

DUKE ENGLISH PROFESSOR STANLEY FISH ATTACKED TRUTH WITH ALL THE FERVOR OF AN OLD-TIME PREACHER DENOUNCING SIN.

Modern linguistics is built on the principle that the means of communication are neither reliable nor politically neutral but that, on the contrary, language itself deceives. Because there is said to be a chasm between rhetoric and reality “deconstructionists” bend the text (never a poem or novel, always a “text”) to their will. Each work examined is deconstructed to demonstrate the impossibility of creating a coherent statement, let alone a truthful one, out of words. Thus the shocking discovery that language can be used to lie, distort, conceal, and fabricate (and it is a shocking discovery at whatever age one makes it) grew into the suspicion that what sometimes happens (usually with a deliberate motive) must *always* happen, with a kind of inevitability independent of human will. Lying is claimed to be a universal practice. Of course, “everyone does it all the time” is all the defense any liar needs.

Deconstruction and the broader field of “critical theory” are said to have crested as forces within American universities. I am not altogether convinced. I believe the tools of deconstruction and its mood of radical suspicion are everywhere present in the study of the humanities. Deconstructionism’s favorite technique of flipping the order of any two elements where one is held inferior to another may be interesting exercise when applied to opposing pairs like man/woman or white/black. But when the procedure is done with truth/falsehood and virtue/vice, the results can be calamitous. Many theorists, as the Alan Sokal physics hoax proved, are now even willing to throw out science and scientific method, as if, say, gravity were merely one more concept to be debunked.

I WONDER IF deconstructionism’s denigration of the importance of authorship—especially Michel Foucault’s insinuation that authorship and copyright law may be capitalist tools—made plagiarism more acceptable? I worry that academic Marxism’s reduction of humanity to the social and economic forces acting upon it cannot help but diminish such virtues as honesty, integrity, and honor. I am concerned that today’s dogma that the powerful rewrite history may devalue history itself into a sequence of episodes in which might makes right, and any means of attaining your goal—lies and deceit included—are justified.

The idea, so common in American college English departments today, that Marxism still has intellectual integrity seems to me one more instance of stubborn illusion, the triumph of the “theoretical” over the bloody truth. I asked a self-described Marxist how he managed to keep the faith despite the wretched history of the Soviet experiment. Oh, Russia didn’t count, he answered, “they didn’t really try it there.” In this man’s view, the Russian Revolution was not genuine Marxism, and therefore the Gulag, the show trials, and Stalinism were irrelevant. This refusal to surrender the abstraction in the face of the disastrously real is true sentimentality. It would be

poignant if it weren’t implicated in the general assault on truth that we now find in the highest offices of the land, as well as in the low.

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The poet David Lehman wrote the signal critique of deconstructionism Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man.

A LYING TONGUE LASTS ONLY A MOMENT

By Gene Edward Veith

Listening to President Clinton’s explanation of how he didn’t really lie in his grand jury testimony brought back fond memories of my grad school days. What Clinton did was take the words *sex*, *alone*, and *is* and proceed to “deconstruct” them. That is, he took ordinary terms whose meaning seems perfectly clear and dissected them so closely that they dissolved into contradictions, uncertainties, and conundrums. He was not lying because, in his rendering of the words, he was never alone with Miss Lewinsky (since other people were in the White House), and they never had sex (since he did not consider oral sex to be sex). If the Independent Counsel and the grand jury had other definitions in mind, these would simply be *their* reading of the words. In a *tour de force* that would have won him an A in any literary criticism seminar, the President presented meaning as inherently problematic, hinging completely on each individual’s interpretation.

The President’s performance was complemented by the “White House spokesmen,” who also must have taken their share of English lit. seminars. According to contemporary critical theory, interpretation itself is a matter of constructing paradigms—also known as “plausibility structures” or “interpretive models”—to account for data. White House spinmasters proved adept at accounting for even the most incriminating evidence, by offering a succession of possible scenarios in which they depicted Miss Lewinsky at various times as a stalker, a tool of the right-wing conspiracy, and a troubled youth whom the President was counseling.

In the nation’s colleges and universities, students are taught that truth is not discovered, but built. If there is no objective truth, of course, it is impossible to lie. Or, put another way, if there is no objective truth, *everything* is a lie.

Thinkers in pre-modern times believed in a vast array of truths—rational, empirical, moral, and theological. “Modern” thinkers restricted truth to what can be known through the scientific method. The “postmodernists” have taken the next step, rejecting even scientific certainty and dismantling the category of objective truth altogether.

Having allowed these redefinitions to take place, it should not be shocking to us to discover that some of our most

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contemporary political leaders are fluent liars. Nor should we be surprised at the "promising young journalists" who get caught making up news stories, the TV producers who mix fact and fiction, the deceptive advertisers, the new profession of "spin doctors." These and other cadres of new liars are simply acting out what they were taught in school.

Postmodern relativism has become a commonplace not only in the academic world but on nearly every level of the culture. Grade-school children are being taught according to "constructivist" educational theory—which encourages them to construct their own histories, word-spellings, and math rules. Television takes seriously the literary critic's canard that, since truths are all constructions, there is no difference between the real and the fictive. And according to a recent survey, 66 percent of the American people believe "there is no absolute truth."

Moral categories such as "lying," "honesty," and "hypocrisy" come out of a far different worldview, as do legal categories such as "swearing under oath," "proof beyond a reasonable doubt," and "perjury." The foundation of Western civilization was formed by the classical Greeks and Romans and the biblical Jews and Christians, all of whom believed in transcendent truths and transcendent moral virtues.

By contrast, Jacques Derrida, a key philosopher of postmodernism, argues that because there is no "transcendent logos," there can be no objective meaning. *Logos*—Greek for "word," "speech," "reason"—is central to Greek philosophy and also to the New Testament's famous passage, "In the beginning was the *Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In other words, Derrida is claiming that, because there is no God and no Word of God, there is no ground for asserting a rational order in the universe or an objective meaning in language.

Postmodernism, by its own admission, is the logical consequence of the rejection of God. When we "turn our backs on God," says the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, we start "uttering lies our hearts have conceived" and soon discover that "truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey" (Isaiah 59:13-15).

Postmodernism cannot last long, for it is an intellectual, moral, and cultural dead end. Without truth there can be no education, no moral consensus, no laws or norms that are essential for culture. "Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment" says Proverbs 12:19.

On the other hand, those who do believe in a transcendent logos—namely, God and His Word—have a foundation for truth of every kind, and a reason to seek it. It is on those who believe there is such a thing as truth that the job of rebuilding our intellectual and cultural infrastructure will fall.

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE STOP TEACHING TRUTH?

By Christina Hoff Sommers

In the fall of 1996, I took part in a PBS program billed as a "Socratic dialogue." For an hour, I discussed moral questions with another ethics professor, a high school history teacher, and seven high school students. The program, "Ethical Choices: Individual Voices," is now circulated to high schools for use in classroom discussions about right and wrong. Its message still troubles me.

In a typical exchange, the moderator posed this question to the students: Unexpectedly your teacher has assigned you a five-page paper. You have only a few days to do it, and you are already overwhelmed with work. Would it be wrong to hand in someone else's paper?

Two of the students found the suggestion unthinkable and spoke about responsibility, honor, and principle. "I wouldn't do it. It is a matter of integrity," said Elizabeth. "It's dishonest," said Erin. But several others saw nothing wrong with such cheating. Eleventh-grader Joseph flatly said, "If you have the opportunity, you should use it." Eric concurred, "I would use the paper and offer it to my friends."

Having taught moral philosophy to college freshmen for more than 15 years, I was not surprised to find students defending cheating. There are always a few in every class who play devil's advocate with an open admiration for the devil's position. I am also aware of ethics surveys indicating that large numbers of students have few qualms about stealing and cheating. The Josephson Institute's 1998 "Report Card on Ethics of American Youth" surveyed more than 10,000 high schools students. Thirty-five percent of students were willing to cheat on a test "if it would help them get into college"; 47 percent had stolen something from a store in the past year.

But at least here, in this PBS Socratic discussion, I expected to have a professional ally in the other philosophy teacher, professor William Puka of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Surely he would join me in making the case for being honest. Instead, Puka defected. He told the students that in this situation, the teacher was immoral for giving the students such a burdensome assignment. "What disturbs me is how accepting you all seem to be of this assignment. To me it's outrageous from the point of view of learning to force you to write a paper in this short a time."

Through most of the session professor Puka focused on the hypocrisy of parents, teachers, and corporations, but had little to say about the moral obligations of the students. He spoke disdainfully of "principled behavior" that ignores social or economic "context." When we discussed the morality of shoplifting, Puka pointed out that we must also consider such things as the "corporations' deciding on a 12 percent profit margin...and perhaps sweatshops." The professor was genially