'The Snakish Cunning of the Saints': A Dialogue on Lying, Deception and Equivocation

T.D.J. Chappell

'St. Athanasius was rowing on a river when the persecutors came rowing in the opposite direction: "Where is the traitor Athanasius?" "Not far away," the Saint gaily replied, and rowed past them unsuspected. St. Joan of Arc... used to put a cross on her letters to her commanders to show that the sentences bore the opposite of the usual French meaning. . . .She was accused of lying, but surely she had a good defence; words get their meaning by convention, and her commanders, to whom the letters were addressed, knew the convention and were not misled; if English soldiers, who had no business to read her letters or to be in her country at all, read them and were misled, that was not her affair. Such is the snakish cunning of the saints . . .' (Peter Geach, *The Virtues*, p.114–115)

Philip's parents had gone out for the evening, and I had been given the job of keeping him amused. About twenty past eight he evidently had a better idea about how to amuse himself than homework, and said he was going out to see a video at a neighbour's house. I wouldn't have been dubious about this—if he hadn't looked so shifty. 'How long will you be?' I asked. 'Hour and a half,' he replied. 'So you'd be back ten minutes before your parents?' 'Er, yes,' he grinned. 'Would your parents let you go?' Philip looked even shiftier. 'Well, I won't stop you going out,' I said; 'but if you do, then I'll tell your parents. Now you decide what to do'. Philip hemmed and hawed; but eventually went.

Presumably the video wasn't showing, for he was back within half an hour. He immediately got to work on softening me up.

'You're not going to tell my parents I've been out, are you?' he began. 'After all, I didn't see the video.'

'But you did go out; so I shall tell them that. Anyway, what if they ask me if you've been out? Are you asking me to lie to them?'

'No,' he replied, 'just give them the wrong impression. You know.'

'I'm not sure I do,' I answered: 'do you mean I should deceive them?'

'Well -- yes. You don't have to tell an actual lie.'

'You think it would be wrong to lie to them, but not to deceive them?'

'Yes. Lying is always wrong, deception isn't. Or at any rate,' he added, 'deceiving them wouldn't be as bad as lying to them. Lying is telling someone an outright falsehood, whereas deceiving them is just letting them think something that isn't true. Lying is the most deceptive kind of deception there is.'

'So is lying just one kind of deceiving?'

'Well,' shrugged Philip, 'you could say that.'

'But if we do say that, then mustn't we say that any other kind of deceiving, as such, is neither better or worse than lying, as such?'

'Eh? I don't get it.'

'What I mean,' I said, 'is that deceiving is a type, of which lying is one example. Any case at all where I cause someone else to believe a falsehood is deceiving. Lying is just that kind of deceiving where I do it by directly *telling* him the falsehood.'

'OK, but so what? That doesn't mean that lying isn't worse than any other kind of deceiving.'

'Compare dogs,' I suggested. 'Labradors, chihuahuas, alsatians, collie: they're all kinds of dog, right?'

'What are you on about?'

'They all display doggy qualities, yes?' 'Yes,' he said, laughing at me, 'they all display doggy qualities.' 'Is a collie more a dog than an alsatian? Does a labrador display doggier qualities than a chihuahua?'

'Course not,' said Philip nonchalantly, picking up the paper. 'A dog is a dog is a dog.'

'Right, then,' I said. 'Likewise, if lying is just one kind of deception among others, it is no *more* a kind of deceiving than any other kind of deceiving. So it isn't worse than any other. So you're wrong. Thank you. That's it.'

Philip put down the newspaper.

"... But I'm not saying that lying is "more" a kind of deceiving than any other kind of deceiving is whatever that means. I'm saying that lying is morally worse!"

'And what does *that* mean? Do you mean that lying has worse consequences than deception? Always?'

'No,' he conceded, 'I don't suppose it does, necessarily... No, you won't catch me that easily. Some piece of mere subtle deception might cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands; some outright, whopping

great lie might happen to have no bad consequences at all. So when I say that lying is morally worse than deceiving, I do mean that it's *always* morally worse; but I don't mean "morally worse as to its consequences". What I mean is: *in the same situation* and *with the same probable consequences*, where I could either lie to someone or just deceive them, it is always worse to lie to them.'

'Excellent!' I said. 'So you distinguish two forms of goodness for an action: one as to its consequences, another as to the action itself, considered as an example of some type of action. And you say that, if an action is of the type Telling a Lie, then, in itself and apart from its consequences, it is always worse than a parallel action of the type Deceiving.'

'You've got it. So I win the argument. That's it. Thank you.'

'Win the argument?' I replied—'You must begin it before you can win it. You haven't even told me why you think this yet!'

Philip adopted a patient expression. 'Look,' he said, 'Lying is obviously worse than deceiving, because it's an outright *statement* of a falsehood, which deceiving isn't.'

'Surely you don't think that lying is worse just because it has to involve words, while deception doesn't?'

'Of course I think that,' he replied. 'If I tell someone a lie, the deception is due to me. If I just deceive them, the deception is up to them. In deceiving, I just *let* the other person believe something false. It's up to them to make the error. But in lying, I *make* them believe something false. They don't have any choice. The error is made directly because of me, so it's directly my responsibility.'

'Well, this is all very interesting,' I said. 'You think the point is that lying is a sin of commission, deception a sin of omission? And sins of commission are always more serious than sins of omission?'

'That's right. So you admit I've won the argument?'

'Anything but,' I laughed. 'For a start we must see if you're right about omission and commission. Are all commissions worse than all omissions? What if I steal five pence — a sin of commission — and you walk past a dying man whom you could save — a sin of omission? Which of us is the greater sinner?'

'But that's a blatant no-ball,' objected Philip. 'You've forgotten what I said before about lying and deception. The same thing is true here: in the same situation and with the same sort of probable consequences, where I could either do a sin of commission or just a sin of omission, it is always worse to do the sin of commission.'

'Touché'!' I conceded. 'But do you think even that is true? Even in the same situation and so forth, is it always true that the relevant sin of commission is worse than the relevant sin of omission?'

'It's up to you to give a counter example. Otherwise my rule holds.'

'True; though since you say simply that lying *is always* worse than deceiving, I take it that you don't mean that lying just happens to be worse than deceiving, but that it's worse in principle (*what* principle, by the way?). But then I only need *one* exception to overthrow your argument.'

'That's what I'm arguing, yes---that it's worse in principle; and you've yet to show me any exceptions at all. The onus is on you.'

'Or is it on you: to show me why commission must necessarily be worse than omission? If your claim holds in every instance, what is the "secret connexion" between all these instances?'

'Who cares what the connection is?' he rejoined. 'It's --'

'-But who says deception is a sin of omission, anyway?' I interrupted. 'It looks pretty much like a sin of commission to me, just as much as lying. Deceiving is an action just as much as lying, isn't it?'

'No. Deceiving means leaving something to the other person. Lying means giving them little or no choice but to believe a falsehood.'

'But in lying as well as deceiving,' I replied, 'you omit something: namely telling the truth. In deceiving as well as lying you do something: you perform the action or the utterance which deceives. In lying you do one thing and omit another; in deceiving you do one thing and omit another; where's the difference? Both seem to be just as much sins of omission as of commission, so by your argument they ought to be morally on a par.'

'But that's just stupid!' Philip protested. 'By the same argument you could show that any sin is a sin of commission- and a sin of omission too!'

'Exactly!' I cried. 'So there's no clear distinction between omission and commission. So you can't say that *that* distinction is what makes the difference between lying and deceiving!'

'All right!' said Philip. 'You're wrong about commission and omission; but let me put it another way. Acts of communication involve two people ---'

'Sometimes they do; what about the Queen's Speech?'

'All right, pedant: acts of communication involve two *sides*. In the simple case of an act of communication between two people, one of them communicates and the other listens. So both the speaker and the hearer have a part to play in the act of communication if it is to succeed. So the speaker has to communicate well what he wants to say, and the hearer has to understand well what he hears. So: when the

speaker lies, he's doing *his* part wrong; but when the speaker deceives, it's *the hearer* who does *his* part wrong. So, from the point of view of the speaker, it's morally better for him to deceive than to lie — because that way it's not his responsibility, but the hearer's, that the act of communication breaks down.'

'I see,' I said. 'You see deception as a sort of legitimate buckpassing: a convenient way to transfer responsibility from the speaker to the hearer. Well, but if lying is something the speaker is directly responsible for, and deceiving is a way of passing on the responsibility for lying to the hearer, that means the hearer is to blame for being deceived, in the same way that the speaker was to blame for lying. Or have I misunderstood you?'

'Ah,' said Philip, pausing in his stride. 'No, the hearer isn't to blame for being deceived. It's his *fault*, though.'

'What's the difference?'

'What I mean,' said Philip, frowning, 'is that the speaker, when he lies, makes a deliberate false impression on the hearer; but when he deceives the hearer, it's an *accident* that the hearer gets a false impression. *Because*, you see, I am to blame for my deliberate wrong actions, and they're my fault too; but although the things I do wrong accidentally are my fault, I'm not to blame for them. The person who lies does a deliberate wrong; the person who is deceived does an accidental one. *There* you are; get out of *that*!'

'I'll do my best!' I promised. 'First: is it really true that it's an accident that the deceived person is deceived?'

'Of course,' said Philip. 'If what I say or do is ambiguous, for example, and he takes it the wrong way, that's his problem, not mine.'

'Ah, but there are distinctions to be drawn here,' I remarked. 'No doubt it is an accident if the deceived person is deceived by the speaker if the speaker doesn't *mean* to deceive him. But how can it be an accident if the speaker deliberately sets out to deceive him?'

'Being deceived is something that goes on in the hearer,' insisted Philip; 'so it's an accident as far as the speaker is concerned. What the speaker intends doesn't make any difference to what happens in the hearer.'

'It makes all the difference in the world!' I answered. 'We're talking about *moral* differences here, aren't we?'

'Yes,' said Philip; 'and what of it?'

'This,' I replied: 'if we're climbing a cliff, and you're below me, and I accidentally dislodge a rock which knocks you out, that's one thing. If I do it on purpose, that's quite another. The two situations differ morally. Let's use your neat distinction. In the first situation I

just think it was your fault (perhaps — depending on how careless or negligent I think you were). But in the second I hold you to blame, as well as thinking it was your fault. Morally there's a difference. So: if you say something ambiguous, and I misunderstand you with bad consequences for me, I think quite differently about the situation if I know you *intended* me to misunderstand you. So in fact, the speaker's intentions are the very *nub* of the moral issue.'

'Oh. You can have that point,' said Philip; 'it costs nothing.'

'Doesn't it? I think it's rather important. I can develop this point by saying that the hearer judges what the speaker says in the light of what he thinks the speaker intends; and similarly the speaker says what he says in the light of what he thinks the hearer will expect him to intend.'

'Very Grice,' said Philip, unless I misheard him; 'but why is this a strike against me? I can still say that there's a spectrum of cases of deception of differing degrees of badness, with Lying right at the top of the scale. Nothing you've said counts against that, and what's more you *still* haven't produced a counter example to my rule that the action-type Lying is morally worse than the action-type Deceiving.'

'The point I'm making,' I said, 'is about sarcasm. If you know I'm being sarcastic when I say 'Well, *that's* a good argument, Philip', then you get my point, even though my point is the *exact opposite* of what I actually say. Which suggests that sometimes lying, so far from always being the worst kind of deception there is (as you say it is), can involve no deception at all.'

'No, no, no!' said Philip: 'I can use your own arguments against you here. You said yourself that the speaker says what he says in the light of what he thinks the hearer will expect him to intend, didn't you? That's all that's going on here — unless the hearer doesn't *realise* that there's sarcasm in the air. The speaker and the hearer have a convention, you could say, according to which, when something is said in a certain tone (or whatever), the words have the opposite of their apparent meaning. No one is actually *lying* to anyone in a situation like that; though if the hearer gets the wrong end of the stick, someone is being deceived.'

'A fair response,' I replied, 'although please note, again, my earlier point that there's a moral difference between that sort of being deceived and the kind where the speaker *means* the hearer to get the wrong end of the stick. But now tell me: Why isn't my sarcasm case a case of lying? After all, at first sight it looks pretty much like a case of lying, if I (say) ask you a question and you give me an answer which is the exact opposite of the truth.'

'Hmm,' said Philip. 'Well, you keep saying how important the

intentions of the speaker are — and the intentions perceived in the speaker by the hearer —'

' - A point you were denying a minute ago - '

'Well, anyway, it's intention, and perceived intention, that counts here. Sarcasm isn't lying, because each side perceives the other side's intentions. We ought really to distinguish lying from telling falsehoods, for I can tell you a falsehood without lying to you — like in the sarcasm case. Telling a falsehood need involve no intention to deceive; telling a lie must involve an intention to deceive. It's all about intention and perceived intention,' said Philip, with evident satisfaction.

'So if I try to tell you snow is black, and you realise I'm trying to deceive you, this isn't a lie on my part, because you perceive my intention?'

'Erm,' said Philip ruminatively. 'No, I suppose it is a lie . . .'

'Because, perhaps, you perceive my intention that you should *not* perceive my intention?'

'Yes,' said Philip, brightening up. 'Yes --- it's an unsuccessful lie.'

'So successful lying involves a concealed intention; unsuccessful lying, an unconcealed intention to conceal an intention; and honesty, simply unconcealed intentions? In fact successful lying must also involve a concealed intention to conceal an intention... you see how it will go. You notice two interesting consequences of all this? First, as we've already seen, I can tell you the truth by telling you a falsehood, as when I'm being sarcastic.'

'Yes,' said Philip thoughtfully; then added: 'I wonder whether, if "speaking the truth" bears the same relation to "telling the truth" as "telling a falsehood" does to "telling a lie", you can tell me a lie by speaking the truth to me?'

'No doubt,' I agreed. 'Perhaps that's why the courtroom oath insists on the whole truth. But we won't pursue that here. The second distinction was this: that you can also tell me a falsehood by telling me the truth in a different way: when you wrongly believe you're "speaking the truth" (to use your phrase). Suppose you think snow is black; if I ask you about the colour of snow, and you tell me snow is black, you're *telling me* the truth, I might say, but not *speaking* the truth.'

'Well, perhaps,' allowed Philip; 'though we seem a long way from how we ordinarily speak here — and also, I don't see where all this gets your argument against me. You're meant to be disproving my claim that Lying is always worse than Deceiving. You haven't done that with all this talk, and I must say I think you've given me some splendid ammunition. Think about this for a start. There are grades of deception, but not of lying. A lie is just a lie, but deceptions range all the way from mere accidental ambiguities to virtual lies. We've agreed that intentions are important to lying and deception; and you rightly say that there's a difference between deceiving someone without meaning to, and intentionally deceiving them. So doesn't it come down to this: how effective my *means* of deceiving them is, and how effective I think it is? If I just say something ambiguous, then it's completely up to the hearer as to how they take it. It may be true that I'm — what's the word? —'

'Equivocating?'

'- Equivocating, thank you- but let's leave that on one side for the moment. The point I want to make's about effectiveness. A simply ambiguous remark, an equivocation, is pretty hit and miss; it might succeed in deceiving, or it might not. And I know that when I say it, so you see my intentions must be involved here. The same applies to more effective deceptions of various forms. I know they're all more or less haphazard, and I deploy them accordingly. But an outright lie - that's a cast-iron, sure-fire way of giving someone the wrong impression, and if I've any sense I know that. So when I deceive instead of lying, my intention to give the wrong impression must be less firm, because I choose one means or another which is, to a greater or lesser degree, a less sure means of achieving what I want than lying would be. But if a deceiver's or equivocator's intention to give the wrong impression is less firm than a liar's, then that's why the deceiver or equivocator is less guilty than the liar, or perhaps not guilty at all: because at least the deceiver or equivocator makes a kind of salute in the direction of honesty. That's what makes lying worse than deception or equivocation; that's the rule I've been trying to demonstrate all along, and which you haven't produced a single counter example to; and that, I think -' concluded Philip - 'is checkmate.'

'It may, at least, be check,' I answered, 'but this game, to mix metaphors like a football commentator, is end to end stuff: plenty of ricochets! Here's my answer: You've been using my own arguments, as you say, against me, to build up your own argument. But now I can use the same arguments as you appropriated from me, as you have developed them, for my own purposes. All I need show is that there can be a case where some other form of deception or equivocation is a more effective way of getting you to believe what I want you to than lying would be in that same situation.'

'That's what you've got to do,' agreed Philip; 'I've been waiting for you to do it from the very beginning, and you still haven't managed it.' 'Try this for size,' I said. 'Don't "actions speak louder than words"?'

'So says the cliché,' said Philip with a shrug.

'A crucial admission!' I exclaimed. 'If actions can speak louder than words to give a *true* impression, then why can't they speak louder than words to give a *false* impression? Suppose I have a lady friend whom I want to marry for her wealth. I don't love her, but I want her to think I *do* love her, or else she won't marry me. So she turns to me, some enchanted evening, and asks: "Do you love me?". How shall I respond, if I want to mislead her?'

'Well,' said Philip, 'as we've seen, you could mislead her by deceiving her; or, if you were really wicked, you could tell her an outright lie.'

'But that's the point! Which is the most effective form of deception here: a lie, or something else?'

'If I'm right,' said Philip, 'it must be a lie.'

'Yes — if you are right,' I answered: 'but, you see, the outright lie isn't the most effective form of deception here. So now I wonder if you are right, after all. The lady friend needs convincing of the falsehood that I love her, right? So 1, the deceiver, must act as convincingly as I can to give her the wrong idea.'

'If you're that determinedly wicked,' said Philip, 'then I say you're a liar, not a deceiver.'

'Not so fast,' I replied, 'for here's checkmate: the deceiver does what he thinks the real lover would do in that situation. Which is what? Not to say "Of course I love you": that would look hopelessly limp and wet and unconvincing. No, what the expert deceiver will do in this case is not tell the puny lie, like an ordinary deceiver; rather, like the true lover, he will sweep his deceived lady friend off her feet and smother her with kisses-without' (I finished with emphasis) 'saying a single word.'

'But,' objected Philip in some desperation, 'the argument doesn't go the other way, does it? Just because some other kind of deceiving is *more effective* than lying in this case doesn't mean that lying is any less culpable than that kind of deceiving!'

'Oh yes it does,' I said, 'at least if we take your point about effectiveness and known (or, we should add, believed) effectiveness. If the liar lies to the lady *because* he believes it's the most effective way to deceive her, then you're right; he is just as culpable as the deceiver in this situation. But if the deceiver deceives in some other way rather than lying *because* he thinks that that will be a more effective form of deception, then I'm right: he is more culpable than he would be if he lied. That is the conclusion you need to prevent me establishing; but I've just established it. So, as I was saying: Thank you. That's it.'

'And,' I continued, 'that about wraps it up. You have, at last, your example of a deception that is worse than lying. You also have the conclusion that the moral dogmatists are wrong on this point (and if on this point, then why not elsewhere?). You can't draw a hard and fast moral distinction between other kinds of deceiving and lying, because lying sometimes is, and/or is perceived to be, a less effective form of deception than other kinds of deception. And we agreed that what counted morally was (first) how effective a form of deception was, and (second) how effective it was *thought to be* by its employer.'

'Perhaps that's what I ought to give up...' began Philip.

'I don't see how else you would defend your insistence that lying, as such, must in principle be worse than deceiving or equivocating. For, as I said earlier, the question would then be: on what principle does lying come out as "in principle" worse than other sorts of deceiving? Now, moreover, you have an example to fight against, so I think your outlook is pretty black. For your original position was, if I remember, something like this: "It is sometimes permissible to deceive or deliberately equivocate; but it is never permissible to lie". Or perhaps it was this weaker claim: "It is always less wrong to deceive or deliberately equivocate than it is to lie". My argument has been that neither claim is true; we see from my example that deception or deliberate equivocation can in some cases be just as bad as lying or even worse. So, if you still hold out for a complete ban on lying, then pari passu — or perhaps even a fortiori — you should hold out for a complete ban on deception too. But I don't think that was what you wanted to argue, was it?'

'I think it's just terrible,' expostulated Philip, 'the way you will insist on trying to get away from a simple moral point with all these outlandish, immoral examples!'

"Outlandish", possibly,' I countered; 'but then life can be pretty outlandish, can't it? And I think morality must be about the insecurities of life, not about the securities — *false* securities, deceptive securities if you like — of some Look-It-Up Book of Unbending Moral Rules. But why "immoral"? Do you think I'm corrupting myself (or you, maybe?) by supposing that situations may occur where it's less bad to lie than to deceive? It seems to me that it's life itself which is the corrupting influence, not me, for life throws this kind of thing up all the time, and it's no good pretending that it doesn't. Of course it's true that there are terrible actions, such that any decent person would recoil in horror at the mere idea of doing them; no one denies that. But to think

that means that all such terrible actions are unequivocally forbidden is to confuse a point about our happiness — what we'd *like* to choose to do — with a point about our voluntariness — what, in some terrible situation, we might *have* to choose to do to avoid something still worse.'

'Isn't there anything you'd rather *die* than avoid doing?' asked Philip.

'Of course there is,' I answered; 'it's part of what it *means* to be, or try to be, a good person that you should value some other things more than your skin. For example: other things being equal, I'd rather die than deny my faith, or betray my family or my friends; in certain circumstances, I'd even die for my country. But that doesn't mean that these actions, denying your faith and so on, are on a list headed 'Unconditionally Forbidden'; for there might. possibly be cases where it would be even worse to do something else. (Didn't St.Paul wish that he might be cut off for the sake of his fellow Jews? He was prepared to bargain even his own faith, his own salvation, for the sake of others' salvation.) If a man's choice was either to deny his own faith or to deny the salvation of many others, how should he choose?'

'It's always possible to choose to die,' objected Philip.

'I thought suicide was another example of a categorically forbidden action!' I replied. 'But anyway, I don't think it is always possible to choose to die. Suppose that someone in a concentration camp was given the choice between shooting one child of his own, or shooting one hundred other children, and wasn't allowed to die himself. Of course such a situation would be nightmarish; why deny that it's possible?'

'Divine providence — ' began Philip

' — Divine providence, no doubt, prevents many bad things,' I said; 'but anyone who has read Greek tragedies can see that It doesn't prevent us having, sometimes, to choose to do something we know is normally wrong. And this applies to lying and other kinds of deception as well as to the more serious cases we've just discussed.'

'Oh, well; my final shot,' said Philip, 'is that you've only found one case where deception is, as you think, worse than lying. I think this case of yours may just be an accidental exception. I think it *may*, in fact, be to do with Providence, though devilish, not Divine Providence. In a case like this the deceiver just gets *lucky*; he can get what he wants without even having to pay the price of committing himself to an actual lie, and indeed he's better off if he doesn't lie. Lucky for him, but that doesn't mean that other forms of deceiving are in general worse than, or even on a level with, actual lying. 'Anyway,' (he continued) 'because you distracted me with all these arguments, I never actually got round to going back to shut the front door properly behind me, to stop my parents noticing I'd been out and now I think I hear them coming in. Since you say there's no important moral distinction between equivocating, deceiving and lying, and since you're such an adroit Professor of Lying — when they ask you if I've been out, would you mind just telling them a straight lie, please?'

I am indebted to master Philip Moody, currently a pupil at Stewart-Melville's School, Edinburgh, for an argument we had on the evening of Thursday, January 9th, 1992.

On being cunning as snakes Matthew X 16: a rejoinder.

The doctrine that lying is always wrong (often, of course, only venially wrong) has been defended at length by many authors who ought to be taken seriously: in the Catechism of the Council of Trent, and in the writings of the Doctors of the Church, e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, and Alphonsus de Liguori. Mr. Chappell, maintaining the contrary thesis, presents to his readers none of this literature, not even by allusion; the nearest he comes to that is a reference to what is 'associated with the Jesuits'. The voice we hear *against lying* is that of an imaginary nasty boy called Philip.

Mr. Chappell also alludes to my book *The Virtues*. The views and arguments of 'Philip' are not ascribable to me; anybody curious about what I say should read my book; if someone does that and still cannot see any significant difference between 'Philip's' view of the matter and mine, nothing I could say now is likely to do him any good.

'Philip' and his creator both reason in a recognisably 'consequentialist' style: we get drearily familiar arguments and examples. But *nobody* has a right to treat consequentialist moral thinking as unanswerably sound, thus ignoring the anti-consequentialist writing not only of Catholics but of non-Christians such as Philippa Foot, Arthur Prior, and Bernard Williams. Mr. Chappell likewise fails to mention the refutation of consequentialist thought in the chapter of my book ('Prudence') devoted to that.

Peter Geach