

TESTING THE TRUTH OF THE NOBLE LIE

by *Thomas L. Gilbert*

By the Grace of Guile: The Role of Deception in Natural History and Human Affairs. By LOYAL D. RUE. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994. 306 pages, \$27.50.

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In Loyal Rue's words, "The ultimate purpose of this book is . . . to oppose a monstrous truth with a Noble Lie." The monstrous truth is nihilism, which Rue accepts as true—and also evil—without question. The book aims at justifying the claims that: (1) deception (that is, guile) is an unavoidable and essential aspect of life and culture and, therefore, morally acceptable (chapters 1 through 4); and (2) in the form of a Noble Lie, it can be effective for countering nihilism (chapter 5).

In chapter 1, the role of deceit in the history of Western intellectual and moral traditions is traced from the ancient period of the Old Testament through the contemporary period. The focus is on "the directive influence of . . . fear of deception" and attitudes toward the dangers of being deceived rather than on "the evils of deceiving." Rue speaks of fear of being deceived as a "cultural bias." The origin of the bias is explained by the comment, "on reflection it becomes obvious that the cultural bias against acts of deceiving is derived from the more fundamental belief that one is harmed by being deceived. It is our profound fear of being deceived that gives moral substance to prohibitions against deceiving" (p. 6).

The history is interesting and informative but does not support the claim that fear of the harmful consequences of deception is unjustified, namely, that fear of being deceived is a "bias." Part of the problem is that, in trying to make the arguments very general, Rue

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fails to make some important distinctions. One significant omission (in chapter 1 and also in later chapters) is not taking into account the distinction between use of deception in competition (where certain forms of deception are essential for survival) and in cooperation (where trust, which can be destroyed by deception, is of primary importance).

Rue does not define "deception" in chapter 1, where the term is used in a cultural context. In chapter 2, he shifts from a cultural context that spans a time period of a few thousand years to a biological context that spans a time period of a few billion years. The stated intent is to examine the suspected "influence of deeper, biological principles." In order to do so, deception must be defined in a way that is applicable to both biology and culture.

Deception is defined by the statement: "*Deception occurs when a discrepancy between appearance and reality can be attributed in part to the causal influence of another organism. That is, a deceiver is an organism (A) whose agency contributes by design to the ignorance or delusion of another organism (B). Self-deception may be said to occur where A and B are the same organism*" (p. 88). Appearance is understood to be the sum total of information encoded by a living organism (incarnate information), which includes inherited (genetic) information, stored information (retrievable memory), and immediate information (perceptions). Reality is regarded as the sum total of potential information on offer to any and all perceivers from the world around. Minimizing the discrepancy between appearance and reality is described as a problem of "adequation" of appearance to reality. The discussion of this problem brings in the concept of information encoded in "neural schemata," understood to be "assemblages of nerve cells that function as strategic units both to encode information and to direct behavior" (p. 93).

The underlying idea is that deception is some kind of interference with and/or distortion of the flow of "information" from the information available in the external environment of the individual (reality) to the incarnate information that controls the actions of an individual organism. Optical illusions are discussed as illustrations of distortions in the flow of information and examples of a logic of "design defeating design." This discussion leads to the general definition, "*Deception occurs when the designs embedded in the morphology and/or behavior of one organism can defeat the designs embedded in the perceptual structures and/or strategies of another organism*" (p. 104). Rue then introduces a typology of deceptive strategies that uses three category pairs (offensive/defensive, evasive/pervasive, and morphology/behavior) and uses this typology to classify deceptive strategies at a molecular level

and for different life forms: plants, insects, aquatic life, amphibians and reptiles, birds, and mammals.

The attempt to be very general is interesting and laudable, but it raises serious questions regarding the relation between “deception” in a general biological context and deception in the cultural context of countering nihilism. In order to make the connection, Rue must make some questionable assumptions. One is that

Human beings should remind themselves on a fairly regular basis that they are capable of doing nothing of an essential nature that is not done with commensurate skill by single-celled organisms. In their various interactions with the environment, all species have developed strategies to find food, to avoid predators, and to reproduce. These are the fundamentals, beyond which any differences between species of plants and animals are mere embellishments of structure and process. Nor can it be said that humans have any greater knowledge about the world around than one-celled organisms. This sounds patently absurd, but on one level it is literally true. That is, one-celled organisms are equipped to respond to every *type* of stimulus from the world around that humans are. (p. 84)

By “type” Rue means electromagnetic, mechanical, chemical, thermal, and electrical stimuli, without regard to the patterns in (spatio-temporal distributions of) these stimuli.

By excluding all stimuli patterns for which the discriminatory capabilities of organisms increase as one progresses from one-celled life-forms to humans and by implying that the ability to discriminate between and interpret these patterns does not enable any greater knowledge, Rue has been able to develop a classification scheme that does not make a distinction between one-celled life-forms and humans. This leads to a categorical scheme that puts all life-forms together into a single category. I doubt that any analysis based on this categorization can “reveal the influence of deeper, biological principles” or provide a credible basis for justifying the morality of deceit in a cultural context. My main criticism of the arguments developed in chapters 1 through 4 is that Rue ignores distinctions that are crucial for his argument, in some cases using questionable presuppositions and logic to force different phenomena and structures into a single category.

At the end of chapter 2, Rue quotes Dobzhansky, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution” and expands this dictum to include culture (“the entire range of human behavior”). He then introduces the presupposition that the ultimate goal of all life and culture is survival and reproduction with the statement: “Implicit in this evolutionary view is the insight that all biological adaptations (among which I include the full range of

cultural innovations) stand ultimately in the service of survival and reproduction." This presupposition is critical for Rue's thesis. If it could be shown that morality could be derived from the presupposition (a possibility that Rue does not exclude and which cannot, today, be credibly excluded simply by reference to the so-called naturalist fallacy), or if it could be shown that survival and reproduction are only necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for human life and that there are other "goals," not yet known to us, that guide the evolutionary trajectory, then the nihilist thesis would be refuted. Rue's presupposition regarding ultimate goals is consistent with his presupposition regarding the truth of nihilism, but leaves questions that are crucial for his thesis unanswered.

Rue introduces *personal wholeness* and *social coherence* as penultimate goals with the statements, "But it should be added that this ultimate goal can be further clarified in the case of human behavior by specifying two penultimate goals. That is, humans pursue the ultimate goal of survival in the process of achieving the intermediate goals of personal wholeness and social coherence." He defines these concepts as, "By *personal wholeness* I mean a sense of individual well being, integrity, equilibrium, homeostasis, mental health, self-fulfillment, and the like. And by *social coherence* I mean an acceptable level of collective order and stability, a sense of security, solidarity, predictability and communion of purpose" (p. 127). The roles of deception for personal wholeness and social cohesion are discussed in chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

In chapter 3 Rue starts from the view that "*a person is a set of motivational processes that are integrated into a functional unity*" and introduces three categories of motivational systems (cognitive [curiosity], hedonic [pleasure/pain], and self-esteem). He then states, as a general principle, "Personal wholeness is achieved to the extent that an individual is successful in satisfying the needs instigated by robust motivational systems" and identifies intrapsychic motivational conflicts (cognitive/cognitive, hedonic/hedonic, hedonic/cognitive, self-esteem/cognitive, self-esteem/hedonic, and self-esteem/self-esteem conflicts) as the obstacles to achieving personal wholeness. He goes on to develop a rather elaborate conjecture—an organizing scheme—for the role of deception in the process of achieving personal wholeness. A typology of deception, similar to that introduced in chapter 2 but based on three different category pairs (self-deception/other-deception, evasive-means/pervasive-means, and constructive-ends/deconstructive-ends) is used. Having made the point that some loss of "adequation to reality" is "very often conducive to the achievement of personal wholeness," Rue ends chapter 3 by pointing

out the psychological limits of deception and its potential for damaging effects on personal wholeness.

Although many illustrative examples of the various types of deception and the way in which they affect the motivational factors involved in personal wholeness are given, the evidence for the validity of the conjecture proposed for understanding the role of deception is anecdotal rather than systematic. It is clear (from the references cited) that Rue has drawn extensively on current work in psychology for many of the parts of his organizing scheme; however, the entire scheme must be regarded as an interesting conjecture that will have to be tested systematically before it can be accepted as an accurate representation of the dynamical processes involved in achieving personal wholeness and the role of deception in these processes.

One must admire the bold way in which Rue crosses the disciplinary boundary from philosophy into psychology in order to address philosophical problems. Even if his conjectural organizing scheme does not hold up under the critique of the psychology community and systematic empirical testing, it is a useful contribution to the interdisciplinary dialogue that is needed for addressing problems at the frontier where philosophy, science, and theology overlap.

The structure of chapter 4 parallels that of chapter 3. Starting with a discussion of the nature of society, defined as "*an organized group of individuals having a means of cooperation sufficient to establish a confluence of interests among its members,*" Rue focuses on social domains with overlaps of self-interest that can lead to conflict and proposes a correspondence between the three motivational categories introduced in chapter 3 and three categories for social domains (knowledge [cosmology], resources [economy], and values [morality]). He then develops a conjectural organizing scheme for understanding the role of deception in social coherence. The need to integrate motivational systems into a functional unity for personal wholeness becomes a need for a society to integrate its cosmology, economy, and morality into a functional unity for social coherence. Myth, defined as "a narrative integration of cosmology, economy, and morality," is identified as the means by which this integration is accomplished. These ideas are illustrated in a discussion of the four principal types of social organization: kinship bands, tribal alliances, chiefdoms, and states.

The second section of chapter 4 summarizes the central role of myth for social cohesion and examines the problem of the lack of an overarching, credible, and compelling myth that can provide cohesion today by countering the effects of what the author calls "*social entropy*" or "*mythic senescence*" which lead to a condition of "amythia," the subject of an earlier book by the author. The author then

identifies three strategies for dealing with this malady: *repristination* (reinstating the faltering myth of a culture in its traditional form); *reinterpretation* (rendering a myth consistent with new and troublesome meanings); and *mythopoesis* (imaginative storytelling). In pointing out the inadequacies of all three strategies, it is not clear from the discussion which strategy the author believes will be most effective. My comments on chapter 3 regarding the need for critique by the relevant professional communities (and admiration for his boldness in crossing disciplinary boundaries) apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the foregoing sociological/anthropological conjectures.

In the third section of chapter 4, Rue summarizes the arguments in chapters 1 through 4 with the statement, "Emerging from the arguments of these chapters is the view that a certain amount of deception and self-deception is essential to the achievement of personal and social well-being, and thus to human survival" (p. 258) and points out that this is contrary to "the view that has dominated the intellectual and moral traditions of Western culture, which have taught that deception is *always* inimical to human excellence" (my emphasis). He states that "*adaptation to the world around is not to be equated with the adequation of appearance to reality*" and emphasizes this point with a Venn diagram of two sets, one labeled as "truth" and the other as "adaptivity," with a large joint area labeled "adaptive truths" and much smaller disjoint areas labeled "maladaptive truths" and "adaptive falsehoods" (p. 259).

Rue ends his arguments for justifying the use of guile with the following summation: "So where does this leave us? It leaves us in a position of sharing and defending a general preference for the truth, as best we can know it. And yet we are liberated from the view that truth is an end in itself. It is a means only, and as a means it is ennobled only by the ends it serves. Which is to say that truth is a moral option, an option we must be prepared to forswear in favor of Noble Lies" (p. 260).

The arguments and discussion in chapters 3 and 4 are insightful and provide new and useful perspectives on the role of deception in individual and group dynamics. They do not, however, provide a convincing rationale for the use of deception in addressing the problem of amythia. This is, in part, because (as noted earlier in connection with deception in historical and biological contexts) important distinctions are not made: in particular, a distinction between the necessary role of deception in competition and the destructive role of deception in cooperation.

The last chapter, "The Saving Grace of Noble Lies," starts with an excellent discussion of the "Age of Kulturkampf," where

kulturkampf is defined as a chronic condition of ideological struggle (“culture warfare”) within human social groups. The author traces *kulturkampf* from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the current ideological struggles identified by the terms “postmodernism” and “anti-foundationalism.” He characterizes postmodernism by provocative statements such as: “There are no absolute truths and no objective values”; “Foundational philosophy, as a genre, is defunct. God is dead, Zeus is toppled”; “There can be . . . no final cosmology, no final economy, and no final morality”; “It rejects all descriptions of the way things really are as contingent pretenders to objective truth”; and “If we need a vocabulary for social cooperation then let it be one that abstains from universal definitions and theories. Personal wholeness is one thing, social coherence is another; they are ‘equally valid, yet forever incommensurable’ ” (pp. 272–73).

Rue states his own position clearly at this point. “Descriptions of the way things really are *really are* contingent caricatures, whether these descriptions be theoretical or narrative. There is no final vocabulary for adequating appearance to reality, nor can there be one. All truths and all values are optional. The universe has no meaning, only interpretations do. And no interpretation is privileged by a transcendent point of reference. In fact, I am so persuaded by the postmodern critique of foundationalism that I am compelled to embrace its nihilism in a way that postmodernists are generally reluctant to do. Here, I’ll even say it: *Nihilism is true*” (p. 277). These are honest statements of personal belief rather than conclusions from the arguments given. They color the entire content and organization of the book.

In the last section of chapter 5, the author develops the concept of a “Federation of Meaning” as a framework for countering the threat of nihilism. It is a statement of Rue’s beliefs regarding how one might reconcile divisive and life-threatening differences in cosmology, economics, and morality. The author’s Western, liberal mindset shows through clearly. But this last section is largely disconnected from the rest of the book. The issues of whether or not nihilism is true and whether or not it can be countered by deception in the form of a Noble Lie are largely irrelevant for the question of the effectiveness of the suggestions made for use of a “federation of meaning” as a strategy for addressing contemporary problems of lack of personal wholeness and lack of social coherence.

My major criticism, which concerns the main thesis regarding the need for and effectiveness of a Noble Lie, is that, in order for a myth to be effective in spite of the powerful antagonistic forces generated by competing interests that threaten social cohesion, those who hold to a myth must believe, deeply and strongly, that it is “true” in some

sense. A myth is unlikely to be effective if members of the community for whom it provides social cohesion regard it as a Noble Lie. One can claim that those who believe in the truth of some particular myth are deluding themselves (or being deluded by others), but such claims are not only arrogant, they are unjustified without a much deeper examination of what we mean when we say that a myth is "true" or "false" (or some mixture of truth and falsity).

The author has, for good reason, chosen not to address the truth question (this would require a separate book or books). His statements regarding truth and value and the truth of the nihilist thesis must be respected as statements of strong personal belief to be accepted as "givens" on which the book is based. The book contains much useful information and interesting ideas and perspectives. But I question the significance of a scholarly contribution (other than its value in raising provocative and interesting questions) in which the central question for the main thesis—in this case the truth question—is not examined or explored in any depth, let alone the depth that would be needed to resolve the issues at stake. I suggest that the central problem is misapplication of truth criteria used for scientific concepts to moral and religious concepts. This and other problems concerning the meaning of the words "true" and "truth" have not been resolved to the point of consensus in spite of having been a focus of attention of philosophers and theologians for several millennia. However, we have some clues for how some of these problems might be addressed today: for example, in the different criteria introduced by Imre Lakatos for assessing the validity of the "hard core" of a scientific research program and the validity of the "protective belt" of hypotheses generated by a hard core. Nancey Murphy has applied some of these ideas to the problem of validating religious concepts.

In summary, the merit of this book, which presents a bold and provocative thesis, is in providing a new perspective and new insights on longstanding philosophical issues concerning ends, means, morality, and truth. I can recommend it as a valuable addition to personal and public libraries and for use in the classroom. It contains valuable information, and reflection on the author's reasoned arguments can lead to new insights on issues of major societal, as well as philosophical and theological, importance. It is well written and a pleasure to read, with a large fund of useful information put together in an interesting way, but some of the key arguments are flawed. If I were asked to summarize the foregoing review in a sentence, my response would be: "It is an interesting book, well worth reading, but in the end the author fails to accomplish his stated purpose of opposing the monstrous truth of nihilism with a Noble Lie."