The Review of Politics 79 (2017), 451–473.
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doi:10.1017/S003467051700016X

Truth, Lies, and Concealment: St. Augustine on Mendacious Political Thought

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Abstract: There is disagreement among scholars regarding the mendacity of esoteric writing. Some see it as a necessarily dishonest mode of communication; others argue it does not meet the conditions of lying; others are more nuanced in their assessment. In this article, we seek to resolve this disagreement by offering a systematic analysis of the literary practice in which we argue that there are both truthful and mendacious forms of esoteric writing. In sum, if an author conceals truths from a general audience while still being truthful on the surface of the text or makes it clear that he is being untruthful, he is not lying; yet if an author conceals truths while intentionally being untruthful on the surface, he is lying. Given the parallel ethical structure between esoteric writing and political discourse, we argue that the analysis provided in this article may illuminate the ethical choices made in both written and political statements.

Every speech and every composition, and similarly every political statement, involves a choice regarding truthfulness and concealment. This choice has two dimensions. First, the writer or public figure must decide whether to lie in pursuit of his objective(s). Second, he must determine how openly to convey this selection of truthfulness or mendacity to his audience. For a variety of reasons—ranging from imminent persecution to political tact—a public figure may wish to conceal some degree of his intentions or reveal them only to a select audience.

These decisions to lie, deceive, or conceal political statements is akin to a well-rehearsed principle of political philosophy often referred to as esotericism. Esoteric writing—the deliberate efforts of an author to misrepresent or conceal certain intentions—involves the same dimensions of lying and concealment as political speech. The mode of communication does not alter the underlying ethical decisions. This parallel ethical structure allows the fiercely

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051700016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

contested ethics of lying and concealment by public figures to be illuminated by the commensurate and long-standing tradition of scholarship concerning the ethics of esoteric writing.

In an attempt to illuminate the ethical choices inherent in both arenas of political communication, this article offers an analysis and clarification of the ethics of esoteric writing. All public figures and authors must make decisions about lying and concealment; we propose an ethical framework for evaluating these decisions and the consequences of these choices for the authors' relationship to, and pursuit of, truth.

Scholars disagree about the ethical significance of esoteric writing, particularly its truthfulness (or lack thereof). Many contend it is a mendacious mode of communication.[1] Arthur Melzer, for instance, author of the most comprehensive treatment of esoteric writing to date, says it is "fundamentally dishonest" because it not only conveys certain truths to an exclusive group and conceals those same truths from the general readership, but it also propagates a "fictional doctrine" to this latter audience.[2] Similarly, Michael Frazer says that esoteric writing involves "simultaneously communicating true, esoteric teachings to the few and beneficial (if not entirely truthful) exoteric teachings to the many."[3] Thus, on this reading, conveying falsehood is an essential characteristic of the literary practice.

Other scholars suggest that only certain types of esoteric writing are mendacious. For example, Leo Strauss, the thinker chiefly responsible for

[1]This essay is not concerned about whether such writing, particularly if it is mendacious, is justifiable. It only seeks to ascertain whether it is essentially lying or not. Many scholars who defend esotericism argue that untruthful forms of esoteric writing are justifiable owing to the noble aims they achieve. First, they argue, esoteric writing protects philosophers from persecution. Actually, this can apply to anyone. People who hold dissenting opinions can be imprisoned and tortured, particularly in nonliberal societies, and the ability to conceal their true beliefs can shield them from persecution. Second, scholars suggest that esoteric writing promotes philosophical education. By using various literary devices (e.g., intentional contradictions within one's work), authors can entice gifted and inquisitive minds to search for answers and think for themselves. This literary practice also protects society from instability. Philosophers often pursue certain dangerous truths and question conventional norms, including religious ones. These activities can unsettle a society, yet by appearing to "fit in" and mask their subversive teaching, philosophers can ensure that the status quo goes unchallenged (at least publicly). Yet such defenses are ultimately unpersuasive to those (albeit a minority) who hold that lying is never morally permissible regardless of the harm it avoids or the benefits it gains.

[2]Arthur Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1–2, 121. See also Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Christopher Nadon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 68, 73, 97.

[3]Michael Frazer, "Esotericism Ancient and Modern: Strauss contra Straussianism on the Art of Political-Philosophical Writing," *Political Theory* 34, no. 1 (2006): 57n5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051700016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

rediscovering the use of this literary practice in political philosophy, admits that a writer's deliberately deceiving the majority of his audience would no doubt shock "the decent modern reader,"[4] yet he says such dishonesty is indicative of much of this form of writing. At times, he describes instances of esoteric writing as "noble lies" and "pious frauds," which he says consist of opinions not "in all respects consonant with the truth."[5] Esoteric writers use these opinions to conceal their true teaching, and though they express these to their audience, Strauss admits this is not the same as "accepting them as true."[6] Yet there are other instances of esoteric writing that Strauss characterizes in ways that are not suggestive of lying in the strictest sense—economic truths, likely tales, probable opinions, and *ductus obliquus*. However, Strauss never discusses, at least in any systematic way, which types are inherently dishonest.

Further developing Strauss's argument, some scholars identify specific types they claim are not mendacious, even if they admit other forms are. Robert Howse, for example, argues that esotericism, which veils truth in times of persecution, or what he calls "exoteric writing," is not a lie because it is unreasonable to believe what an author says in such circumstances is truthful.[7] Catherine and Michael Zuckert describe Strauss's own use of esoteric writing as an honest form of communication. They argue he did not compose noble lies so much as he wrote with what they call "pedagogical reserve," which is to say Strauss said less than he thought, but not other than what he thought.[8] Another form of truthful esotericism is what

[4]Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 35.

[5]Ibid. See also *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 131–33 and Laurence Lampert's analysis in "Strauss's Recovery of Esotericism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Strauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 76–89.

[6]Leo Strauss, "On a Forgotten Kind of Writing," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 221–22. In a footnote in *Natural Right and History*, where Strauss discusses Rousseau's esotericism, he mentions the French philosopher's ethical assessment of it: "'Je ne suis pas tout-à-fait de cet avis, et je crois, qu'il faut laisser des osselets aux enfants.' … Rousseau's principle was to say the truth 'en toute chose *utile*'… hence one may not only suppress or disguise truths devoid of all possible utility but may even be positively deceitful about them by asserting their contraries, without thus committing the sin of lying" (Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953], 261n20). Here, it is acknowledged this form of writing is a lie, albeit one that is morally justified.

[7]Robert Howse, "Reading between the Lines: Exotericism, Esotericism, and the Philosophical Rhetoric of Leo Strauss," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 32, no. 1 (1999): 63–64.

[8]Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss: Political Philosophy and American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 136–37. For alternate readings of Strauss's esotericism, see for example Peter Levine, *Nietzsche and the Modern Crisis of the Humanities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 152–65; Larry Peterman, "Approaching Leo Strauss: Some

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Frederick Crosson calls "latent teaching," or in reference to early Christian literature, what John Henry Newman and Ernest Fortin call "the Economy."[9] This writing conceals certain aspects of the truth (or deeper facets of it) but what is actually conveyed, even to the casual reader, remains truthful. In other words, depending on the audience, it presents "different depths of meaning" of the same truth, not two inconsistent statements to two distinct audiences as does the form mentioned by Melzer and others.

In contrast to these previous scholars who are willing to admit some, if not all, esoteric writing involves lying, a few appear unwilling to categorize esoteric writing as mendacious at all. Steven Smith claims that an esoteric author "does not engage in the kind of systematic deception characteristic of a liar."[10] He readily admits, particularly of philosophers, that they prudently remain silent and obfuscate the truth; nevertheless they fall short of mendacity in his estimation. Curiously, one of Strauss's most notorious critics, Shadia Drury, is another exception to the rule. Though she argues that Strauss provides justification for lying, she suggests that esoteric writing, or at least the form he employs, is not dishonest: "I do not regard, nor do I think that Strauss ever believed, that those who write esoterically are liars. Strauss says a great deal about noble lies and pious frauds. … But these noble lies contain part of the truth and sometimes the whole truth."[11] According to

Comments on *Thoughts on Machiavelli*," *Political Science Reviewer* 16 (1986): 317–51; and Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[9]Frederick Crosson, "Esoteric versus Latent Teaching," *Review of Metaphysics* 59, no. 1 (2005): 73–93; John Henry Newman, "Note F: The Economy," and "Note G: Lying and Equivocation," in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua & Six Sermons*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 412–26; Ernest Fortin, "Clement of Alexandria and the Esoteric Tradition," *Studia Patristica* 9, no. 3 (1966): 41–56; Fortin, "Hellenism and Christianity in Basil the Great's Address *ad adulescentes*," in *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of A. H. Armstrong*, ed. A. H. Armstrong, H. J. Blumenthal, and R. A. Markus (London: Variorum, 1981), 189–203; Fortin, "Basil the Great and the Choice of Hercules," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 11, no. 2 (1986): 65–81; Fortin, "The Church Fathers and the Transmission of the Christian Message," and "The 'Rhetoric' of the Church Fathers," in *Ever Ancient, Ever New: Ruminations on the City, the Soul, and the Church*, ed. Michael Foley (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 13–30, 47–58; and to a lesser degree, Fortin, "Between the Lines: Was Leo Strauss a Secret Enemy of Morality?," in *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 317–27.

[10]Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 163–64.

[11]Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), lx. For a persuasive response to Drury, see Zuckert and Zuckert, *The Truth about Leo Strauss*, 116–20.

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Drury, Strauss's esoteric writing is mostly tedious commentary on philosophic texts that withholds his true intentions and contains certain devices, such as various obscure metaphors, to conceal those intentions. He never lies, however.

In this article, we attempt to resolve the disagreement over the truthfulness of esoteric writing—and esoteric political statements more broadly—by offering a systematic analysis of the literary practice. We argue that esoteric writing is not, in and of itself, mendacious. There are truthful forms, just as there are untruthful ones. We point out that the ethical determination of a particular instance is not based on the decision to conceal certain truths; rather, it is located in what is written to the general audience. If an author intentionally conveys on the surface of the text what is false from his perspective, the author is lying, unless he makes it clear by the mode of writing that the idea is false. Yet if an author conveys on the surface what is true from his perspective (or at least not false),[12] the author is not lying. Moreover, our analysis outlines the different types of esoteric writing and delineates the imprecise language concerning lying, deception, and dishonesty.

The importance of this systematic analysis of esoteric writing is twofold. First, as suggested above, considerations of truthfulness, lying, and concealment in esoteric writing parallel the broader contours of political discourse. Political figures are continually charged with lying and deception, often owing to genuine dishonesty or withholding varying levels of dangerous or classified information. Consequently, a robust ethical framework for classifying and evaluating mendacity and concealment is illuminating for citizens and politicians alike. Second, this framework is of consequence for the interpretation and writing of esoteric political thought. It is not our purpose to pass judgment on political thinkers, but a framework for approaching their choices regarding truth, lying, and concealment may prove useful to future interpreters. After all, an author's decisions regarding lies and concealment communicate, at least implicitly, certain relations between political thought and truth. Moreover, the definitions and conditions offered below facilitate more rigorous discussion regarding the use of esoteric political philosophy today.

Throughout our analysis we draw largely from a thinker who is uniquely qualified to address the topic, St. Augustine of Hippo.[13] Augustine is perhaps best known as one of the few thinkers to argue that lying is never morally

[12]It seems that there is a range of one's confidence in particular ideas that cannot be reduced to either true or false. Sometimes we *mostly* believe; at other times, we talk in terms of probabilities; and still, at other times, we doubt. For our purposes, the minimum threshold for truthful esoteric writing is that what is read is not false.

[13]For the primary sources, see Augustine, "Lying," in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, Fathers of the Church 16, ed. R. J. Deferrari (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1965), 47–110; "Against Lying," in *Treatises on Various Subjects*, 113–79.

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permissible regardless of the circumstances.[14] Augustine's robust theoretical treatment of lying is therefore a particularly suitable resource for evaluating *all* circumstances of mendacity. In addition to this contribution to our understanding of lying, he also provided what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first systematic analysis of esoteric writing. Though he never used the term (*esotericam*), Augustine was well aware of the use of this literary practice in antiquity and believed the writings of Plato, Cicero, Varro, the Academics, and perhaps shockingly, even the scriptures themselves were esoteric.[15] This analysis of esoteric writing paired with his thorough examination of lying positions Augustine to powerfully speak to truth, lies, and concealment in political statements.

In what follows, we first offer an extended discussion of Augustine's definition of a lie. We then elucidate the distinctive processes of esoteric writing, and based on Augustine's definition, offer an evaluation of the possible choices made throughout those processes. We close with a brief assessment of the varied voices within the debate over the truthfulness of this mode of communication and its relationship to pursuing truth in politics and philosophy.

[14]We are aware of only two scholars who take issue with the traditional reading of Augustine's absolute prohibition on lying. John von Heyking claims that Augustine permits, nay even requires, lying in certain circumstances (e.g., to save someone's life). See *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 117–18. David Decosimo argues that Augustine approves of state-sponsored lying in certain justified cases even though he condemns all private (or personal) instances of lying. See "Just Lies: Finding Augustine's Ethics of Public Lying in His Treatments of Lying and Killing," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 4 (2010): 661–97.

[15]He devoted particular attention to the Academics. Taken mostly from the Neoplatonist Porphyry's account, Augustine believed that these philosophers concealed their true teaching with an apparent skepticism that served to seduce young inquisitive readers to pursue the truth. They were not truly skeptics but for pedagogical reasons constantly questioned ideas and refused to offer any positive teaching, at least on the surface, in order to provoke people to search for the truth. Though he acknowledged the merit of such an approach in the right context, he worried it could turn people into actual skeptics. See "Letter to Hermogenianus (Letter 1)." See also *City of God* 4.27, 30, 5.9, 6.10; *Of True Religion* 1.1, 5.8; *Against the Academics* 2.29, 3.17.37–38; "Letter to Dioscorus (Letter 118)"; *Confessions* 5.10.19; and *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6 and 4.6–9. For commentary on Augustine and esotericism, see Douglas Kries, "Augustine as Defender and Critic of Leo Strauss's Esotericism Thesis," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 83 (2009): 241–52. Augustine's consideration of esotericism in scripture occurs in response to a defense of "useful lies" (*mendacium officiosum*) given by his contemporary St. Jerome. The disagreement was over an episode recounted in the book of Galatians and is detailed in Augustine's *On Lying*.

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Lying

The divergence of opinion over this issue comes in part from the imprecise use of the term "lie" and the utilization of different conceptions of mendacity, deception, and dishonesty. For instance, Howse states that a false statement is only a lie "when the author has indicated that she is communicating her own sincerely held beliefs."[16] Quite differently, Smith says a liar is "someone who purposefully leads us away from the truth or from a correct apprehension of reality to something he knows to be false."[17] Thus, in order to assess properly the ethical significance of esoteric writing, it is important to have a precise definition of these terms.

For the purposes of this article, we use the definition provided by Augustine.[18] He defines a lie as a "false statement made with the desire to deceive."[19] Though it is centuries old, it is remarkably similar to the traditional definition used by scholars today. Arnold Isenberg says a lie is "a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it."[20] Igor Primoratz defines a lie as "a statement believed to be false, with the intention of getting another to accept it as true."[21] These definitions all share three necessary conditions: a statement condition, a falsehood (or untruthful) condition, and an intention to deceive. Though these conditions seem rather straightforward, there are a few aspects that need clarification. We will also note any alternative conceptualizations of lying that would affect our assessment of esoteric writing.

First, the term "statement" implies that a person actually conveys information, but not just any type of information; it must be an assertion. In other words, in this definition, a statement is not simply a proposition (e.g., Socrates teaches about the immortality of the soul) but an expression of the speaker's *judgment* of that proposition (Socrates is right in his teaching on the immorality of the

[16]Howse, "Reading between the Lines," 63.

[17]Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 163.

[18]For discussions on Augustine and lying, see Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004); Thomas D. Feehan, "Augustine's Own Examples of Lying," *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991): 165–90; Feehan, "The Morality of Lying in St. Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990): 67–81; Feehan, "Augustine on Lying and Deception," *Augustinian Studies* 19 (1988): 131–39; and Alan Brinton, "St. Augustine and the Problem of Deception in Religious Persuasion," *Religious Studies* 19, no. 4 (1983): 437–50.

[19]Augustine, *On Lying* 4.5; *Against Lying* 12.26.

[20]Arnold Isenberg, "Deontology and the Ethics of Lying," in *Aesthetics and Theory of Criticism: Selected Essays of Arnold Isenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 248.

[21]Igor Primoratz, "Lying and the 'Methods of Ethics,'" *International Studies in Philosophy* 16 (1984): 54n2.

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soul).[22] Utterances, such as simple commands or exclamations, do not seem to fit this condition. Moreover, silence and what we typically call "half-truths" are generally not categorized as lies.[23] Silence typically does not convey judgment about a proposition.[24] Granted, there are a few instances when silence can convey such (tacit consent, for example), but particularly in writing, it usually is a nonstatement, expressing nothing about what a person actually believes. Likewise, half-truths are more often characterized by their omissions than what is actually communicated. Omissions in and of themselves are not indicative of judgment; they are similar to silence in this regard.

Though a judgment must be expressed to qualify as a lie, it can be conveyed in a number of ways, both verbally and nonverbally. For the term "statement," Augustine sometimes uses the Latin word *enuntiatio* from which our English word "enunciation" is derived. This might suggest he restricts lying to verbal communication, whether spoken or written. But at other times, he uses *significatio*.[25] Admittedly, Augustine believes that the most predominant signs (*significatio*) used for conveying what is on one's mind are words.[26] However, he nowhere restricts signification to verbal communication. To the contrary, he explicitly includes nonverbal modes: "He lies, moreover, who holds one opinion in his mind who gives expression to another through words or any other outward manifestation [*significatio*]."[27] Thus, in addition to verbal communication, certain nonverbal signifiers (e.g., Morse code, sign language, and gestures) qualify as well.[28] As long as a person is making a statement—verbal or otherwise—it has the potential to be a lie.

Second, the term "false" in Augustine's definition does not refer to what is in fact false but what the liar perceives as such.[29] One can imagine a situation in which a person says a wrong statement fully believing it is true. Such a

[22]The only exception is that lying can also occur when the statement ostensibly reports something—certain facts or citations, for example. As will be addressed below, such a report is a lie if the statement is given duplicitously with the intent to deceive.

[23]A few scholars suggest that even silence, if intended to deceive, is lying. See Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Marriage, and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1985), 28, and Gini Graham Scott, *The Truth about Lying* (Lincoln, NE: ASJA Press, 2006), 4. If deceptive silence is considered lying, then certain forms of esoteric writing considered truthful in this article would be counted among the fraudulent. Silence to the general audience regarding certain truths is not necessarily deceptive in nature (i.e., Crosson's latent teaching). However, it certainly can be.

[24]For an alternative reading, see Marcia Colish, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence Revisited," *Augustinian Studies* 9 (1978): 15–24.

[25]See for instance *Against Lying* 12.26.

[26]Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.1–3.

[27]Augustine, *On Lying* 3.3. See also Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II 110.1.3.

[28]This is in contrast to Griffiths's reading of Augustine in which lying is restricted to verbal communication. See *Lying*, 33–34.

[29]Augustine, *On Lying* 3.3.

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person is better described as mistaken than lying. In other words, lying is a matter of being dishonest, not being wrong. If someone incorrectly believes that *a* is *b* and intentionally tells another person that *a* is not *b*, it is a false statement, in Augustine's view, even though what is said is factually true. Lying is not about the lack of correspondence between the statement and external reality but about the lack of correspondence between the statement and the liar's beliefs. A false statement is the incongruence between what the liar believes and what is communicated. "The heart of a liar," Augustine writes, "is said to be double, that is, two-fold in its thinking: one part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be true, yet does not so express it; the other part consisting of that knowledge which he knows or thinks to be false, yet expresses as true."[30] This double-heartedness has two components—withholding what one believes is true and revealing what one believes is false. Such duplicity is a necessary but insufficient condition of a lie.[31]

Finally, in this definition, lying requires the intent to deceive, that is to say, a liar must intend to cause a person to believe something false (or continue to believe something false).[32] Someone could make an untruthful statement simply by misspeaking. This act is more indicative of carelessness than lying. The intention to deceive is thus considered a necessary condition. It should be clear that the intent could be to deceive the addressee about the beliefs of the speaker just as much as it could be about the actual content of the statement.[33] In other words, lying is as much about wanting to convince

[30]Ibid.

[31]Some scholars question the validity of the falsehood condition. They argue that any statement, even a truthful one, if made with the intent to deceive, is a lie. See for example J. A. Barnes, *A Pack of Lies: Towards A Sociology of Lying* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11, and Donald Davidson, "Deception and Division," in *The Multiple Self*, ed. Jon Elster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 88.

[32]Griffiths does not consider the intent to deceive to be an essential part of Augustine's definition of a lie. See *Lying*, 27–29. Most Augustine scholars disagree, even though it is debated whether intentionality is merely an explanation of the term or a necessary part of it. For a debate on this issue, see Joseph Boyle, "The Absolute Prohibition of Lying and the Origins of the Casuistry of Mental Reservation: Augustinian Arguments and Thomistic Developments," *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 44, no. 1 (1999): 43–65, and Julius Dorszynski, *Catholic Teaching about the Morality of Falsehood* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1948).

[33]Though not explicitly found in Augustine, it is not inconsistent with his view and is a position generally agreed upon by scholars. See Roderick Chisholm and Thomas D. Feehan, "The Intent to Deceive," *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977): 152; James E. Mahon, "Two Definitions of Lying," *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22 (2008): 220; and Christopher O. Tollefsen, *Lying and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24.

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someone that the speaker believes something as it is about convincing the addressee to believe something. Augustine's discussion of jocose lies is informative here. Such "lies" are immediately dismissed from consideration as "real lies," even though the speaker is duplicitous. As Christopher Levenick notes: "a joke, by its nature, involves the joker signifying something other than what he believes to be the actual case."[34] Yet the intent to deceive is absent. Jokes "are accompanied by a very evident lack of intention to deceive," Augustine says, "even though the person be not speaking the truth."[35] In this and other similar cases, the speaker is not *affirming* the untruthful statement, and the hearer is well aware of this fact. The logic in Augustine's dismissal of jokes can be applied to other forms of communication, most notably for this article's purpose, fictional writing. When discussing this genre, he invokes an almost identical rationale to his analysis of joking—fictional writings contain many falsehoods but are told for the purpose of delight, not deception.[36] These two exceptions help illustrate that, for Augustine, the intent to deceive is a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition of a lie.

In sum, a statement is a lie if and only if it intentionally conveys something untruthful from the liar's perspective in order to deceive. Moreover, lying is distinct from both deception and dishonesty. Dishonesty is a broad category of behavior encompassing deception, lying, and perhaps also promise breaking and stealing. Lying is thus a subcategory of dishonesty. In addition, lying is always deceptive but deception is not always mendacious. This distinction will be clarified in the following section.

The Esoteric Choice

With this definition of a lie, we can now analyze the ethical dimensions of esoteric writing. To do this, we first need to identify the distinctive processes of this literary practice. There are three distinct yet related considerations that occur in the mind of potential esoteric authors: first, what we call the "esoteric choice"; then, the "exoteric choice"; and finally, the "choice of composition." We emphasize the author's decision making in writing, as opposed to the components of the literary form, in order to highlight the intent-to-deceive condition of a lie. As Melzer notes, "every topic, every argument, every word is a product of *choice*."[37] Having said that, we willingly admit that not everything written is intentional. There are instances when writers make mistakes or oversights, and these errors should not be considered

[34]Christopher Levenick, "Exceptis Igitur Iocis: Augustine on Lying, Joking, and Jesting," *Augustinian Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 304–5.

[35]Augustine, *On Lying* 2.2.

[36]Augustine, *Soliloquies* 2.9.15–18.

[37]Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines*, 294.

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lies. For the purpose of this article, however, it is assumed every detail is deliberate.

In one of Augustine's discussions regarding the Academics' use of esoteric writing, he offers a rather helpful analogy to illuminate these three considerations. Esoteric writing, he says, is like hiding a pure, unadulterated stream by surrounding it with dark and thorny brambles.[38] Authors possess something precious—important truths about a number of topics, especially those about the highest things. Augustine uses the imagery of a pure, unadulterated stream to symbolize these truths. Writers must consider whether to reveal this life-giving water, at least to the casual reader, based on the circumstances in which they find themselves. It is the decision to conceal those truths that we call the "esoteric choice."

These concealed truths are in the strict sense what is meant by the term "esoteric." The term can mean, as it often does in casual conversation, something abstruse or difficult to understand. But in a more technical sense, as it is used by Strauss and others, it means something difficult to comprehend because it is hidden or elusive. In other words, the former is called esoteric because the information is difficult to *grasp*; the latter is so because it is difficult to *find*. The esoteric, then, is meant for a specific audience. As a matter of fact, the term "esoteric" is derived from the Greek word *esōterikos*, which means "inner" or "internal," and typically is used to denote something known by or intended for an inner circle. This is in contrast to the exoteric (*exōterikos*), which is something known by or meant for those "outside" that circle.

Once authors decide to veil the esoteric, they must consider what to write in order to hide their true beliefs. This second consideration is what one might call the "exoteric choice." To return to our analogy, writers must decide on what "materials" to use in order to conceal the pure, unadulterated stream. In Augustine's version, it is concealed with dark and thorny brambles, but there is no reason it has to be this particular camouflage. A stream can be hidden numerous ways. A wooden fence or a rock wall, for instance, can just as easily serve the same purpose. And so it is in writing. Authors can choose from a number of literary genres and techniques to conceal their true beliefs, depending on the circumstances or the aim of the written work.

The third and final consideration is how to position the chosen "materials" so as to allow careful readers to discover the hidden truths. This is the "choice of composition." Esoteric authors not only conceal ideas from a more general audience but also reveal them to a select group. They attempt, as Augustine says, "to conceal their view from the unintelligent and to reveal it to the more penetrating."[39] The dark and thorny brambles of the exoteric are meant to keep out the casual passerby, but the perceptive traveler can see the water

[38]Augustine, "Letter to Hermogenianus (Letter 1)."
[39]Augustine, *Against the Academics* 2.10.24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051700016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

through the thicket. In this way, the materials function like a veil.[40] They conceal, but they do not make that which is veiled invisible. A groom can make out the contours of his bride's veiled face on their wedding day, just as a careful reader can identify something between the lines. Authors can use several literary devices, which will be discussed below, to accomplish this task.

These three distinct yet related considerations ultimately are part of one process—esoteric writing. Still, it is important to assess the ethical implications of each consideration in order to identify where potential mendacity might occur. In the remainder of this section, we analyze the esoteric choice and then turn in subsequent sections to the exoteric choice and the choice of composition.

The first consideration—concealing one's true beliefs (at least from the general readership)—does not meet all the necessary conditions of a lie. In the Augustinian view, a lie must be an intentionally deceptive and untruthful signification of what one believes. Even if we grant for argument's sake that a writer's choice to conceal information can at times intend to deceive, and even if we grant that concealment can at times signify something, the author is still not acting duplicitously by choosing to conceal. Thus, deception and lying are chiefly distinguished by the choice to make duplicitous statements. Statements of deception do not inherently entail lying.

Consider two ways in which people often hide information. Sometimes they simply remain silent. Augustine offers a helpful illustration of this in his first treatise on lying.[41] The bishop of Tagaste hid a man, most likely a Christian fleeing persecution. Aware of this fact, the emperor sent messengers to interrogate the bishop about the fugitive's location. The bishop refused to answer his inquisitors. They then proceeded to torment him to no avail. He remained silent concerning the whereabouts of the man. Assuming the bishop intended to deceive (which he did not)[42] and assuming he signified information (which he did not seem to do),[43] he was not duplicitous. Recall that, for Augustine, duplicity has two components: concealing knowledge thought to be true and expressing knowledge thought to be false. The bishop decided not to reveal certain information. This decision meets the first condition of duplicity—he concealed knowledge he knew was true—but it does not meet the second. He did not express information he knew

[40]We borrow this helpful analogy from Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 2–3.

[41]Augustine, *On Lying* 13.23.

[42]The bishop's silence is not deceptive because the interrogators already knew the truth—he was hiding a man. His silence did not cause them to believe to the contrary.

[43]No information was conveyed through his silence. Again, the interrogators knew he was hiding a man. They were only trying to learn where he was hiding him. The bishop's silence did not reveal anything in this regard. If, however, the interrogators asked whether the man was in a certain location, silence would have signified information, namely, that he was in fact there. See *On Lying* 13.24.

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was false. He did not, for example, try to mislead the interrogators by giving them a wrong location. He said nothing. Thus, he did not lie. To strengthen this conclusion, it must be noted that Augustine himself praises the bishop as one worthy of emulation, a commendation unthinkable if the theologian thought he lied.[44]

In addition to silence, people also tell half-truths to hide information. This method is more controversial than the former but still is not a lie in the Augustinian sense of the term. Consider another example, this time taken from Augustine's second treatise on the subject, *Against Lying*. Here, Abraham offered a rather economical answer to Abimelech, king of Gerar, when asked about his relationship to Sarah.[45] He only disclosed that she was his sister (half-sister in fact), but fearing for his life, did not reveal the fact that she was his wife. Again assuming he intended to deceive (which it appears he did)[46] and assuming he signified information (which he did),[47] he was not acting duplicitously and thus not lying. Abraham's claim that Sarah was his sister was truthful. He knew she was his sister and revealed as much. Withholding the fact that they were married was not untruthful. This withholding is similar to the silence of the bishop of Tagaste. Abraham's choice meets the first condition of duplicity, not expressing knowledge thought to be true, but not the second, expressing knowledge thought to be false. As a matter of fact, Augustine explicitly confirms this analysis: "he [Abraham] concealed something of the truth but did not say anything false in concealing the fact that she was his wife. … Hence, it is not a lie when truth is passed over in silence, but when falsehood is brought forth in speech."[48]

These examples demonstrate that the ethical dimensions of lying relate to both spoken and written statements. They illustrate the ethical significance of concealment, and if our understanding of Augustine's definition is correct, particularly that oral and written communication are *significatio*, the nature of the analysis should be the same. Nevertheless, it is worth illustrating this point with a written example, this time from Strauss's own interpretation. In his introduction to *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss is struck by the fact that al-Farabi never mentions, let alone discusses, the immortality of the soul throughout his comprehensive summary of Plato's philosophy, which

[44]In *On Lying* (13.23), Augustine writes of this man, "I consider as praiseworthy that man who was unwilling to tell a lie or to betray another man, and I hold that he understood the Scriptures better and fulfilled their commands more courageously" than one who lied or betrayed.

[45]Genesis 20:1–18.

[46]Abraham's silence about his marriage to Sarah deceived Abimelech in that it caused him to believe something false about her, namely, that she was not Abraham's wife.

[47]The information conveyed by Abraham's silence was that Sarah was not his wife.

[48]Augustine, *Against Lying* 10.23.

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even includes a synopsis of the most famous dialogue on the subject, the *Phaedo*.[49] Either this absence was an almost unforgivable oversight on the philosopher's part, or it was intentional. Thus, Strauss's al-Farabi concealed his true thoughts regarding the soul, namely, that he rejected its immortality. Such a choice was made in light of the fact that he would face ostracism, if not outright persecution, for diverging from the Islamic teaching of his culture if this dissent were disclosed.

This esoteric choice was not dishonest. As a matter of fact, in terms of our previous analysis, it appears closer to the silence of the bishop of Tagaste than the Abrahamic half-truth. Strauss's al-Farabi did not intend to deceive his readers. To be sure, he wanted to guarantee that casual readers were unaware of his heresy, and perhaps more than that, he wanted them to believe he agreed with the convention. Still, his silence was most likely not the cause, or the reason, they believed that he agreed with the doctrine. In such a religious culture, most readers would assume he accepted the convention, unless they had evidence to the contrary. Moreover, in his silence, al-Farabi did not act duplicitously, nor did he signify anything, certainly not anything untruthful.

After examining these various instances of concealment, the esoteric choice, that is, the decision to conceal one's ideas, does not meet the necessary conditions of a lie, and thus, if esoteric writing is ever mendacious, it is not due to this initial choice.[50] Moreover, this analysis suggests the ethical parallels between deception in written and in spoken statements. On both accounts, certain forms of nonduplicitous deception do not entail an ethical compromise from the Augustinian perspective.

The Exoteric Choice

Having argued that the esoteric choice is not mendacious, we now turn to the second consideration of esoteric writing, namely, the exoteric choice. To return to our analogy, after making the conscious decision to conceal their ideas, writers must consider what "materials" best hide those ideas. It is with this second consideration in mind that authors actually determine

[49]Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 13–15.

[50]Though concealing truths can be morally permissible, there are instances where one is obliged to reveal them. These are instances where someone has a "right" to a particular truth. In these situations, one is not permitted to deceive by concealing that truth. Many of these cases occur through professional obligations. For example, if a real estate agent is aware of a serious problem with a home, there are ethical standards within that profession requiring that the agent reveal the information. There might also be examples in political life. If a politician has information that could harm citizens or jeopardize the nation's security, there may be some moral obligation to reveal those facts.

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what to write. After all, writers cannot remain completely silent, unlike oral communication. They must write *something* even if they do not write everything. The possibilities here are endless. There are an infinite number of topics to discuss, and even if circumstances dictate the subject matter, authors can still choose from a number of different literary genres, as well as structure the text in numerous ways. Not to overstate the point, but every spoken and written word involves a choice. And it is for this reason that, generally speaking, the ethical determination of a particular form of esotericism is found in this consideration because here is where duplicity is most likely to occur.

As a matter of fact, the disagreement about the truthfulness of the esoteric writing is rooted in differing opinions over the ethical import of the second consideration, that is to say, what is written to the general audience. No scholar, as far as we know, if they pronounce moral judgment at all, locates the blame in the previous consideration. For Melzer, the ethical problem arises in the conveyance of "fictional doctrine" to the casual reader, not the concealment of esoteric truths. Similarly, for Strauss, it is expressing untruthful opinions, not hiding dangerous truths, that makes "noble lies." By contrast, Howse argues that "exoteric writing" should not be considered a lie because what is written, namely, the totalitarian propaganda that the author disingenuously confesses, should not be believed. Again, focusing on what we call the exoteric choice, both the Zuckerts and Drury argue that Strauss's form of esoteric writing is truthful, not because what he concealed is so, but because what he actually wrote is true, even if he did not "dot all the i's." Moreover, Crosson says latent teaching is not mendacious because what is taught to the general audience is true, just not as sophisticated or complex. And finally, Smith finds no mendacity, either in the concealment of certain truths or the expression of conventional opinion, even if it is false in the author's mind, since that expression itself does not lead its readers astray. Thus, in order to resolve the broader disagreement over the truthfulness of esoteric writing, the ethical import of this exoteric choice must be determined.

Depending on what is written, the second consideration can meet all the necessary conditions of a lie. Consider the most likely preferred method for conveying political philosophy: nonfictional writing. Within this genre, there are several specific types—historical narratives, biographies, speeches, essays, and treatises, for example. Works such as Aristotle's *Politics*, Cicero's *On the Commonwealth*, Machiavelli's *Prince*, and John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* immediately come to mind.[51] This genre is perhaps the most vulnerable to mendacity in that what is written on the surface is taken at face value by the average reader. Thus, authors can appear to affirm things they

[51]For clarity's sake, we are not identifying these as esoteric works but simply as works of nonfiction.

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believe are false. If a writer conceals his true position on a given subject and then expresses a different one, he is lying, in Augustinian terms. He is disingenuously conveying knowledge he believes is false (duplicity). This position is signified by written word (signification) and is intended to deceive, at least casual readers, into thinking the author believes differently than he does. Scholars such as Melzer and Strauss, who consider esoteric writing dishonest, rightly evaluate this particular form of its practice. For instance, on Strauss's reading, al-Farabi not only kept silent regarding his true beliefs but also wrote, in his own name, "more or less orthodox views" on the afterlife to which he did not subscribe in *The Virtuous Religious Community* and *The Political Governments*.[52] Such texts, if Strauss is correct, are mendacious.[53]

It is here that Howse and Smith present a challenge. Other scholars referred to in this article appear willing to admit this type of writing is mendacious. However, they suggest the opposite. Howse contends that "exoteric writing," similar in kind to al-Farabi's work, is not lying. To build his case, he invokes a necessary condition given by Kant, wherein a false statement is only a lie "when the author has indicated that she is communicating her own sincerely held beliefs."[54] He suggests that, in a regime where there is a real threat of persecution for dissenters, it may be unreasonable to assume that an author believes what is said publicly, particularly if it is orthodox. Nevertheless, there are few greater ways to indicate one is communicating one's true beliefs than the composition of nonfiction, particularly a philosophical treatise. It would seem strange to require authors to state explicitly in their preface, for example, that they will communicate their true beliefs in

[52]Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 13–14.

[53]Augustine addresses a similar case in *Against Lying*. Members of a Christian sect, known as the Priscillianists, publicly professed orthodox doctrine and openly practiced Catholic liturgy, all the while secretly believing and practicing otherwise. Their founder, Priscillian, was charged with a host of different sins, from professing heresy to practicing magic. This former bishop of Avila was tried before a tribunal, convicted, and executed, along with several of his followers. To avoid further persecution, Priscillianists began practicing their useful lie. Catholics wanted to identify and admonish members of this sect but found it difficult to do so. To overcome this challenge, some Catholics suggested using the Priscillian tactic against them, which is to say, publicly professing to be other than they were. It is likely other Catholics were already doing this. Consentius, one such enquirer, wrote Augustine in hopes he would address the issue. If Christians employed lying in leading people to the faith, Augustine wrote to Consentius, the truth of that faith and the trustworthiness of its messengers would be subject to doubt.

[54]Smith, "Reading between the Lines," 63. See Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (London: Methuen, 1930), 228. It is worth noting that this particular definition of a lie is not Kant's more mature definition or his final position on lying. In his final word on the subject, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropic Concerns," Kant has no such stipulation and defines a lie as simply "an intentionally untruthful declaration to another man," which is similar to Augustine's definition.

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what follows, but even if they did, this may be just as easily doubted on Howse's logic. Thus, it seems the very act of writing, particularly a nonfictional work, gives sufficient indication that the author is conveying his true beliefs, and if the author is doing so duplicitously, it is a lie regardless of whether or not we should believe it.[55]

Smith argues that the propagation of a society's "cherished illusions," similar to those "orthodox views" stated by al-Farabi, is not lying because it does not lead the readers away from "the truth or a correct apprehension of reality."[56] In any society, there are certain accepted opinions that everyone believes without reflection, and Smith states that the philosopher does not owe it to those who blindly accept those illusions to guide them toward the truth,[57] particularly when there is a clear and present danger in doing so. More importantly, for Smith, the philosopher's propagation of those illusions is not the *cause* of their delusion. The casual readers are already deluded. The philosopher is simply leaving them chained to the bottom of the cave. This reading places the weight of a work's ethical significance on the condition of deception, which is to say, on whether casual readers are led to falsehood. However, this is a misappropriation of the condition. In considering the author's intent to deceive, it can apply not only to the content of the statement (on which Smith focuses) but to the beliefs of the speaker as well. In this instance, the philosopher intends to deceive the addressees about his beliefs, which meets the third condition of a lie. Moreover, intent is not

[55]One possible exception is when one is forced against his will to sign or compose a letter assenting to a particular orthodoxy.

[56]Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss*, 163–64. Smith quotes Harry Frankfurt's definition of a liar; see *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 52–61.

[57]On this view, the propagation does not inhibit the search for the highest truths because the average reader is not searching. They believe conventional wisdom. And the few philosophically minded people, who are searching, are not fooled by the noble lies. As Strauss notes, a philosopher "would not deceive himself about the fact that such opinions are merely 'likely tales,' or 'noble lies,' or 'probable opinions' and would leave it to his philosophic readers to disentangle the truth" from the conventions (*Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 35). This approach was necessary, it is argued, because of a tension between philosophy and society. But Christianity radically changed this tension, in Augustine's view. As Kries notes, it replaced the "steep, rough, upward path out of the cave" with a "smooth and wide Roman highway" ("Augustine as Defender and Critic," 247). Now, those who were unwilling (or unable) to search for the highest truths had an easier path than philosophy. They had faith. And as a result, these truths could be "believed [even] if they could not grasp them with the mind" (Augustine, *Of True Religion* 3.3). Moreover, for Augustine, this new reality permitted, nay required, a more inclusive audience. Since there was an obligation to guide everyone toward the truth, noble lies were no longer needed. In fact, the propagation of society's "cherished illusions" would undercut such education.

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only about wanting readers to believe something false but also about wanting them to *continue to believe* something false.

Though, as we have suggested, an esoteric work, particularly through the exoteric choice, can meet all the necessary conditions of a lie, it does not necessarily do so. In esoteric writing, authors conceal something, but this is not duplicitous in and of itself. What is of central ethical significance is the truthfulness of what is expressed, and thus, even if we assume these texts meet the other two conditions of a lie (i.e., signification and intent to deceive), they are not mendacious, presuming the exoteric is truthful. Much like Abraham who concealed his marriage but revealed his kinship, authors can decide to convey things they believe are true, all the while concealing other, perhaps more dangerous (or deeper) truths.[58] An author can, without ethical compromise, discuss an entirely different, less threatening subject, or he can focus on the same topic but write about different aspects of that topic deemed less controversial. Neither of these paths is mendacious although they may be deceptive. This type of exoteric choice is made in Strauss's "pedagogical reserve," Crosson's latent teaching, and the Christian "Economy."

There is an important exception to this conclusion: authors can convey ideas they believe are false if they make it clear through their mode of writing that such is the case. This is typically done through the genre of fiction. Though perhaps not as common as its counterpart, important works in political philosophy are written in this genre. Plato's *Republic*, Dante's *Inferno*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, all generally fall into this category.[59] And though there are several genres within fiction—parables, allegories, poems, comedies, and satires, for instance—they all possess at least one important trait, namely, the reader understands the work is not true (at least on its surface). It is clear that More does not believe the new island of Utopia exists, any more than Swift believes a man named Lemuel Gulliver traveled to Lilliput. If a writer decides to conceal dangerous truths with exoteric content that he believes is false, he is not lying *if* the work is fiction.[60] Granted, the author is duplicitous. He is concealing ideas he knows are

[58]Augustine commends this truthful form: "if some truths must be kept hidden from him because of the fact that he is not yet of our faith and a partaker of our Sacrament, he should not for that reason be told what is false" (*Against Lying* 6.15; cf. *On Lying* 10.17). Strauss suggests that at least al-Farabi thought such an option was not viable. The philosopher must appear to accept, at least provisionally, the accepted opinions of his society (*Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 17).

[59]Again, for clarity's sake, we are not identifying these as esoteric works but simply as works of fiction.

[60]Besides works of a singular genre, there are numerous texts that mix fiction and nonfiction. These move back and forth between the different genres. As long as authors make clear to the casual reader that they are transitioning to another genre, the distinctions established above hold true for each respective genre.

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true and expressing concepts he knows are false. He is also signifying these concepts via the written word. Yet it fails to meet the third condition (the intent to deceive) because the author took the appropriate measures to ensure the work is properly interpreted. In other words, readers clearly understand that the author does not believe the exoteric. These measures separate fictional writing from Howse's "exoteric writing." Fiction by definition is not believed by its author, and readers are well aware of this fact. It is less clear that a nonfictional work, especially a philosophical treatise, is not believed by its author, even in times of persecution.

To be sure, there are instances in which fiction is misinterpreted, not simply by casual readers, but by scholars. In instances such as this, philosophers cannot be characterized as liars nor considered culpable for the misinterpretation, unless one is ready to say the author was a poor writer who did not provide the adequate indicators to signify his literary genre. The blame (if one even wants to use this word) is on the readers for being mistaken. With that said, the author must take proper measures to help ensure the work is interpreted properly.

The Choice of Composition

Apart from exceptions such as fictional writing, where authors make it clear by their mode of writing that their work is false, esoteric writing is truthful only if the exoteric is also truthful. Once the exoteric choice is made, authors turn to the third and final consideration—how to compose the work in such a way as to conceal truths from the general readership and reveal them to a more discerning audience. To return to our analogy, once the materials are chosen, a decision must be made regarding how best to position them to achieve both ends. The materials can be positioned at some distance from the stream, or they can be placed right over the water. In other words, writers must decide whether to separate the exoteric from the esoteric or combine them into one multilayered work.

Authors can choose to compose two sets of written works, one meant for public consumption and the other for a select group. The former works contain the exoteric material; the latter, the esoteric. As an example, most scholars say Aristotle employed this tactic based in part on the first use of the word "exoteric" by the Greek rhetorician Lucian. In his comedic dialogue, *Sale of Creeds*, Zeus put several philosophers on the slave market. One such philosopher was Aristotle, whom Hermes described as "double," that is to say, viewed from the outside he is one thing and from the inside (*esōterikos*) another.[61] Scholars believe this is an allusion to the idea that Aristotle divided his corpus into two categories: popular works addressed to a general audience and philosophical works addressed to his students at the

[61]*Lucian*, vol. 2, trans. A. M. Harmon (London: Heinemann, 1919), 503.

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Lyceum.[62] The choice to separate the two, much like its multilayered alternative considered below, has its advantages and disadvantages. Complete separation, for instance, better guarantees that general readers will remain oblivious to any dangerous truths an author wishes to convey to his select audience. Such readers only have access to the exoteric works, which do not contain these truths. Only a select few are privy to the esoteric texts that reveal them. Yet authors run the risk that these esoteric texts might be discovered. Moreover, writers lose what amounts to an important advantage with multilayered works, namely, the ability to entice inquisitive readers not yet part of the inner circle.

By contrast, authors can also write in such a way as to hide their true teaching with an exoteric veil. The two different, though not necessarily contradictory, teachings are combined into one multilayered work. This option requires certain rhetorical devices that are less necessary when the esoteric and exoteric are separated. These devices help ensure that casual readers see only the exoteric and the more discerning readers discover the esoteric along the way. Strauss and others identify several such devices. One of these (namely, the use of silence) we have already mentioned. But another device Strauss says philosophers employed is intentionally contradicting themselves within a single work (or between works, which was used when the esoteric and exoteric were separate). For example, he says, various writers stated conventional beliefs early in their texts, only to express their opposite several pages later.[63] Because they separated the contradiction, it most likely went unnoticed by casual readers, who would assume they believed conventional wisdom. The careful reader, however, would be struck by the change. Besides contradictions, Strauss also argues that some philosophers intentionally altered or misquoted sources. They omitted words or even phrases, for instance, in an attempt to reflect the accepted opinion. The general readership would overlook this alteration or consider it a mistake on their part. Careful readers would recognize the "error" and reflect on its implications. Finally, Strauss suggests that some philosophers used unlikely characters (e.g., devils, madmen, and drunkards) to convey their dangerous truths or stated a particular character was their mouthpiece, when in fact that character was not.[64]

In some ways, these more specific considerations concerning the "art of writing" are less ethically significant than the broader exoteric choice. If an author is intentionally duplicitous in his exoteric teaching he is lying, irrespective of how these untruthful "materials" are positioned. Or, to put it

[62]Despite this division, some argue that Aristotle's esoteric texts—those we still possess—are themselves esoteric. Strauss, for example, makes this point in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (111).

[63]In *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (70–71), Strauss offers five other ways philosophers have intentionally contradicted themselves.

[64]Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 36.

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somewhat differently, it is of little importance if the exoteric and esoteric are separate or integrated into one volume, if the exoteric is a lie. Nonetheless, it is possible, though doubtful, that an author would conceal certain truths, express truthful exoteric statements, and use mendacious devices in their work. Still, there are important implications in the positioning of the author's materials to consider. For example, it seems the choice to separate the esoteric from the exoteric is less deceptive than integrating them. Most readers, we assume, take a book at face value, with the exception of certain types of fiction. If a writer does not integrate the esoteric into the exoteric, he can be rather straightforward. By contrast, if they are integrated, he must deceive the average reader into thinking the work is straightforward when in fact it is not. This inference is not to say multilayered works are necessarily lies, but they do seem deceptive in a way that separated works do not. Moreover, because the separated works are straightforward, there is less of a need to employ rhetorical devices to indicate to perceptive readers that there is something beneath the surface of the text.

Some of these devices are at least deceptive to casual readers, if not outright lies. For example, an intentional contradiction within a work (or between works, for that matter) is mendacious. Whether the original position is truthful or not, an author is lying when he intentionally contradicts that claim in another passage. What is more, intentionally altering sources can be dishonest, depending on the nature of the change. If an author simply leaves out part of a statement, he is not necessarily lying, so long as what is read is still truthful. This change is similar to the Abrahamic half-truth. However, if the *meaning* of the text is changed by the alteration, then the writer is both deceiving and lying. He is concealing the actual meaning of the source and expressing something he knows is false. As for characters (both historical and fictional) in philosophical dialogues, the work's ethical import depends on their use. Some characters explicitly convey the author's true beliefs; others present positions to the contrary. The latter characters generally help imitate, as best as one can, an actual dialogue. Any falsehoods stated by these interlocutors are not lies because they are not intended to mislead. Readers understand that those views are mentioned for didactic purposes. If a writer does not indicate which character(s) represents his position, there is little chance for mendacity because readers are unaware of the author's view. Having said that, we assume most readers believe the central character or protagonist is the author's mouthpiece. The use of an unlikely character to express one's true beliefs is not mendacious, so long as the author does not give readers indication to the contrary. However, disingenuously expressing to readers that a character expresses the truth is duplicitous simply by conveying to readers false information. He knows the character is not representative of his beliefs, yet says otherwise.

Though perhaps generally not as determinative as the second consideration, the composition of an esoteric work still contains several components of ethical import. Much like the previous consideration, if an author

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intentionally conveys what is untruthful, it is lying, but if the author conveys the truth, then it is not a mendacious mode of communication. The choice of composition, or the art of writing, reveals the important nuance between lies and deception while communicating certain political ideas. From the Augustinian perspective, deception is ethically permissible insofar as the three conditions of a lie are not met. Thus, the ethics of esoteric writing should not to be classified indiscriminately; deception and mendacity are related yet distinct methods in the art of writing.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempt to resolve a debate in the scholarly literature regarding the ethical dimensions of esoteric writing by offering a systematic analysis of the literary form. We argue that there are truthful and mendacious forms, the determination of which ultimately depends on what is actually expressed on the surface of the text. This stipulation applies not only to the content of the text but to any rhetorical devices used to convey to the diligent reader the presence of an esoteric teaching. If we are correct in our analysis, scholars who categorize all forms of esoteric writing as lies make too sweeping a judgment, as do those who fail to acknowledge any possible mendacity. By contrast, scholars who suggest that there can be both truthful and untruthful forms are correct in their assessment.

Furthermore, given the ethical parallels between written and spoken statements, we have argued for the import of this framework in evaluating lies and concealment in the actions of public figures as well as esoteric authors. Given the regular presence of conflicting priorities, classified information, and issues of security, public figures consistently make choices analogous to those stipulated above. Our delineation of dishonesty, deception, and lies illustrates a nuanced yet important point in evaluating and participating in political discourse. From an Augustinian perspective, the use of deception is not inherently immoral unless their statements meet all three conditions of a lie—deliberate statement, duplicity, and intent to deceive—or they are bound by another ethical principle to communicate more openly. As our analysis of the scholarship on esoteric writing indicates, categorical classifications are rarely appropriate when evaluating mendacity and deception.

To be clear, this analysis should not be taken as a tacit endorsement of deception in philosophy or political discourse. In addition to his moral prohibitions of lying, Augustine argued that esotericism and deception may undercut the philosopher's (and, to a lesser extent, the politician's) ultimate goal of pursuing and sharing truth. Many of Augustine's philosophical predecessors believed the task of the philosopher was to reveal the highest truths to the few under their tutelage. To everyone else, they propagated the conventional wisdom of their societies. This approach was deemed necessary because of an apparent tension between philosophy and society. Philosophers employed

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051700016X Published online by Cambridge University Press

esoteric writing—revealing the truth to a few and leaving the rest to conventional wisdom—because of this dangerous tension.

But Augustine argued that this tension was due to the inability of philosophers to persuade the nonphilosophic. "These men were not fit to change the minds of their fellow-citizens," he wrote.[65] But Christianity was. Now those who were unwilling (or unable) to search for the highest truths had an easier path to what philosophy sought. They had faith. And as a result, these truths could be "believed [even] if they could not grasp them with the mind."[66] Thus, as mentioned above, Augustine's analysis of mendacity and deception in political thought also suggests an implicit relation between the philosopher or public figure and truth. For Augustine, this relation is just as important in our interpretation of written and political statements as the prohibitions of mendacity.

[65]Augustine, *Of True Religion* 2.2.
[66]Ibid., 3.3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051700016X Published online by Cambridge University Press