

Book Review

UDK: 165.6/.8(091):[111.83:177.3

DOI: 10.7251/SOCEN2526171S

COBISS.RS-ID 142906113

**FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF LYING TOWARDS THE
SOCIOLOGY OF (SCIENTIFIC) KNOWLEDGE**

(Book Review)

Lars Fr. H. Svendsen – *Philosophy of Lying* (trans. Gorana Knezevic, Milica Visnjic),
Geopoetika Publishing, Belgrade, 2024. p. 144

Lars Fr. H. Svendsen is a Norwegian professor of philosophy at the University of Bergen and a project manager at the research organization Civita. He is the author of a large body of books, translated into more than twenty languages: *The Philosophy of Boredom* (1999), *Art* (2000), *The Philosophy of Evil* (2001), *Man, Morality and Genes - A Critique of Biologism* (2001), *What is Philosophy* (2003), *The True, the Good and the Beautiful - An Introduction to Philosophy* (2004), *The Philosophy of Fashion* (2004), *The Philosophy of Fear* (2007), *The Philosophy of Work* (2008), etc.

The focus of this review is the book *The Philosophy of Lying* (2008), published in 2012 in Serbian by Geopoetika, translated by Gorana Knezevic and Milica Visnjic. It is written on 141 pages and structured through seven chapters: 1) Introduction (pp. 11 – 14); 2) What is a lie (pp. 15 – 37); 3) The ethics of lies (pp. 38 – 61); 4) When we lie to ourselves (pp. 62 – 76); 5) Lies and friendship (pp. 77 – 86); 6) The politics of lies (pp. 87 – 114); 7) Living with lies (pp. 115 – 128), and 4 appendices: Acknowledgements (pp. 127 – 129); Notes (pp. 129 – 138); Index of names (pp. 139 – 142) and Note on the author (pp. 143 – 144).

The book explores the concept of the phenomenon of lying at the macro, meso, and especially micro levels of everyday life. In the introductory part of the book, the author lays the foundation for a comprehensive study of the phenomenon of lying in everyday life. He begins by defining the very concept of lying and its various forms, including the concepts of truth, truthfulness, truthfiness and bullshit (nebulosity). He introduces the reader to the ethical

aspects of lying, raising questions about the moral correctness of deception and its impact on interpersonal relationships, especially in the context of trust between friends. He emphasizes that we often deceive ourselves ('Whoever lies to himself is most easily offended.'), while at the same time believing that it is our obligation to be honest with ourselves. It foreshadows topics that will be covered in more detail in later chapters, such as the role of lies in society and politics and a discussion of the views of important thinkers such as Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Weber, and Hannah Arendt on the justification and consequences of lying in a political context.

The chapter What is a Lie defines and analyzes the concept of a lie. Lie, bullshit and truthiness are the opposites of truth.

The Truth is a philosophical concept that Svendsen considers from different perspectives, including objective truth, subjective truth, and truth as a social construct. Truth is a copy of reality, or an objective state that corresponds to reality.

A *half-truth* is the presentation of partially accurate information in a way that leads to a false conclusion (For example, partially accurate sentences: 1. A person with some psychological, e.g. anxiety-depressive, imbalance is not capable of working. 2. A short person would not be able to reach a package from the last shelf. Unless he uses a ladder.). Hence, it is one of the most common forms of manipulation in politics and the media.

Truthiness is a term that Svendsen takes from Stephen Colbert to denote satisfying the internal impression of truth (subjective truth) and not satisfying objective compliance with facts.

Truthfulness is the impression of truthfulness based on intuition about reality, without checking the facts, i.e. factography and logic (For example, climate change is eco-manipulation with the aim of establishing global control).

A *lie* is a conscious intention to deceive another person, either by words or actions. A lie implies that the speaker knows the truth but deliberately distorts it (For example, a dean conducts collective mobbing over an employee but blames the employee for his natural reactions to the unfavorable circumstances for work and psycho-physical health at the workplace).

Self-deception is when a person unconsciously ignores or suppresses the truth in order to protect themselves from unpleasant facts (For example, a person with obvious stunted psycho-physical development compensates for a lack of personal prestige by striving for as much power in society and high social positions as possible). Therefore, it is not only external manipulation but also an internal belief that this external manipulation is normal. Most often, a lie is self-perpetuating so that individuals who are self-deceiving avoid cognitive

dissonance. This concept is equivalent to the Marxist concept of ideology as distorted consciousness (ideology in the narrow sense).

Silence as deception is the withholding of information with the aim of misleading another person, which Svendsen analyzes as a special form of lying (for example, withholding emails with important information or answers to inquiries, which in business culture is also treated as a specific form of mobbing due to the deprivation of access to important information, i.e. resources).

Pretending and masking is, along with verbal lying, behavior that serves to hide real intentions or feelings (for example, pretending to be offended in order to have a reason to deal with the target or pretending to be disabled in order to retire).

Propaganda is the systematic dissemination of lies or distorted information with the aim of manipulating public opinion (spreading party, e.g. communist, propaganda).

Bullshit is a concept that, together with truthiness, is classified as a media-constructed phenomenon, which is particularly expressed in the era of post-truth and the type of (media) culture shaped by it, thus contributing to reflections within the sociology of mass communication and the sociology of culture. Bullshit is not aimed at truth or lies, but at the production of words that have an effect but without concern for their truthfulness (for example, Not even Comte would have stood a chance: The worst candidate elected as an assistant at the Faculty of Political Sciences).

Svendsen discusses how lies function as a means of manipulation and power in interpersonal relationships, emphasizing that lying can be a form of control over other people. It also analyzes forms of untruthful communication, such as mistakes, misconceptions, or sarcasm. It considers the role of context in determining whether a particular statement is a lie, emphasizing that the same statement can have different implications depending on the situation in which it is uttered (For example, “it is night now” – stated at 9 a.m.). Svendsen’s analysis in this chapter lays the foundation for further exploration of the ethical and social implications of lying, which are addressed in subsequent parts of the book.

The chapter The Ethics of Lying explores the moral aspects of lying, asking why lying has generally been considered morally wrong. It places particular emphasis on the breach of trust that occurs when lying to friends, emphasizing that such deceptions are particularly damaging to the foundations of interpersonal relationships. Svendsen also discusses situations in which lying may be justified or even necessary, analyzing the various philosophical approaches and ethical theories that deal with this phenomenon. Throughout this chapter,

the author encourages readers to critically examine their own views on honesty and deception in everyday life.

The chapter When We Lie to Ourselves explores the phenomenon of self-deception, analyzing why and how people deceive themselves. It discusses the psychological mechanisms that enable self-deception, such as cognitive biases and rationalizations, which allow individuals to avoid facing unpleasant truths or to maintain a positive self-image. Although we occasionally lie to ourselves, most of the time we are trustworthy. Trusting others makes us vulnerable, but it is better to be deceived occasionally than to live in constant distrust of others. Throughout this chapter, readers are encouraged to critically examine their own thoughts and beliefs, in order to better understand and recognize situations in which they may be deceiving themselves.

In *the chapter Lying and Friendship*, he explores how lying affects friendships and trust between friends. He emphasizes that lying to friends is particularly problematic because it undermines the foundations of trust that are essential to friendship. Svendsen analyzes various situations in which people may be inclined to lie to their friends, such as avoiding conflict, protecting feelings, or personal gain, and discusses the ethical implications of such actions. Throughout this chapter, Svendsen encourages readers to consider their own values and actions in the context of friendship and honesty.

In *the chapter The Politics of Lies*, he analyzes the role and presence of lies in political life. He explores how and why political leaders use lies as a means to achieve their goals, considering historical and contemporary examples. He looks back at the concept of the 'noble lie' originating from Plato, where lies are considered justified if they serve a higher good. Thus, he analyzes the views of philosophers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Weber, and Hannah Arendt on the use of lies in politics. Niccolò Machiavelli argued in *The Prince* that political power is often maintained thanks to the skill of deception. Svendsen discusses Machiavelli's idea that a leader does not always have to be honest, but that it is more important to know when to lie in order to preserve power. Hobbes believes that social order is based on agreement and that lies can be an instrument of stability, but also of destruction of the social contract. According to Kant, it is absolutely forbidden to lie, which is one of the strictest moral positions in philosophy because lying is always immoral even in extreme situations. Hannah Arendt emphasized that the systematic use of lies in politics leads to the loss of the distinction between truth and fiction. She refers to Harry Frankfurt's concept of *nebulosity*, where the goal of a statement is often indifference to the truth rather than conscious deception. She raises the question of to what extent lying in politics is morally acceptable and what consequenc-

es it has for society and democracy. 'It is not possible to have a meaningful democratic discussion if we do not refer to the same reality.' He emphasizes that, although lying is often used as a tool for manipulation and maintaining power, it undermines citizens' trust in institutions and the political system. It examines contemporary examples of political leaders who are notorious for their frequent lying, analyzing how such behavior affects public discourse and society as a whole. Throughout this chapter, the author encourages readers to critically consider the relationship between truth and politics, and to reexamine their own views on the acceptability of lies in public life.

In the chapter Living with Lies, the author explores how lies affect everyday life and interpersonal relationships. It examines the ways in which individuals and societies adapt to the presence of lies, whether they are small, everyday untruths or larger deceptions. Svendsen analyzes how tolerance for lies can shape social norms and values, and how the continued acceptance of lies can lead to the erosion of trust in a community. It examines the strategies that people use to cope with the knowledge that they have been deceived, including forgiveness, rationalization or facing the truth. Through this chapter, the author encourages readers to reconsider their own attitude towards lies in their lives and how they affect their relationships and society as a whole.

Finally, taking all of the above into account, it is possible to conclude that the book *The Philosophy of Lying* is more than relevant for sociology and sociologists, but also other specialists, researchers and students in the field of social sciences and humanities because, in the conditions of global communication and manipulation, it possesses a significant capacity to enrich the (sociological) understanding of the process of (scientific) cognition with a special critique of the social construct of truth that is presented in the book. The book serves as an instrument for illuminating the deformations of knowledge in social life, and in particular the differences between truth as an ethical and social category. Namely, truth in society is not just a matter of facts but of consensus, or agreement, between the subjects of communicative action. This is in accordance with Luckmann and Berger's theory of the social construction of reality, according to which knowledge is not neutral but a product of culture and institutions, and which was also proven by Karl Mannheim, in the context of the concept of epochal consciousness (the total concept of ideology) as the dominant way of thinking of a certain territorial group in a certain period of time. Truth is produced, fabricated, and often even a lie is accepted as 'truth' in society if it corresponds to collective interest, power, and ideology. Michel Foucault was also on the trail of such a determination, arguing that what is true is determined by those who have the power and resources to produce and

maintain what they have determined to be truth, which is another contribution to the critical view of institutions of knowledge (education, politics, and the media).

Dušanka Slijepčević, MA – Senior Assistant, PhD Candidate
Faculty of Political Science
University of Banja Luka

Applied Sociology Study Program

Banjaluka, 20.06.2025.