

THE LIAR AND THE SKEPTIC

Mortimer Adler

It is possible to be either a liar or a skeptic, but not both. Of course, it is also possible, and quite preferable, to be neither.

The person who maintains that he knows nothing because nothing is knowable, or who declares that no statement can be either true or false, interdicts himself from telling lies. His extreme skepticism removes him from the ordinary world in which most of us live and in which, according to him, we live under the illusion that we can discriminate between statements that are true and statements that are false.

Illusion or not, the liar at least thinks that he knows the difference between what is true and what is false when he deliberately deceives someone about a matter of fact. If he were in total ignorance of the fact in question, or in grave doubt about it, he could not tell a lie.

Consider the dishonest jeweler who persuades his customer to purchase a ring that he claims is set with a diamond of high quality,

aware that what he is offering is nothing but a relatively worthless imitation of the genuine article. He has told a deliberate lie, which he simply could not do if, like the skeptic, he were to think that the statement he made—"The stone in this ring is a diamond"—could be neither true nor false, because nothing is either true or false.

However, there is one lie that the skeptic can tell. Sincere in his adherence to skepticism, he can still deceive someone else by pretending not to be a skeptic. Instead of honestly confessing his skepticism, he can verbally declare the very opposite, saying that he thinks some statements are true and others false when he really thinks no such thing at all.

This pinpoints for us the essence of lying. It consists in putting into words the very opposite of what one really thinks—the opposite of one's own state of mind. If your landlord thinks that rents are not going up and tells you in so many words that they are, he has lied to you. The lie must, of course, be intentional and with a deliberate purpose to deceive for the sake of gaining some advantage, regardless of the injury that may result to the person who is deceived.

The condemnation of lying as morally wrong or unjust presupposes that injury results from the deception. What we call a "white lie" and usually condone rather than condemn consists in a harmless deception or one that even may work to the benefit of the person deceived. But whether the false statement turns out to be injurious or beneficial, it remains a false statement because what its words say do not correspond to what the person who has made the statement actually thinks.

The truth of verbally expressed statements thus consists in their correspondence or agreement with the state of mind of the person making them or, if you will, with the statements he or she makes in the privacy of his or her own mind. A verbally expressed statement is false if the opposite relation obtains between it and what the person who makes it thinks, or says to himself—if the two do not agree or correspond, as is the case if I tell you that I have a toothache when I do not.

To speak falsely, it has been pointed out, consists in willfully misplacing one's ontological predicates. That is a highfalutin way of saying that to speak falsely consists in putting "is" where one should put "is not," or "is not" where one should put "is." The dishonest jeweler asserted, "This is a diamond," when he should have said, "This is not a diamond," because he was aware that it was not what he asserted it to be.

When we characterize a person as a liar, implying thereby a condemnation of his or her moral character, we usually impute to that person a habitual disposition or inclination to speak falsely whenever some profit can be gained from the deception. We are put on guard to beware of what that person says. It is more likely than not to be false and result in an injury to someone.

Without being chronic or habitual liars, who among us would not confess to having told some lies, white or otherwise? By that confession, we separate ourselves from the extreme skeptic who finds it impossible to tell lies, except, perhaps, the one lie that attempts to conceal his skeptical state of mind.

Unlike the extreme skeptic, we do not refuse to attribute truth to certain statements and falsity to others, sometimes with more assurance, sometimes with less. The statements we regard as true are those that not only honestly express what we think to be the case, but those that in our judgment also assert what is in fact the case.

Here, too, there is a relationship of agreement or correspondence, but now that relation obtains between what a person thinks, believes, opines, or says to himself and what actually exists or does not exist in reality. When I assert that that which is, is, or that that which is not, is not, my assertion is true. When I assert that that which is, is not, or that that which is not, is, my assertion is false.

Just as the truth of speech consists in the agreement or correspondence between what one says to another and what one thinks or says to oneself, so the truth of thought consists in the agreement or correspondence between what one thinks, believes, or opines and what actually exists or does not exist in the reality that is independent of our minds and of our thinking one thing or another.

This definition of truth answers the question, "What is truth?" but about any particular opinion or belief that we may harbor in our minds, it does not answer the question, "Is it true?" That is a much harder question to answer, even for those who accept the definition of truth as consisting in an agreement or correspondence between the mind and reality. For the extreme skeptic who rejects that definition on the ground that it erroneously presupposes a state of reality with which a state of mind can agree or disagree, that second question is not merely harder than the first, but unanswerable.

The definition of truth involves an erroneous presupposition, the skeptic charges. Does not his use of the word "erroneously" trip

him up? Has he not contradicted himself by saying, on the one hand, that nothing is either true or false and yet saying, on the other hand, that the presupposition involved in the definition of truth is an erroneous presupposition or, in other words, false?

We are verging here on an age-old reply to the extreme skeptic that dismisses him as refuting himself. One cannot say that no statements are true or false, or that there is no such thing as truth in the sense defined, without contradicting oneself. If the statement that expresses the skeptic's view about truth is one that he himself regards as true, then at least one statement is true. If it is false, then it is quite possible for many other statements to be either true or false. If the statement that expresses the skeptic's view is neither true nor false, then why should we pay any attention to what he says?

Either he has contradicted himself or he has impelled us to discontinue any further conversation with him on the grounds that it can lead nowhere. There is no point in talking to someone who is willing to answer any question by saying both yes and no at the same time.

Since the extreme skeptic does not acknowledge the restraint imposed by the rule of reason that we ought not to contradict ourselves if we can avoid doing so, our refutation of him by appealing to that rule does not silence him. He has no objection to being unreasonable. We may have refuted him to our own satisfaction, but that does not carry with it an acknowledgment by him that he has been refuted and should abandon his skepticism. The only consequence that follows from our regarding his view as self-contradictory and therefore self-refuting is the judgment we may be forced to make that there is no point in carrying on the conversation with him any further.

The commonsense view is the one that all of us embrace when we reject the self-contradictory and self-refuting position of the extreme skeptic as being not only unreasonable, but also impracticable. There is hardly an aspect of our daily lives that would be the same if we were to embrace instead of rejecting the position of the extreme skeptic. We are firmly committed to the view that truth and falsity are ascertainable by us and that, with varying degrees of assurance, we can somehow discriminate between what is true and what is false. Almost everything we do or rely upon is grounded in that commitment.

One illustration of this should suffice. We accept trial by jury before a judicial tribunal as a way of deciding disputed questions of

fact. Was the prisoner at the bar seen running away from the scene of the crime? Was the last will and testament of the deceased signed by him while in a sound state of body and mind? Witnesses are called to give testimony in answer to such questions; and, in the direct and cross-examination of the witnesses, the attempt is made by counsel either to enhance their credibility in the eyes of the jury or to diminish it.

When all the evidence is in and the jury has completed its deliberations, the verdict they render asserts the truth of a statement of fact, either beyond a reasonable doubt in a criminal prosecution or by a preponderance of the evidence in a civil litigation.

That's what the word "verdict" means—the assertion of a truth. The verdict that the prisoner at the bar is not guilty as charged may spring from the jury's low estimate of the credibility of the witness who testified that he saw the person charged with murder running away from the scene of the crime. The verdict may also have been determined by more credible testimony that he was somewhere else on that occasion. It never occurs to the jury to doubt that one of the two alternatives must be the case in fact: Either the person charged with the crime did have the opportunity to commit it or he did not have the opportunity to commit it.

The presupposition called erroneous by the skeptic will not be regarded as such by persons holding a commonsense view of the world in which we live. Common sense would not hesitate for a moment to assert that at a given time a particular thing either exists or does not exist, that a certain event either occurred or did not occur, that something being considered either does or does not have a certain characteristic or attribute. Far from being an outrageous, not to say erroneous, assumption about the reality to which our beliefs or opinions may or may not correspond, this view of reality seems undeniable to common sense.

By the commonsense view with regard to truth, I mean simply the non-skeptical view that understands what truth consists in—what it means for a statement to be true rather than false. In addition, the commonsense view does not doubt that some statements are true and others false and that there are ways of finding out which is which.

Without being explicitly aware of it, the jury embraces this commonsense view in its unquestioning acceptance of the fact that the person charged with murder either did or did not have the opportunity to commit the crime. That being so, then one or the other of

these alternatives must be true and the other false. The grounds of the jury's verdict are thus seen to consist, first, in their accepting the presupposition involved in the definition of truth, which the skeptic rejects as erroneous; and, second, in their confidence that by weighing the evidence they can ascertain which of two opposite statements is true and which is false.

In the first instance, they implicitly acknowledge the correctness of the definition of truth as an agreement or correspondence between the mind and reality, which means that they affirm the existence of a reality that is independent of the mind and is what it is regardless of what we may think about it.


In the second instance, they implicitly acknowledge that, in addition to knowing what truth consists in, they can also use their minds to discover whether a given statement is true or false.

Human beings have been charged with perjury and convicted of it. They have been found guilty of falsification when they are under oath to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If the skeptic's denials were sound, the oath every witness is required to take, and the threat of a prosecution for perjury if he or she fails to live up to it, would be a scandalous travesty.

Judicial procedure and trial by jury afford but one example out of many, all of which tend to show how in the practical affairs of daily life the commonsense view prevails—in business and commerce, in the practice of the professions, in the rearing of children and in other aspects of family life, in the consideration of the claims made by candidates for public office, or the claims made by advertisers, in buying and selling and in economic transactions of every sort, and in all our dealings with our fellow human beings.

In our further consideration of truth in the chapters to follow, we shall be concerned with the failure to speak the truth that arises from ignorance or error rather than from deliberate prevarication. One does not have the truth in one's mind and so, with no intention to deceive, one fails to speak it when one expresses one's mind in verbal utterance.

There is a clear difference between the judgment that what a man says is false and the judgment that he is telling a lie. His statement may be false without his necessarily being a liar. Try as he will to speak truthfully by saying precisely what he thinks, he may be mistaken in what he says through error or ignorance.

The person we ask for directions may honestly but erroneously think that a certain road is the shortest route to the destination we wish to reach. When he tells us which road to take, what he says is false, but not a lie. However, if he does in fact know another road to be shorter and withholds that information from us, then his statement is not only false, but also a lie. 

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