

**LIES AND THE FATHER OF LIES**

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The pandemic deprived me of the pleasure of roaming the halls of Harvard Law School and chatting with my colleagues. The time saved allowed me to do some reading I somehow had never got to. One of the treasures I uncovered was Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

I am not now a religious person. I am, however, a believer in objective standards of right and wrong, in truth and the reality of love and generosity, and in beauty as the order which comes—often as a surprise—out of these. I turned to Milton for beauty and found, in addition, profound moral truths.

Let me change the register for a minute to introduce my subject. A while back NPR did interviews of Trump supporters to see what makes them tick. They spoke to one woman, an evangelical, and asked, “But, aren't you disturbed by the frequent and flagrant lying?” She gave what I would describe as the audible version of a shrug. “He's done so much for us evangelicals”—as if a practice of lying was like bad table manners, an endearing and minor foible. Well, it is not. In the public realm it is a cardinal sin—cardinal, in the etymological sense of that word: a hinge. In the public realm, the rule of law and democracy hinge on truthfulness. Even in regimes that have not been democracies, but were committed nonetheless to the rule of law—Kant thought Frederick's Prussia was such a regime—law was at least a promise that the

government would keep, and from that promise was the assurance of a measure of liberty. And of course a promise is a commitment made through language and language can only be understood if language is intact because on the whole what is said can be believed as true. It is like currency: there are very occasionally counterfeit bills, but currency only works if there is a sturdy presumption that the bills are not phony, that they are true.

In a democracy, truth is doubly urgent. We choose our governors. Our governors necessarily have to do many things we do not understand, that we cannot probe and perhaps even should not probe. For that very reason it is important that the governors to whom we have chosen to give this authority will tell us what is happening and why it is happening. If we cannot believe them, the choice that democracy gives us is meaningless; they might stay forever.

Let me again change registers and return to Milton. Satan was named in John 8:44 “the father of lies.” Why does lying rank so high among evils? Because it disables, it contradicts the defining quality of human beings: the ability to recognize truth and to act on it. In Satan's seduction of Eve was the lie that if she and Adam ate the forbidden fruit, “you shall be as gods.” He elaborated, I'm a serpent. I am the lowest of creatures—I don't even have legs but must creep down on the ground. Yet I, such a low creature, ate of the fruit and now only I of all the creatures in Eden can talk to you. Just imagine the power you will have if you eat of it, because you are the very top of creation. You shall be as gods.

There is another story in the Bible which is, in a sense, a parallel or mirror to that. The story of the Tower of Babel. As you will recall, the Babylonians, were—I don't know if Satan suggested this to them—seeking to build a tower—they were great engineers—so high that it would reach to heaven; and then they too would be as gods. They were punished for this seduction by all being made to speak in different languages. They could no longer communicate. Everything that anyone said could no longer be understood. The cooperative effort necessary to this remarkable engineering project came to a halt, as the inability to communicate disables all human effort; it makes for the inability to cooperate. And this is the extreme end of a world where lying is the norm: it is like the economy where there is no longer a presumption that the currency is genuine. In the end, the habit of lying undermines our ability to communicate even with ourselves, that is to say, to have a conscience.

That is the reason, therefore, that a casual liar is not simply like a crazy uncle one views with bemused affection. No, because somebody who is an inveterate liar debases the very currency of human thought and human collaboration. A lie is the counterfeit of truth; it is the counterfeit of the currency, which allows trust and communication and cooperation. How about the occasional lie? Well, how about the occasional counterfeit \$20 bill? If you don't do something about that, the occasional counterfeit \$20 bill becomes more and more common and pretty soon there is no currency and the money system disappears. Imagine if the Chair of the Fed were caught passing a counterfeit \$20 bill!

Milton's Satan says that the way God's creatures embrace the truth, I embrace chaos; chaos is the child of the father of lies. In Satan's words: "Evil, be thou my good." In the poem the archangel Michael shows Adam the results of what he and Eve have done, the world of chaos they have exchanged for Paradise, a place of truth, order, and beauty. This is the world that the father of lies has brought them:

Of Death . . . many are the ways that lead /To his grim cave, all dismal; yet to sense More terrible at the entrance, than within. /Some, as thou sawest, by violent stroke shall die; By fire, flood, famine, by intemperance more In meats and drinks, which on the earth shall bring /Diseases dire, of which a monstrous crew /Before thee shall appear; that thou mayest know /What misery the inabstinence of Eve Shall bring on Men. /Immediately a place Before his eyes appeared, sad, noisome, dark; A lazar-house it seemed; wherein were laid Numbers of all diseased; all maladies Of ghastly spasm, or racking torture, qualms Of heart-sick agony, all feverous kinds, Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs, Intestine stone and ulcer, colic-pangs, Daemonic phrenzy, moaping melancholy, And moon-struck madness, pining atrophy, Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence, Dropsies, and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums. Dire was the tossing, deep the groans; Despair Tended the sick busiest from couch to couch; And over them triumphant Death his dart Shook, but delayed to strike, though oft invoc'd With vows, as their chief good, and final hope. (Book XI, ll. 468–493)

This is a pretty good description of the horrors of the hundreds of thousands of deaths from Covid-19, many of which brought on by the lies that Covid is no worse than a bad cold or that it can be cured by chloroquine or horse dewormer or drinking bleach. What a Milton might have shown us of the devastation of climate change! The flooded coasts, the hurricanes and heat waves, the encroaching deserts and melting ice caps, with lost farm lands and lost species and lost lives! All worsened by the lie that there is no such thing as global warming, and if there is climate change, it is not brought about by human activity.

In Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Siena frescos there is a visual representation of [good](#) and [bad government](#)—*buon governo* and *mal governo*. In the former we are shown a thriving city, where

the arts, trade, construction, agriculture and manufacture flourish; in the other, presided over by Satan crops wither, fires burn, bandits roam the country-side, and in the city there are riot and murder. That is the scene that comes to mind as one sees the images of the grotesques rampaging through the halls of Congress on January 6, 2020.

I cannot improve on Milton's account of what a mendacious leader, a mendacious President has done to us—now he is gone! But to that pious lady who was interviewed on NPR, I say, “No. No, lying is not an endearing foible of an otherwise virtuous person. It is the child of Satan.”