

Book Reviews

Sam Harris, *Lying*. Edited by Annaka Harris. 2011. Kindle Edition. 26 pages. \$1.99.

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In Sam Harris' latest philosophical endeavor, an e-book entitled "Lying,"¹ Harris provides a brief and accessible analysis of lying and its potentially detrimental effects on human relationships. Whether considering the relationship between husband and wife, citizen and politician, parent and child, or any other, Harris argues that, more often than not, lying causes harm rather than good. When tackling lies that conceal grievous acts such as murder or rape, this thesis is strong and unobjectionable. However, when discussing controversial lies, such as those that people tell to escape extreme circumstances, Harris's analysis only scratches the surface of the issue. Throughout the twelve sections of the book, the burden of supporting the thesis rests largely on short stories that exemplify specific reasons why telling the truth is superior to lying. Alongside these stories, Harris buttresses his arguments with a few surprisingly enlightening pieces of empirical evidence. Considering that Harris argues for scientifically determined moral values in "The Moral Landscape,"² it seems odd that the bulk of evidence provided in "Lying" comes from short stories as opposed to empirical studies. While the book succeeds at challenging the reader to reconsider the harms of lying, it would pose a more

¹ Sam Harris, *Lying*. 2011. Kindle Edition.

² Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010)

substantial challenge if Harris had delved deeper into the controversial aspects of lying while providing more hard evidence.

In the chapter entitled “Lies in Extremis,”³ Harris attempts to take on lying that allows people to escape extreme circumstances. Putting his best foot forward, Harris begins his examination by discussing Kant’s belief that lying is always unethical. Harris finds this belief unreasonable, but he makes it clear that a rejection of Kant’s absolutist position does not mean that lying becomes easy to justify. This is a worthwhile point considering the fact that justifying one lie often makes it easier to justify the next. In addition, Harris points out that in situations that one might deem it necessary to lie, one has generally concluded that the person to be deceived is both dangerous and unreasonable. Therefore, while certain circumstances may require one to lie, Harris argues that these cases occur so rarely that some people may never experience one during their lifetime. Harris aims to place the bar for justified lies relatively high considering few people need to be placed in such extraordinary circumstances in order to feel comfortable with their deception. Perhaps Harris is right in that people too quickly resort to lying when the going gets tough; perhaps people overestimate the brief relief that lies can provide. However, where does one draw the line? While Harris seems comfortable justifying lying to known murderers in order to protect innocent lives, it remains unclear how he regards lying in less extreme, but nonetheless dire situations.

Harris fails to capitalize on the strong opening of this chapter when he doesn’t dive deeper into the issues being discussed. Telling the truth in extreme

³ *Lying*, 326-381

circumstances can potentially bring about more desirable results than certain lies, but it seems that in some cases it would be unintelligent to take the risk. Harris' analysis stands incomplete since he does not provide substantial insight into how to deal with life's more precarious predicaments. For example, consider his single, inconclusive comment on lying that allows people to escape being punished for breaking unjust laws: "One of the worst things about breaking the law is that it puts one at odds with an indeterminate number of other people. This is among the many corrosive effects of having unjust laws: They tempt peaceful and (otherwise) honest people to lie so as to avoid being punished for behavior that is ethically blameless."⁴ What Harris says is true, but it provides no solution to the problem that faces victims of unjust laws. Expanding on Harris' remark, the same unfortunate temptation to lie also befalls victims of unjust discrimination who risk unsatisfying consequences when telling the truth. To give an example of unjust discrimination that encourages lying, consider the prejudice that atheists often experience in the United States. An outspoken atheist like Harris is no doubt aware that empirical evidence demonstrates that atheists are some of the most distrusted people in both private and public settings.⁵ That is not to say that all atheists are peaceful and ethically blameless in their actions, but there are certainly a number of atheists that live as close to these descriptions as possible. For them, the temptation to lie and to hide their lack of belief in any gods is strong.

Consider the following true story, written in the style of Harris' "Lying," of

⁴ *Lying*, 381

⁵ Edgell, Penny, Douglas Hartmann, and Joseph Gerteis. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society." *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211-234.

someone put in a difficult position due to unjust discrimination (the protagonist's name has been changed to protect her identity): After graduating from college, Penny entered into a competitive job market and could not find work in order to support herself. Throughout college she had earned much of her money as a babysitter, so she decided to post an ad on a website dedicated to connecting families with sitters. When it came time to fill out her personal profile, which each potential employer would view, she came to an impasse: should she disclose her atheism? Knowing from personal experience and from empirical data that atheists are some of the most distrusted people in the United States, Penny was aware that honesty about her atheism might severely decrease her chances of getting hired. Although she has raving reviews from families she has worked with in the past, the fact that people often associate atheism with moral bankruptcy means that the atheist candidate is likely not the preferred choice when parents look for someone with whom to leave their children. While it is entirely possible that being honest might have landed her a job with an atheist family who wanted to reward her bravery in being forthright about her worldview, Penny decided not to take the risk. Time was running out for the money to start coming in so she lied and registered as a Christian; a wonderfully nice and religious family hired Penny shortly thereafter. No one will ever know if revealing her atheistic worldview would have been a deal-breaker, but it seems likely considering that the parents were raising their child to be Christian. Penny had no intention of teaching the child about atheism or answering the curious child's questions in a fashion that might instill doubt. She signed up to be a caring sitter and had no issue respecting the beliefs of the parents.

Months have passed and the parents have no idea that Penny identifies as an atheist, and they couldn't be happier with her performance as a babysitter.

While Penny did not lie to save anyone's life from immediate danger, she was in an unfair situation created by cultural misconceptions of atheism. The only commentary on situations like this that Harris provides is that they are unfortunate and that it is possible that honesty might produce a better outcome than lying. This essentially reduces to Harris affirming that Penny was indeed in a pickle without providing any practical solution for her or other people in similar situations. Considering Harris' recent work on scientifically derived moral values in "The Moral Landscape," one might have expected Harris to argue that empirical evidence should serve as the means for determining the few exceptions to the precept that one should not lie. For example, if scientific studies discovered that preference generally goes to believers over non-believers when employers review applications of known atheists and theists, then Penny would have more reason and thus stronger justification for lying. While it is beyond the scope of this review, one could make a compelling case for empirical evidence providing the strongest justification for lying in specific situations. It is one thing to claim that Penny did the right thing based on personal experience or a relevant story, but it would be far more compelling to claim that she did the right thing based on empirical evidence. Of course, if the evidence indicated that revealing her worldview would not hinder her chances of getting hired then it would seem unreasonable to claim that her lie was justified.

Moving forward, the strongest and most interesting part of "Lying" was the inclusion of scientifically derived information about how lying affects human

relationships. For example, Harris informs his readers that empirical evidence suggests that liars are less trusting of the people they lie to and that “at least one study found that ten percent of communication between spouses is deceptive.”⁶ While it is no surprise that lying can hurt a relationship, it is not as obvious that even white lies told to spare the feelings of others are associated with poorer-quality relationships. The studies Harris mentions give far more reason to endure the momentary awkwardness that honesty can produce than any short story describing the potential disaster of white lies. That is not to say that hypothetical scenarios and real-life examples have no value, they can most definitely create a more accessible and interesting book. However, no matter how compelling Penny’s story may be, one could easily find a true story of someone who greatly benefitted from telling the truth in a similar situation. While there might not be enough empirical evidence currently available to support each specific argument Harris makes in his book, he still could have made a strong case for utilizing scientific evidence when determining whether a lie is justified or not.

From my perspective, Harris’ “Lying” was worth the read (and the two dollars it cost) in that it inspired me to be a more honest person. Like many others, I am often too quick to lie to escape the momentary pain of speaking honestly with friends, family, coworkers, etc. only to find that my dishonesty has cheapened the quality of the relationship. However, it was not necessarily Harris’ philosophical wisdom that motivated me to be more honest. Not to belittle Harris as a thinker, but the book succeeds largely because it is a straightforward work on a topic that gets

⁶ *Lying*, 85

tossed aside because many (if not most) people think that they already know the extent of the damage that lying can cause. Perhaps my slight disappointment results from my expectation of more than a reminder of why lying can be destructive; I had hoped to open my mind to a new way of thinking, not a renewed way of thinking. While the book achieves an elegant simplicity and accessible style, there is no reason to suppose that “Lying” couldn’t have maintained its simplicity while also fully addressing the controversial aspects of lying.