing/allowing doctrine explains how agents do not incur responsibility for consequences that are not their actions. (Hence an agent is never in a position where he has to do, rather than merely permit, wrongdoing.) To be sure, we would want more by way of argument for Augustine’s underlying moral theory; it is deployed rather than defended here. Yet enough has been said to show that Augustine’s position has deep roots and is philosophically motivated, and not merely some rule-worshipping groundless view. Seen in context, Augustine’s refusal to countenance lying is part and parcel of his moral theory as a whole. The final answer to the normative question, then, is that there are no circumstances in which lying is permissible.

### Conclusion

What a lie is, why it is wrong, and whether lying is ever permissible are questions that arise in the course of everyday moral life, as Augustine remarks (*mend.* 1.1). Reflecting on these questions has led us to the complexities of belief-acquisition, to the role of Truth in the ordering of the world, and to the foundations of Augustine’s moral theory. At that, the discussion here has only scratched the surface of the *De mendacio*, leaving

<sup>37</sup> Augustine does not interpret the injunction to “love thy neighbor as thyself” as establishing any kind of moral equality, as it is commonly read. He argues against lifesaving lies that they would improperly value someone else’s good above one’s own, and therefore are impermissible: see *mend.* 6.9.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine has well-known and complicated views about the existence of evil and human free choice; one reason he is happy to “let justice be done though the heavens fall” is that he holds that evil consequences are in the end the product of (evil) human choices. His rejection of consequentialism is thus not cavalier; in fact it runs deep in his metaphysics and theology, and I shall do no more than offer this gesture at it.

aside much that would profit from further examination. All in all, the difficulties surrounding lying seem to have brought out the best in the Bishop of Hippo; allowing for the inevitable shift in philosophical interests and styles over the past 1600 years, his treatise is the equal if not the superior of later work on the subject, and serves to remind us of just how good a philosopher Augustine could be. At his best, as when dealing with lies, he can take one's breath away.

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