

A HISTORY

OF

LYING

JUAN JACINTO MUÑOZ-RENGEL

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A HISTORY OF LYING

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MUÑOZ-RENGEL

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polity

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Simulation is the essence of the current time. Our politics is simulation, our morality is simulation, simulation is our religion and our science.

Ludwig Feuerbach

That man has always lied, to himself and to others, is indisputable.

Alexandre Koyré

It is only a man's own fundamental thoughts that have truth and life in them.

Arthur Schopenhauer

The poet is a feigner
who is so good at his act
he even feigns the pain
of pain he feels in fact.

Fernando Pessoa

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And, once again, to Ada, also a *conditio sine qua non* of this book.

ONE

Suppose for a moment that the narrator speaking to you now is a fictional construct. Suppose that, to make communication between us possible, I have been obliged to create the illusion of a tone, a voice, a point of view – of a projected identity.

Now suppose that, by extension, everything this narrator says, including these very words, is a lie.

But say we go further still. Suppose – and the verb ‘suppose’, which comes from the Latin *suppositio*, is not chosen arbitrarily – that everything you have been told over the course of your life is a lie. The history of humankind. The sum of human understanding. The way humans are and how they relate to the world.

Suppose that your memories have been warped by your own mind. Suppose that the story of your life – all that you choose to tell yourself – has also been manipulated by the limitations of memory, by the psychological necessity of self-deceit and by the defence mechanisms of your ego. And therefore, kind reader, that your identity is also a projection.

You, my voice and everything intermediate between us are all lies. Only once this has been accepted will we be in a suitable position to begin communicating. With these premises established, our dialogue can begin.

Because the history of humankind is nothing other than the history of making it up.

MINUS SIX

In the sixth century BC, there lived a Greek philosopher, poet and prophet named Epimenides, who was the first to point out the problem inherent in every narrator, which was the possibility of the unreliable narrator.

Legend has it that Epimenides, retreating once from the midday heat of the Aegean, took refuge in the cool of a cave. Where, if we go along with Diogenes Laertius' account, he slept for fifty-seven years straight. Plutarch, in an attempt to make the story more credible, amends the number, declaring that his nap lasted only fifty years. When he finally awoke, Epimenides found that he had been touched by the gods and that a constant bombardment of divine revelations was raining down on him.

He ran to the city and began throwing truths – like punches – in people's faces. Among many other things, he said:

'All Cretans are liars!'

Bearing in mind that Epimenides was a Cretan, his statement contained quite the dilemma. Because, if Epimenides is a Cretan and all Cretans lie, then, when Epimenides says 'All Cretans are liars', either he himself is lying – which would cast doubt on the truth of the statement – or he is telling the truth, which would automatically mean there is at least one Cretan who is not a liar.

Later philosophers were quick to see the true magnitude of the problem, and even went to some lengths to refine it, in order to highlight further its paradoxical character. Thus, they altered the original premise to 'All claims made by Cretans are always false.' Or to other equivalents such as

'No Cretan ever tells the truth', or simpler ones such as 'This sentence is false', or simply 'I lie.' And so the paradox remained, insoluble, throughout history, leading to dozens of new works and theories in the fields of semantics, logic, mathematics and the philosophy of language.

The problem was finally solved in the twentieth century. Kurt Gödel was among those responsible when he managed to formulate his first incompleteness theorem, which came to show that any recursive axiomatic system that is consistent enough to define natural numbers contains statements that may not be proved or disproved *within* that same system. Bertrand Russell was, too, with his theory of types, which discarded such paradoxical sentences as Epimenides' as being badly formed, that is, as not conforming to the rules of the system of which they themselves are part.

In other words, to understand what happens when I say that 'I lie', we should distinguish between a language and the metalanguage that refers to that language. And in the event that we move up to a higher level or set – as in this moment, as I embark on this loop – between the metalanguage and the meta-metalanguage of that metalanguage, then we will in fact be talking about the meta-meta-metalanguage of the meta-metalanguage of that metalanguage. And so on successively. The semantic paradoxes about the truth in question would then be suppressed for we would be able to see that 'it is true' or 'it is false' do not belong to the same level of metalanguage as 'I lie.'

And, as will be seen, it is in this gift for self-referentiality, in this loop, leap or tail-chasing circle – a quintessentially human gift – that some of the most interesting aspects of our condition are hidden. Some of them will not be so decisive when it comes to humanity's fate – for example,

those that relate to the qualities of fashionable literary genres like metafiction and autofiction – but the root of all the great epistemological problems undoubtedly lies in certain other aspects. And among these is the one that concerns us now. Inside this loop, leap or circle, then, there hides the centre of everything: ourselves, and the possibility of fiction and of consciousness.

There will be time to address all these essential questions. I promise we will return to and give a full account of them. With the formal problem of lying – this supposed first obstacle – resolved, however, I think it would be a good idea for you to come with me now. For you to come with me and for us to go back to an even earlier time.

AN EVEN EARLIER TIME: NATURE

Come with me, trust me. I won't deceive you. Most likely, until now, you've been led to believe that lying is something that happens only among our kind, among man- and woman-kind. Perhaps your definition of truth has, roughly, been to do with adapting between what is and what is claimed to be – that is, with an adaptation between reality and thought. And, therefore, it might seem that the truth depends solely on the intervention of the human intellect, which comes into play only with us. At this point, however, we might ask ourselves: so does nature not lie?

Let's go back to the beginning of the world. We don't need to go as far back as the beginning of time, nor even to the period when the planet was forming. It's enough for us to pause in that moment when things began to take the shape we now know, just before the arrival of human beings.

Already around us are the forests, rivers, the high mountains and, in the background, the sea, and in them practically all the known animals. Except for us. But let's look a little more closely. Isn't that thing hiding among the branches above a bird that's the exact same colour as the leaves? Don't the feathers of that owl also have the same shape and texture as the rough bark of that tree trunk? Who are they trying to deceive? Their predators, no doubt. And yet, what about that cheetah crouching in the dry grass, with its spots and its straw-coloured fur? Isn't it also using camouflage to fool its prey? Now, let's move away – slowly – mustn't draw attention. Let's go and hunker down on the riverbank, amidst the silence of the world's faint far-off beginnings. Wait. Even here, even in the water, you and

I alike have real difficulty picking out those fish on the rocky riverbed, given how faithfully the scales on their backs mimic the shapes of the stones in the water below. And, if we could dive down and somehow get ourselves underneath the fish, we still wouldn't be able to see them, because, as would then become clear, their bellies are just the right colours to blend in with the bright sky above.

The most famous case of crypsis (from *kryptos*, 'cryptic', 'hidden') is perhaps that of the chameleon, which as everyone must know can change skin colour according to circumstance. Despite this, its fame is somewhat undeserved, its transformation not being so complete, nor its control over it so absolute. We would only need to walk around the place where we currently are to discover far more sophisticated specimens: we need look no further than the cuttlefish, which not only changes colour in a matter of seconds, but is at the same time capable of modifying its texture, the entirety of its external structure, and even of generating patterns similar to the shifting seabed which it can then set in motion along its body in the opposite direction to that in which it is actually moving. And not all such strategies are visual. Further on, in that reef over there, its cousins the squids indeed shoot out ink jets to hide themselves, but first and foremost they deceive their natural enemies with the chemistry of their smells.

On the other hand, in addition to all these animals that seek to resemble their environment, everywhere around us we can find abundant examples of mimesis (from *mimos*, 'imitation') in animals trying to look like others, whether those others be dangerous, harmless or repugnant. Like the flies that pretend to be bees, or the snakes that take on the gentle shapes of the coral, or those owls that nest among the rocks and, to protect their eggs, make a sound identical to that of a rattlesnake. And, now that we look closely, the owl that we thought we saw pretending to be part of a tree

trunk wasn't in fact even a bird, but rather an owl butterfly with wings outspread, mimicking with astonishing precision the face of an owl. Each of this butterfly's wings shows a marvellous ocellus, or eye-like marking, large and round, of a vivid yellow with black dilated pupils inside. To the point that, in this moment, even though she has concerns entirely her own, we could swear that the non-existent owl is holding our gaze. Such ocelli are not, of course, only found among prey animals like butterflies and fish. Even tigers have the *trompe l'oeil* of an eye outlined on the backs of their ears, in the form of white spots that ward off any attacks from behind.

So, the primeval forest is full of deception.

And, although I've brought you here, at such an untimely hour, maybe you didn't even need to leave your house. Perhaps you could have just observed your pet cat for a few minutes – which is currently motionless, crouched, ready to pounce, and thinks it's in with a chance of catching the sparrow pecking about on the other side of the glass. Doesn't any animal dissemble just by crouching down in this way? Doesn't it try to make others believe that it isn't in the place where it in fact is? Crouching down is always a kind of dissembling; that goes for the victim paralysed by fear, too. But what if you tried to surprise the little hunter by suddenly leaping over to it like a mad person, waving your arms in the air, and getting it to bare its teeth, to hiss at you, fur bristling – wouldn't you say your cat is then pretending to be bigger than it really is? Its arched spine and upstanding fur, would they not again be a form of deception?

All of which means that lying was already there in nature, long before language arose, long before we showed up. You, me or any of our kind.

Imagine the uncertainty of the first primate that found itself plunged into a dream. How perplexed they would have been upon waking. What bewilderment to be suddenly pulled out of that other story, out of that other apparently meaningful reality with all its many images, and to discover oneself back in the cave again, alone, frozen stiff, and the white rabbit they had just caught gone, and their parents, long dead, also now gone. What are dreams but one more huge lie?

What about sex? One of the greatest natural deceptions in the world, and one that cuts from the jungle to the fundamental centre of human society, and still governs our lives today, no matter how aware we may become of our instincts and biological patterns. And it is even greater because it is a double lie. On the one hand, sex deceives us through attraction, making us believe that those legs, that back or that neck are more appealing than the hairy hindquarters of a deer and the sweet musky smell secreted by its glands. Making us think that we are the ones who freely choose one person over another – that tummy, that chest or those ankles, over the swollen, almost exploding belly of the frigate bird, whose intense red colour is irresistible to the females of its species. And then there is the fact that sex deceives us through the illusion of descent. Parents are prey to the illusion that they will be reproduced in their children, who will supposedly be a copy of them, a continuity of their own being, a step towards immortality. But this false promise is a yet another of nature's ruses. Subjects do not reproduce, only species do. Individuals are nothing more than vehicles for genetic code.

Sexual attraction and the need to reproduce, therefore, are deceptions long before the formation of societies. Long before the appearance of the sophisticated idea of love, too, to which I'll have to dedicate a special section later. In the

same way that the first lies pre-date language. Even the first conscious lies, those born of shrewd intention – those that have their origin in an intelligent mind, in the capacity to project the future and anticipate what is going to happen – are anterior to language. At some moment in the remote past, for the first time a primate had to emit a cry of alarm that was not genuine. Although it had never happened before, there must have been a specific morning, or perhaps a noontime, when it first occurred to a capuchin monkey to warn of the arrival of a predator with high-pitched screeches and hopping around – but this time not in order to save its companions, but rather to make them all run off, so that it could have the crab it had seen approaching in the grass all to itself. The first semantic lie.

Millions of years later, of course, language as we know it would emerge and lies could then become far more complex and refined, giving rise to art, religions, science and the whole of contemporary culture.

However, attentive reader, I would like you to have noticed not only that there are lies that pre-date human beings, but also that they are above the level of the individual. It is not one owl in particular that chooses to adopt a plumage similar to the tree trunks, nor a single cheetah that decides to turn yellow in the savannah. Even a certain chameleon or a certain cuttlefish does not get to choose. It is in the *species* and not in individuals that the lie resides. It is in nature, in its higher plan, in its inextricable desire for permanence and evolution in some direction, that the will to mislead is embedded. Counterfeiting, manipulation and deception do not require the trifling will of beings endowed with intelligence. The orchid mimics female bees with its labellum, not only imitating their shape, but also replicating their pheromone production, in order that the drones will pollinate it. And it doesn't even have a nervous system.

I assured you that I was not going to deceive you, that you could accompany me risk-free. I lied.

Perhaps you know the anecdote about the writer J. D. Salinger told by his daughter in her memoirs. In a passage from *The Guardian of Dreams*, Margaret Salinger recalls a childhood experience that, because of her tender age, may have been traumatic for her. Father and daughter were sitting in front of their living room window in their home in Cornish, New Hampshire, looking out at the woods and high mountains, the crops, the animals and the farms. Then the writer got up, waved his hand over the window in a gesture meant to indicate erasing each of the shapes beyond it, and said:

‘All this is maya, an illusion. Isn’t it wonderful?’

Well, this is what’s just happened to us. Nothing that you and I have seen is real: not the forests, not the mountains, not the sea, the owl, the cheetah, the fish, the colours or smells. They were necessary just so that we could understand each other. Do you see? They aren’t here now.

Nothing that is beyond us, nothing that comes to us through the senses is true. Or, at least, that momentous leap is one we haven’t yet been able to make. For the moment, we are still locked in here, inside ourselves. And everything else is illusion.

TWO

In a way, the lie is a question of two.

At least two opposed entities are needed for one to make the other believe that what is is not. Or two subjects; or, on one side, reality and, on the other, a subject with a minimal capacity for perception. Strictly speaking, however, I am afraid (very afraid) that these two sides of the coin come down to only oneself and the world. Perhaps, reader of these lines, in this search for the truth there is only space for two extremes: you and everything else.

Even in the very way the problem has been articulated, duality has been present from the beginning. We need look no further than the two principal traditions in the history of philosophy, initiated by Plato and Aristotle. In Plato's case, he brought truth itself into existence: Truth is unique, perfect, eternal and immutable, and exists independently of the mind in the World of Ideas. Whereas Aristotle, moving away from identifying truth and reality, grounded it more in earthly things and limited it to a mere property of certain statements: 'To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.' Aristotle was ahead of his time here, inaugurating, in the fourth book of his *Metaphysics*, the semantic conception of truth, and bringing us closer to ideas about adaptation or correspondence. And yet, both traditions have turned out to be dead ends, ultimately leading us back to the point where we started. Ourselves. The Aristotelian meaning withstood the passing of the centuries, being assimilated over time into nominalism, empiricism, materialism, structuralism and deconstructionism, before throwing us into this

relentlessly sceptical world in which we now exist. Platonism, on the other hand, was fervently embraced, for its own ends, by Christianity, thanks to Saint Augustine's maxim establishing God as the only possible source of truth. Centuries later, Nietzsche – one of the three great masters of scepticism – would refer to this concept of truth as the conspiracy engineered by Socrates, Plato and the Judaeo-Christian tradition to chain man in the prison of reason and keep him locked away from his passions. The invention of truth would be, in Nietzschean terms, the greatest lie of the Greco-Latin culture and of the West, a trap concocted by cowards who feared life, with the net result that our vital instincts were left behind. Platonism did try to escape the mire, on many occasions, with various bids to integrate Aristotelian concepts into its theoretical corpus, beginning with the work of Thomas Aquinas within Scholasticism itself, and continuing with the likes of Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz, and their truths of reason and truths in fact.

Out of these – and, more generally, out of all the minds in history – the French philosopher René Descartes is one who would undoubtedly submit the truth to the most stringent of tests. It's with him that we passed the point of no return.

Descartes himself said that from a very young age, he noticed that he had become used to accepting a certain proportion of false opinions, and that therefore everything he built on them in later years could only be considered doubtful and debatable. So when he judged the moment right, having reached intellectual maturity and in the exile of his long and quiet stay in Holland, always by the heat of his stove, he decided to face the task of his life: to reject systematically each and every one of his beliefs and find at least one unquestionable truth on which to build. To get past this initial phase of scepticism, he first wrote his *Discourse on Method*, in which he established the rules for