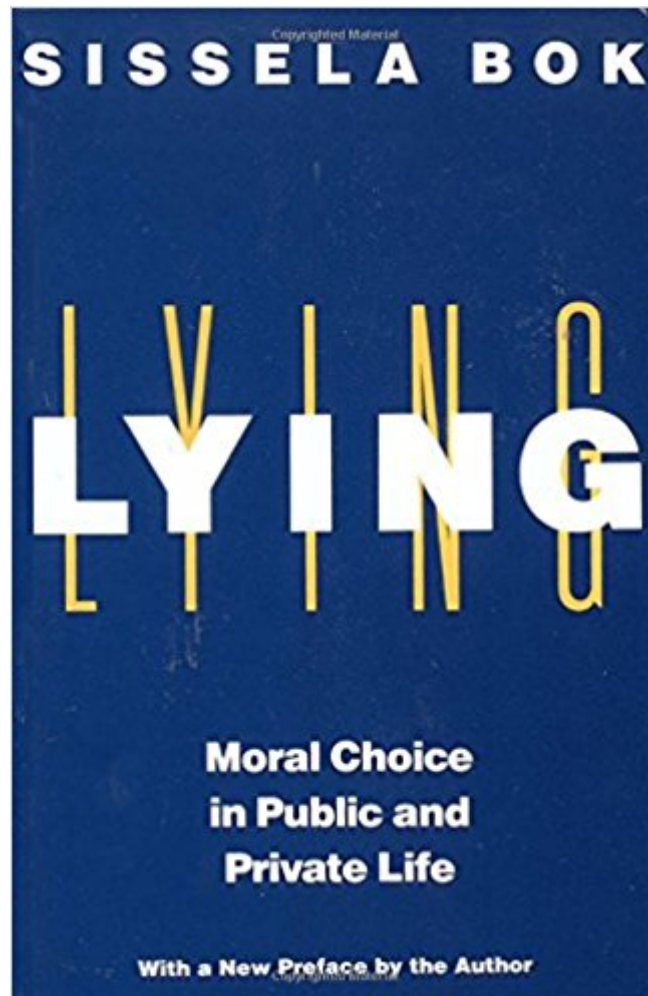




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# Lying: Moral Choice In Public And Private Life



## Synopsis

Is it ever all right to lie? A philosopher looks at lying and deception in public and private life—in government, medicine, law, academia, journalism, in the family and between friends. Lying is a penetrating and thoughtful examination of one of the most pervasive yet little discussed aspects of our public and private lives. Beginning with the moral questions raised about lying since antiquity, Sissela Bok takes up the justifications offered for all kinds of lies—white lies, lies to the sick and dying, lies of parents to children, lies to enemies, lies to protect clients and peers. The consequences of such lies are then explored through a number of concrete situations in which people are involved, either as liars or as the victims of a lie.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A thoughtful addition to the growing debate over public and private morality. Looks at lying and deception in law, family, medicine, government.

Sissela Bok is a senior visiting fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. Previously, she was a professor of philosophy at Brandeis University. She is the author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Private and Public Life*; *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*; *A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War*; *Alva Myrdal: A Daughter's Memoir*; *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*; *Common Values*; and *Exploring Happiness: From Aristotle to Brain Science*. A former member of the Pulitzer Prize Board, Bok is a fellow of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Call 911. No matter where you look these days, there's an American political campaign with its pants on fire. Today's New York Times article on the subject puts it this way: "Negative, out of context attack ads by both sides have come to define the presidential campaign." The campaigns for contested down-ballot offices are just as virulent. David Brooks, the Times' op ed page columnist, wrote (July 30) that "both parties are driven more by hatred than by love" and engage in "carpet bomb[ing]" negative ad campaigns in the indemonstrable hope that "the sheer weight of the barrage" will help their candidate. Meanwhile, the polls uniformly report that a substantial majority of Americans are sick and tired of the shrill commercials and the bitter end partisanship that has brought our government to its knees. Sissela Bok, an expert on lying, its justifications and consequences, makes clear the price we pay when we are lied to. One lie, unchallenged, begets another and another. Unless stopped, "government leaders will have free rein to manipulate and distort the facts and thus escape accountability to the public." The candidates justify their lies on the grounds that they are better suited to govern than their opponents. Quite the contrary, the more a candidate lies to win election, the more likely he or she is to lie in office at the cost of losing our trust and, in the process, the ability to govern effectively. "Lying" is a comprehensive treatment of the history and practice of lying at all levels of society, from family matters (lying to children, the sick, and the elderly) to lies to protect colleagues and one's self from criticism and blame, lies in business and commerce for gain or to head off loss, and lies of state in war and in peace. Bok treats the justifications advanced for lying, the consequences that result from deceit, and demonstrates that valid justifications for lying at any level are rare and should always be subject to scrutiny and debate. "Lying" should be required reading for everyone in authority and everyone subject to authority. Unless we can trust those who lead us, and unless those of us who follow are able to hold our leaders accountable when they violate our trust, no amount of hand wringing over the present sad state of affairs will get us anywhere. Liar, Liar, pants on fire. Our political system is burning. We need to regain control of it p d q. End note. I think highly of Sissela and Derek Bok based on limited but telling personal experiences. I would like to think that my view of the value and timeliness of "Lying" is based not on my acquaintance with the author and her husband, but on the merits of the book. FYI, I have also reviewed Dan Ariely's new book, "The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty", a kindred topic and equally timely.

Pretty dense yet informed. Very philosophical!

nice book to read

outstanding

Great book, required reading but enjoyed it

Sissela Bok does a great job in addressing the complexities of lies and truth in this book. Though the debate is a fiery hot one, Bok takes it in stride and does everything necessary to address both sides neatly. Her arguments are persuasive and her evidence is extensive. It seems that she may agree that lying is a negative vice, but she wishes to leave the choice to us and makes note of the few occasions that it would be more than necessary. Bok addresses the words of St. Augustine, and well known psychologists and philosophers in her quest to answer the question; Is lying immoral? A fantastic read!

Awesome book

Sissela Bok's "Lying" is even more relevant today than when it was first published in 1978. Everyone has dealt with liars, and everyone has lied. It therefore behooves us to know something about lying. Is it simply a part of the human condition? Isn't it okay to embellish a resume and cover gaps in employment just in order to "get ahead"? Does our government need to lie to us in order to effectively lead? Rarely are there public discussions about these topics. The book delves into concepts that go far beyond nebulous concepts or assumptions such as "good people don't lie" (which is actually often stated in order to deceive, justify or deflect) or "be good for the sake of goodness." It instead provides a concrete model for governing and living through a very analytical approach to questions that are more often than not never asked and that outline exactly why truthfulness is so important and how it becomes a societal anchor (or how, if not, how being untruthful leads to moral decay). After close and careful consideration Bok consistently concludes that lying (including the vast majority of "white lies") except in the most exceptional and dire circumstances is unwarranted, unnecessary, and ultimately harmful. This book is required reading for not just the obvious categories (politicians, legal and medical professions, government officials, business leaders, military leaders, recruiters, stockbrokers, telemarketers, many more.) Anyone who provides advice to another of any kind should read this book. Any person who sells a product or service should read this book. Every high school student should be required to read this book. It

should be routinely provided to new hires. And, it needs to be periodically re-read as part of ongoing personal morality check-up as well to shed light on events that may have occurred since the last reading and simply as a part of the pursuit of both wisdom and authenticity. While not stated as such by the author, "Lying" in unequivocal terms provides the detailed rationale behind the fact that honesty is truly the best policy for everyone (and not just for some, nor just for some of the time) and under essentially all circumstances. Sadly, despite the availability of instructional text such as this one for now over three decades, instead of a world that has become more enlightened and more truthful, we have been heading in an entirely different direction and now are living with those predictably undesirable consequences.

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