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Is it easier to lie now than in the past?

A lie is a tool of combat. It has been used since ancient times. And in periods of heightened conflict of interests and views, it manifests itself with particular intensity. As an imperative, 'believe it' is sometimes used through persuasion and force – persuasion when it is presented as the truth, which the recipient, unaware of the falsehood, accepts in good faith: the aim here is to deceive the opponent in order to deprive them of their freedom of action and subject them to the will of the liar. Examples include sending false guides to lure the enemy into an ambush or deceptive light signals on the sea coast to direct a ship onto rocks in order to wreck and plunder it. Violence is sometimes used when the opponent is already at the mercy of the oppressor, who forces the victim to say what he wants, knowing that these statements are not in line with the beliefs of the defeated: an immediate goal of such forced lying is to obtain an act of submission, and ultimately to suggest to the defeated person a belief in what is being imposed on them, initially contrary to their convictions. This is what an invader does when he demands declarations of friendship and gratitude from a conquered society, and what a bad teacher does when forcing a child to feign remorse.

Similar to coerced lying is lying for personal gain, which manifests itself in various forms of apostasy in the domain of moral values, e.g. in matters of national and religious affiliation or political and social ideology. As we know, there are cases of changing religion in order to obtain a divorce, renouncing nationality for the sake of a career, while maintaining religious and national feelings; the same applies to accepting a foreign political ideology on account of favourable economic condi-

tions, etc. Outwardly, one professes what does not correspond to one's inner convictions.

There is also lying for one's own benefit, as a means of escaping from an unpleasant reality that does not correspond to one's desires. Insignificant, but ambitious, people convince themselves of their own greatness, while those who are tormented by remorse for the harm they have done to someone else convince themselves of their own nobility. A phenomenon related to lying for personal gain is breaking promises, not keeping one's word, and not being bound by the commitments one has made.

The frequency of lying and related behaviours suggests a general disregard for what is said, a tendency not to attach importance to one's words, a lack of responsibility for one's statements, and a failure to accept the consequences of them. This assumption is supported by facts that are seemingly different from those mentioned above: even supposedly serious people fabricate stories in disputes and arguments. They condemn one another, and then, when the anger subsides, the matter is forgotten, as if neither the offender nor the offended took what they said seriously and as if they did not consider the accusations to be true. Words are thrown to the wind, without regard for their connection to reality.

It is precisely this connection that becomes disrupted in the phenomena of lying, formal apostasy, and careless hurling of insults. A thought comes to mind. It is as if, with the passage of time, words have become increasingly detached from objective reality. We know how close the connection between words and things was in primitive thinking. Words belonged to the objective realm: this is the magical power of words – spells and curses which, like the biblical 'let there be', turned into reality. This close connection, taken in reverse, is manifested in the realism of ancient philosophical thought, which saw words as a direct reflection of reality. For some ancient thinkers, a word was not merely a sign of a thing, which only acquires its meaning through knowledge of the thing it signifies, but on the contrary – in certain cases, a word was supposed to be a source of knowledge about things. It was believed that this was the case with regard to the original terms of science: a word provides an intuition of the object it signifies. The same connection lies, at least in part, at the basis of the mental phenomenon known as hypostatizing, i.e. the reification of linguistic meanings, and in the specific case of substituting real entities for general terms; there is a word, and therefore there is also a thing belonging to it. This close connection made it difficult to lie. Breaking a promise, the discord between word and deed,

denying one's faith was a violation, something contrary to nature, and the person who committed it was nothing short of a monster.

The evolution of philosophical thought loosens this connection, primarily by criticising primitive realism. Reality slowly ceases to be something absolute in relation to the human mind; in what primitive realistic thought took to be objective reality, increasingly more humanistic factors are being discovered. This criticism first destroys the magical world of primitive beliefs, then attacks the rationalist, non-empirical world in the form given to it by Platonic doctrine and its derivatives. Finally, it does not bypass the empirical world. The boundary between the subjective and the objective is shifting further and further outwards; more than that, it is becoming less sharp; subjective elements seem to be inseparable from any objective reality.

Parallel to this objectification of the object of cognition, a conviction or feeling begins to arise that the world in which we live can be transformed and shaped. The primal attitude towards this world was passive; the world was something given, and life wisdom consisted in adapting to it – this was the essence of Stoicism and Epicureanism. That passive attitude was transformed into an active one – on the one hand, thanks to the technical mastery of nature, but on the other hand, also in connection with a subjective view of the world: man begins to see it as he wants to see it and as he describes it in his projects. It is as if the original magical connection between the word and reality has been reversed; there, words of spells or incantations turned into facts because they belonged to the same objective domain – here, words create reality because reality has become dependent on its subjective perception in cognition and action.

This tendency to make reality dependent on the content of the statements made about it and on the desires nurtured in relation to it could be called pragmatic, as it finds expression in the epistemology of pragmatism, if we formulate the principal statement of this school of thought, as James did, in the aphorism: any statement that effectively guides action is true. In each of the types of dishonesty I have mentioned, there is a visible tendency to create an image of reality – a myth, as it is sometimes called – as the basis for effective action, a tendency that falls under the pragmatic concept of truth.

The word began to serve action rather than cognition. At the same time, of the two semantic functions of language, the objective and subjective designation of things and the expression of experiences, the latter came to the fore. The importance of words shifted from what they mean

to what they express. The brakes of nature, not moral but semantic, which hindered lying, became worn out. Today, lying is easier because it encounters less resistance from the objective side, which seems to have distanced itself from words.

But at the same time, the question arises as to whether the basis for the moral judgement of lying has changed. The negative moral qualification of lying is based on multiple motives. One of them seems to be the original understanding of the inseparable connection between words and things. Lying violates this connection, and is therefore contrary to nature and evil as such. Secondly, lying disrupts social relations and is thus also socially harmful, as Kant in particular emphasised. Thirdly, lying is a weapon of the weak and cowardly, in the sense that lies fear the truth, i.e. liars fear exposure, which is why lying is viewed negatively from the perspective of heroic ideals. Of the three reasons mentioned (and there are more that could be cited) behind the negative moral judgement of lying, the first has lost its force as a result of the previously discussed shift in emphasis away from the function of signifying and towards the function of expressing.

The third motive also does not work as strongly as it used to, owing to changes in the ideal of heroism. The motive of social harm undoubtedly remains in force. However, we do not always remember this, especially since lying always brings some immediate benefit to the liar. Today, moral judgement is most often applied not to lying as an act in itself, but to the whole situation in which lying is a means to achieve other goals. Depending on the assessment of these goals, whether positive or negative, lying is either justified or condemned. Thus, while it would be incorrect to say that lying in itself is no longer considered morally wrong, it seems that the moral judgement of lying has lost much of its former severity in today's society. Although for many of us lying is still considered ugly, moral sanctions against lying as such are applied with great leniency. This is also one of the reasons why it is easier to lie today than in the past.