

Sissela bok on lying and moral choice in private and public life

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In Sissela Bok's "Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life," the philosopher examines the behaviour of lying and deception in public and private life. The results of such lies are then investigated through many real-life situations in which people are involved, either as liars or as the victims of deceit. The main focus of this paper will show that Bok did not adequately address an objection to the position that she discusses. Sissela Bok believes in ethics, morality, and individual rights. She sheds light on how it has been a deep-rooted tradition that "political philosophy endorses some lies for the sake of the public". Many generations of rulers and religious figures have created and preserved myths played on the "gullibility of the ignorant, and sought stability in shared beliefs." These people in power see themselves as superior to those they have fooled, believing that they have a better understanding of what is at stake. They do not believe that the public will be able to bear the burden of the truth. Bok believes lying is not acceptable, she directs her core argument mainly around prioritizing being truthful over avoiding harm to the deceived.

The limitation to her premise is that it is only justifiable if deceptive practices can be openly debated and consented to in advance in a democracy. Similar to a debate between one's legal duties versus one's moral duties. Bok argues that political fabrication is usually consequential, especially lies told by those occupying positions of power and authority in American society. The first application of her premise is the case of American involvement in the Vietnam war as an example of political deception. Where President Johnson made himself look like the "candidate of peace" during the election, but shortly after winning the United States launched "massive bombing

raids” in North Vietnam. Bok examines the lies by political figures that are rationalized as producing more “public good,” and questions whether it is justifiable if the purposes are so altruistic. She believes that that political leaders get used to deceiving that they become apathetic to truthfulness and equality, which are the foundations of democracy. Bok also examines deception and consent in public life. She understands that white lies are as common in political affairs as they are in private lives. However, Bok advocates that white lies should be kept to the absolute minimum to limit “widespread deceitful practices”. For Bok, it is normally inexcusable for public officials to deceive the public for “their own good,” yet she argues that in situations where the public receives a chance to publicly discuss a certain type of deceit, then that deceit can be justified if consent is given in advance. Bok is essentially claiming that it is rare in cases where lying can be justified.

Lying is an issue that has been constantly debated over periods of time. Some people believe that lying is sometimes acceptable in certain circumstances, while some believe lying is always bad. Bok insists that public servants should always be truthful and transparent in the act of their service, according to Bok. Unfortunately in our society today, lying has become a pattern that many governments display. So why give away such a dangerous power that does not seem to have people’s interest at heart? That is because a political lie may be a mechanism used to empower rather than deceive. In a democratic society, the people trust in the people they elect, believing that someone else’s judgement, to tell the truth when needed.

There are countless situations where governments have fabricated events

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and deceived their own people, for “ the public good.” Deceitful practices have shown to uphold positive and negative responses from their people.

Throughout history, governments have always lied and will probably continue to lie. It is a disturbing reality to see; however, there can be distinctions between certain types of lies within a government. Nonetheless, when there is a crisis where overpowering harm can be avoided only through deceit, can those who deceive be justified? Nobles lies can be justified because of the important goals they can secure. First, I will argue that Bok’s trivial viewpoint is problematic because she did not provide a definitive guideline for when deceitful behaviours arise in critical situations. For example, in a case where sensitive information must be kept away from the public and other countries, lying seems to be the best alternative. Bok’s response to this objection was somewhat insufficient because a population can “ publicly debate” for when it is permissible to lie, but she did not address what happens if that population cannot come into agreement about these standards. Bok brought up an example of how President Johnson lied about America’s involvement in the Vietnam war to win the election and the aftermath was that Americans lost trust in their government. She also uses this example to generalize that lying only leads to corruption, even lying for good reasons. In a political system of the representatives who act on behalf of the people, we often forget about the authority that resides in the power of the people.

In this case then we should lose trust in the people who elected the representatives. Her objection is flawed because she only considers the

viewpoint of the deceived victims. Bok may be shortsighted on seeing how lying may divert the negative outcomes of the truth. The second objection that Bok addresses are how governments sometimes lie temporarily to avoid public panic and chaos. I will use one of her examples to show that Bok's inadequate response to this objection only addresses the aftermath of deceitful behaviours and not the events before. The time shortly before World War II, a crisis was appearing before the United States of America, the nation needed to prepare and acquire support from allies. Bok is against how the American government bypass consent for moving the nation closer to war. She states how once the public uncovers the truth it will destroy public trust which pressures the government to lie even more. In a situation such as deciding whether or not to participate in warfare, the public will always be divided amongst themselves and will not come into agreement. This will essentially cause public tension and confusion, the government will struggle to unite a divided nation, especially in a time of war. She seems blind to see how lying may partially resolve a problem, if not fully. There is a difference between lying with malicious intent and lying with the sincere intention of improving people's lives. Bok does not take into the account of intentions, the root of how one acts, in any of her arguments.