

## **To Consentius: Against Lying.** [*Contra Mendacium*, 420 A.D.]

*Augustine of Hippo; paraphrased and abridged (only from English! – see below) by A. Cameron.*

**Note from AC:** *This is a loose paraphrase of an older English translation, and over two thirds of the work has been removed with no attempt to indicate where (although I have retained the paragraph numbers of that English translation). But the main lines of the argument are clear, and I think Augustine would still own it as his!*

*Remember how old this is – it was written 1600 years ago. It will say things that you are unused to hearing! In all that follows, ‘catholic’ means ‘mainstream Christian’; this was over a thousand years before the split into ‘Roman Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’. ‘Heresy’ is a word for any teaching about God that opposes the Bible’s teaching. ‘The Apostle’ refers to Paul of the New Testament.*

*The scenario is that Consentius has written to Augustine to ask about a plan to ‘flush out’ the Priscillianists – heretics who cover their tracks by lying about what they believe. The plan is that catholics should pretend to be Priscillianists, agreeing with all their teachings, to find them out.*

*The full version can be found in Schaff, Philip, Augustine: Moral Treatises in A Select library of the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian Church, first series, vol. III. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1956. [230.14 NPF]*

*Also available at*

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf103.v.vi.html> .

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1. You’ve sent a lot for me to read, my dear brother Consentius: a great deal indeed. I am greatly delighted with your eloquence, and your memory of the holy Scripture, and your cleverness of wit, and the resentment with which you attack negligent catholics, and the zeal with which you rip into these undercover heretics.

But I am not persuaded that it is right to unearth them out of their hiding places by our telling lies.

For to what end do we take such pains in tracking them out and running them down? Having exposed them, we plan either to teach them the truth - or at least, having convicted them by the truth, to stop them hurting others. We plan to stop their heretical lies, and increase God’s truth.

How then by a lie shall I rightly be able to attack lies? Or is it by robbery that robberies are to be attacked, or by sacrilege that we attack sacrilege, or by adultery that we attack adultery?

“But the truth of God shall abound by my lie,” you say; are we also then to say, “Let us do evil that good may come” (Romans 3:8)? That is something that the Apostle detests, as you can see. For what else is, “Let us lie, that we may bring heretic liars to the truth,” but, “Let us do evil that good may come?”

Or, is a lie sometimes good, or sometimes a lie not evil? Why then is it written of God, “You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies” (Psalm 5:5b-6a). He has not made exceptions; and “You destroy those who tell lies” hardly sounds indefinite, as if we can understand it as talking about some and not all liars. It is a universal sentence that he has passed. Or do you think it should have said “You destroy those who *only* tell lies”, as if it is OK for some to tell lies sometimes, with God only destroying all who speak ‘unjust’ lies? Or that there is such a thing as a ‘righteous’ lie, which therefore ought to be a matter of praise, not of crime?

2. Don’t you see how much this reasoning plays straight into the hands of the very persons of whom we make this great game of catching by our lies? You yourself have shown that this is the Priscillianist method. They use the Bible to exhort their followers to lie, as though by the examples of Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Angels; not hesitating to add even the Lord Christ Himself. This must be refuted, not imitated! We ought not be partners with the same evil in which they are convicted to be worse than other heretics! For *only they* turn lying into a life-principle. “Hiding their truth”, they call it. They justify this evil by saying that you hold what is true in the heart, but that telling strangers untruths with the mouth is no sin. They quote Psalm 15:2, about whoever “speaks the truth in his heart”<sup>†</sup> as though this were enough for righteousness. So they think that when Paul wrote “each of you must put off falsehood,” his immediate addition, “and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4:25) means that it is OK to lie to someone not in their group!
4. There are many sorts of lies and we should hate them all. For there is no lie that is not contrary to truth. For, as light and darkness, piety and impiety, judge and crime, sin and right-doing, health and weakness, life and death, **so are truth and a lie contrary the one to the other**. We should love the first as much as we to hate the second.

Yet it is true that there are some lies where no harm is done when someone believes it. However, such lies *do* harm to the one who *tells* them. If a heretic lyingly professes the catholic doctrines and one believes him to be a catholic,

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<sup>†</sup> Our translations make the original Hebrew much clearer: the righteous person is whoever speaks the truth *from* their heart. Of course this completely reverses what the Priscillianists wanted from the verse, that it’s enough to store up the truth *in* the heart.

the one who believes it has hardly done anything wrong, and it will not hurt them. The listener has only mistaken the mind of another human, which no one can judge anyway. So when Priscillianists lie, in order that they not betray themselves, whoever of us believes them, even while they escape detection, perseveres a catholic.

But if we falsely give ourselves out as Priscillianists, we will have to praise their teachings as though they were our own. And how do you know what will happen next? Perhaps someone will be set free by us when we speak true things, even though they were deceived by us when speaking false; but we don't even know if they will be willing to hear us teaching the truth, when they have just experienced telling a lie! How could you possibly disagree that the result is uncertain?

Basically, it is far more evil and perilous for catholics to lie that they may catch heretics, than for heretics to lie that they may not be found out by catholics. Because, whoever believes catholics when they tell a lie to tempt people, is either made or confirmed a heretic (because the catholic has to say false things about God to camouflage themselves); but whoever believes heretics when they tell a lie to conceal themselves, does not cease to be a catholic. But that this may become more plain, let us propose some cases by way of example.

5. Let us consider this cunning spy, as he converses with the suspected Priscillianist. He starts with Dictinius, their leader, and lyingly praises either his life, if he knew him, or his fame, if he didn't. Then, passing on to Priscillian, he shall make reverend mention of him - an impious and detestable person, condemned for his wickedness and crimes!

What if the suspected Priscillianist is not firmly so? In this reverend mention, this 'preaching' about Priscillian will make her a stronger Priscillianist! The spy goes on about other matters. He praises Dictinius' book as being more precious than many thousands of pounds of gold. Well done. This recommendation by the one who tells the lie, slays the soul of she who believes it, or makes her soul deadlier than it already was!

But you say, "afterwards it will be set free!" What if it that doesn't happen? What if something intervenes, and prevents what was begun from being completed? Or what if the suspected Priscillianist had started to profess the catholic faith, but you then push them back to square one? What if she finds out that she has been toyed with by a stranger - won't she just the more boldly conceal her beliefs by lying, having learned from you that it is OK to do this without blame?

7. Even more miserably, now they cannot find *how* to believe us. For now, they will suspect that even in the catholic doctrines we speak lyingly - that we might conceal who knows what other thing which we think true.

Of course you will say to someone with this suspicion “I only did this to catch you”; but what will you answer when she says, “How then do I know whether you are not doing it even now, so that I cannot catch you?” Can anyone be made to believe that someone does not lie not to be caught, even though they lie to catch?

Do you see where this evil is heading? It will not only be we to them and they to us, but every brother and sister will undeservedly suspect every other brother and sister! Your goal is that by a lie, faith may be taught; but instead, what you get is that there shall be no having faith in anyone.

You are willing to speak even against God by falsely agreeing with Priscillian’s heresies. Can there be any *greater* evil about lying, that would lead you to say that we shouldn’t lie? If to catch heretics, you are even willing to tell lies about God himself, will there ever be a situation where you’ll decide it’s wrong to lie?

8. The Priscillianists’ lies about God are more tolerable than yours, actually. They blaspheme without knowing it. You, on the other hand, know that what you are saying is false. They have the blindness of thinking false things, but at least the will to say true things; but you see the truth in secret, and willingly speak falsehood.

If we weigh the evil in all this (for as I’ve said, the future good which a catholic seeks from correcting a heretic is uncertain,) who sins worse? The one who deceives someone without knowing it, or whoever blasphemes God and knows it? And there’s this: if God may be blasphemed in order that we may bring people to praise Him, then without doubt, by our example and doctrine we invite people not only to praise, but also to blaspheme God. Paul delivered someone to Satan himself that they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Timothy 1:20); we rescue people from Satan, that they may learn to blaspheme knowingly! And us - we blaspheme God to save them, so that after delivering them (which is uncertain), we can be teachers of His truth.

11. “But, hidden wolves,” you will say, “dressed in sheep’s clothing, secretly destroying the Lord’s flock, cannot be otherwise find out.” So how have the Priscillianists become known before this way of hunting them with lies was invented? How have so many been found out, and so many more gathered back into the catholic fold?

In his kindness, God gives many ways for the discovery of them. Two are more

happy than others. Those whom they have tried to persuade point them out; and those whom they successfully persuade who then repent, also point them out. Everything is a lot easier if their error is overthrown not by lying tricks, but by truthful reasonings.

When people like you write; when preachers preach; when the truth about God is everywhere diffused - these will be holy nets in which they may be caught truthfully, not hunted after with lies. Either of their own accord they will confess what they have been, and others whom they know to be of the evil fellowship they will either correct, or mercifully point out. Or else, if they shall be ashamed to confess what they long have concealed, the hidden hand of God will heal them and make them whole.

12. When Christ foretold that ravening wolves would come in sheep's clothing, was there not room for him to say, "And you do the same, that you may find them out - assume wolves' clothing, but within, still be a sheep"? No; rather he went on to say, not "By your lies", but, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:15-16a).

By truth must we beware of, by truth must we take, by truth must we kill, lies. Be it far from us, that we should guard against the evils of deceitful men by imitating them. For how shall we guard against them, if in order to guard against them, we shall be them?

17. If lies, not just any kind, but blasphemous lies, are 'righteous' because they are committed with intent to detect hidden heretics, by that logic it will be possible that there should be chaste adulteries, if they are committed with the same intention. Would you sleep with someone, if there was the guarantee of information about Priscillianist hideouts afterwards? Or shall we understand that by no means must such a price be paid to purchase that kind of merchandise?
18. The cause, the goal, the intention of an act certainly makes a very great difference. But there are clear sins that must never be done, and they admit no plea of a good cause, no seeming good end, and no alleged good intention.

Some things are not in themselves sins; here they are good, there they are evil, depending on whether their intention is good or evil. To give food to a poor person is good, if done because of pity, and with right faith; the same act turns to evil, if for boasting a poor man is fed.

But when the acts in themselves are evil, such as theft, fornication, or blasphemy, who is there that will tell us for which good causes they may be done, so that they are not sin, or (more absurd) 'righteous' sins? Who is going to say, "Let us commit thefts upon the rich that we may give to the poor"? or,

“Let us bear false witness, if innocent people are not hurt, to stop guilty men being rescued from the judges who would condemn them”? Even in the matter of wills, if we can, why not suppress the true, and forge false wills that inheritances or legacies may not come to unworthy persons, who do no good with them; but rather to those by whom the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, strangers entertained, captives redeemed, churches built? For why shouldn’t those evil things be done for the sake of these good things, if, for the sake of these good things, they are not evil at all?

Let’s go further. If rich women enrich their lovers, why shouldn’t men of merciful heart learn the arts of a gigolo, to use his earnings to bestow upon the needy – and ignore the Apostle saying, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:18)?

Indeed, not only theft, but false witness, adultery and every evil work will be not evil but good, if done for the sake of doing good. But who can say these things, except someone who wants to subvert human affairs and all relationships and every law? Of what most evil deed, what most foul crime, what most impious sacrilege, can it not be said that it is possible for it to be done rightly and justly; and not only with impunity, but even gloriously, that in perpetrating it, not only should no punishment be feared, but there should even be hope of rewards? That is precisely what will happen if among all evil human works we decide, even once, that the key question is *the goal to which* something is done, rather than *what* is done.

19. Someone is going to reply to me, “So then: any thief whatever is to be counted equal with the thief who steals from mercy?” Who would say this? But of these two it does not follow that any is good, just because one is worse. The one who steals through coveting, is worse than he who steals through pity: but if all theft be sin, from all theft we must abstain. But it is not our concern now what is lighter or what heavier, but what are sins and what is not. No one can say that it was a duty for a sin to be done, where it is clearly a sin.
20. We can all imagine situations where it seems right to commit a small sin, to stop someone else doing a bigger one. But if we shall open this way to sins, then all boundaries are torn up and destroyed, and all sins will enter in and reign. So lies are used to stop theft; then theft is used to stop sexual immorality; then sexual immorality is used to stop whatever we deem to be worse than it, as long as we think it’s going to stop someone from doing the worse thing; and then it becomes a question of quantity, so that we are willing to do a few ‘big’ sins to stop many ‘smaller’ ones. And if the stress of human affairs becomes so great that people will not stop sinning unless we sin, then we arrive at a point where an enemy who wishes to have power shall say, “Unless you be wicked, I

will be more wicked”; so that if we wish to refrain others from wickedness we must give ourselves to wickedness... To be ‘wise’ in this sort of way - what is it but to lose one’s wits, or rather, to be downright mad? *My own evil*, not another’s, whether perpetrated upon me or upon others, is that from which I must beware of damnation. For “the soul who sins is the one who will die” (Exodus 18:4).

23. In relation to lies, a general consensus has been reached that lies are not sin – indeed, are rightly done – when a lie is told to someone whom it is expedient to deceive, or when a person seems likely to hurt others unless he be got rid of by lies.

It is not, however, the same thing to hide the truth as it is to utter a lie. For although every one who lies wishes to hide what is true, not every one who hides what is true, tells a lie. For in general we hide truths not by telling a lie, but by holding our peace. For the Lord did not lie when He said, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear” (John 16:12). He held his peace from true things, but did not speak false things. He did this because he judged them to be unready to hear; if he had not also indicated this to them, he would have been hiding much more of the truth. Whether this may be rightly done we do not know, and we do not have his example to tell us.

36. But we do live in the world of human affairs; and I confess that I am not yet immune to sins done to stop evil. In human affairs, I am often overcome by human feeling. Nor am I able to resist when it is said to me, “Here is a sick man with a terminal illness. His strength will not bear it, if the death of his only and most dear son is announced to him. But he asks whether his son lives, and thou you know the son is dead. What will you reply? If you tell him the truth, people will cry out that you have killed him.”

I am exceedingly moved by this. But when I consider the beauty of God out of whose mouth nothing false proceeds, my weak and throbbing sense is beaten back. Even so, it is a lot to expect that my new resolve is so strong, that the temptation to lie does not overtake me.

But when I think about God, in whom there is no darkness of a lie, it does not impress me that truth is called a murderer, when we refuse to lie and someone through hearing the truth, dies. Or truly, because we read “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2 Corinthians 2:15-16a), shall we pronounce even the fragrance of Christ to be a murderer?

Even so, being mere humans, when we are in questions and contradictions of

this sort, for the most part we are overcome or wearied out by our human feelings. For that very reason the Apostle also added, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16b).

37. Here is something to cry out about most pitifully. If we grant it to have been right to saving that sick man’s life by telling him the lie that his son was alive, then little by little and by minute degrees, the evil grows upon us. By slight accesses to a heap of lies, almost imperceptibly we arrive at a place where we can never resist this huge mischief; there is no escape. The smallest additions of wickedness have risen into a boundless strength.
38. By the way - whoever speaks against me by recommending and defending of lies, what do they speak, if not truth? If they are to be heard because they speak truth, why do they wish to make me, by speaking truth, a liar? How can lying take truth to itself as a patron? Or is it that lying conquers truth, its adversary? Who can bear this absurdity? We can hardly think that those who assert that it is sometimes right to lie, are telling the truth; if we do, we get what is most absurd and foolish to believe – that truth should teach us to be liars. No one learns from chastity to commit adultery. No one learns from piety to offend God. You don’t look to kindness to learn how to do harm. And yet that we may tell lies, we are to learn from truth! But if truth is not teaching this thing, then it is not true. If not true, it is not right to be learned. If it is not right to be learned, then let us never tell a lie.
41. Therefore we are either are to abstain from lies by right doing, or to confess them by repenting: but not, while they unhappily abound in our living, to make them more by teaching also. But let whoever thinks this choose how he may help others in peril ... but far be it from a Christian to deny and blaspheme Christ, that he may make another man a Christian; and by losing himself seek to find one, whom if he teach him such things, he may cause to be lost when found. As we are not to find out concealed adulterers by committing of adulteries, nor murderers by committing of murders, nor practicers of black arts by practising of black arts, so neither must we seek to find out liars by telling lies or blasphemers by blaspheming. This is according to the reasonings which we have in this volume so copiously set forth. We have with difficulty come at last to the finish.