Politics and Morality

SUE MENDUS
Politics and Morality
THEMES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Shaun Riordan, The New Diplomacy
Contents

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 1

1 Integrity 14

2 Political Integrity 37

3 Integrity and Utilitarianism 57

4 Integrity and Pluralism 78

5 Integrity and Social Roles 96

Notes 123

References 125

Index 128
For the Class of 2008
With thanks
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For over thirty years it has been my privilege to teach at the University of York. In that time I have given hundreds of lectures to thousands of students. I have examined dozens of doctoral theses, supervised scores of dissertations and marked millions of essays. I have never been bored, and the thanks for that go in equal measure to my students and my colleagues. I thank them all most warmly.

In the academic year 2007–8 I ran a course called ‘Political Integrity’ for final-year undergraduate students at York and I circulated draft chapters of this book for discussion each week. The discussions gave me a much clearer idea of what I wanted to say and the students on the course made the business of writing and revising a real pleasure. This book is for all my students – past, present, and future – but it is especially for the Class of 2008. It is for Heidi, Jenny, Bianca, Carly, Rachel, Clare, Ashwath, Joe, Daniel, Nick, Chris, Davide, Sam (and all the others). It is for Tom, who came late and brought malt whisky. They were terrific students and it was a joy to teach them.

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Susan Mendus
University of York
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Let me begin, then, with a piece of conventional wisdom to the effect that politicians are a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us (it is the wisdom of the rest of us).

Walzer, 1974, p. 64

Are politicians morally worse than the rest of us? That is the central question of this book and I begin with a case which seems to suggest an affirmative answer – the case of the disgraced British politician Jonathan Aitken. Aitken’s political career began in 1974 when he was elected Member of Parliament for Thanet East. In 1994, he was appointed Chief Secretary to the Treasury, and in April 1995 the *Guardian* newspaper alleged that, during his time as Minister of State for Defence Procurement, Aitken had violated Ministerial rules by accepting substantial payments from Saudi businessmen. At the same time, Granada television screened a documentary which alleged, amongst other things, that Aitken had pimped for Saudi friends at a health farm. Indignant at these allegations, Aitken resigned his ministerial post in order to fight a libel action against the *Guardian* and Granada Television, and, on resigning, he made a notorious speech which concluded with the following words: ‘If it falls to me to start a fight
to cut out the cancer of bent and twisted journalism in our country with the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of British fair play, so be it. I am ready for the fight. The fight against falsehood and those who peddle it’ (Guardian, 11 April 1995). Aitken’s resounding, and public, defence of his own integrity almost succeeded, but in the end it became clear that an Arab businessman had indeed paid for Aitken and his wife to stay in the Paris Ritz, and that Aitken had lied when he said that his wife had paid the bill. The exposure of this lie led to the exposure of other lies and in 1999 Aitken was found guilty of perjury and perverting the course of justice. He was gaol ed for eighteen months.

Jonathan Aitken is only one of a number of Conservative politicians who, in the late 1980s and 1990s, were implicated in the rise of ‘sleaze’ and the concomitant demise of John Major’s Conservative Government. Other notorious figures of the period were Lord (Jeffrey) Archer, Alan Clark, and Neil Hamilton, all of whom were found guilty of deceit and one of whom (Archer) also spent time in prison. Indeed, the Labour victory in the 1997 General Election can be traced, in no small part, to the fact that the Conservative Government had become closely identified with lying and duplicity.

However, it does not follow from this that politicians are worse than the rest of us, and one reason is that there are different kinds of lying and different varieties of duplicity. Aitken lied in order to gain advantage for himself and, in pursuit of that end, he was willing to lie not only to his political adversaries, but also to his wife and his colleagues. Indeed, it was even alleged that he planned to persuade his daughter to lie under oath in order to obtain an acquittal for himself. By contrast, other prominent figures of the period lied, not for self-serving reasons, but in an attempt to secure what they saw as morally important political
outcomes. For example, after the October 1993 IRA bombing on the Shankill Road, in which ten people, including the bomber, were killed, the then Prime Minister, John Major, told Parliament that face-to-face talks with the IRA would ‘turn my stomach’, but it later emerged that, for three years prior to 1993, there had been a channel of communication between the British Government and the IRA, and that from as early as February 1993 the two sides had been in regular contact. Against this background, Major’s statement was, to put it mildly, misleading, but it is arguable that had he lived up (or down) to his public statement of disgust there would have been no IRA ceasefire and no Good Friday Agreement. John Major, it has been said, misled the British public, but he did so for reasons of public good, not for reasons of personal advantage (The Observer, 28 November 1993).

As described, the case of John Major is very different from the case of Jonathan Aitken. It is true that both deceived the public (and indeed Parliament), but Aitken did so to secure his own ends, whereas Major did so to secure outcomes which were politically important and morally desirable. So, whether politicians are indeed morally worse than the rest of us will depend not only on whether they lie, or deceive, or mislead, but also on the reasons for which they lie, or deceive, or mislead.

To see the significance of this, consider Book III of Republic, in which Plato discusses the selection and education of the rulers (the guardians). He argues that those who are entrusted with the responsibility of ruling must love their country more than anything else and must see their own interests as intimately connected to the interests of the country they serve. He says that ‘we must choose from among our guardians those who appear to us on observation to be most likely to devote their lives to doing what they judge to be in the interest of the community,
and who are never prepared to act against it’ (412d–e). However, he goes on to note that, even under these conditions, the best interests of the community will only be secured if the rulers are willing to lie and, in particular, to deceive the populace into thinking that they (the guardians) were born to rule. He writes:

We shall tell our citizens the following tale: You are all of you, in this community, brothers, but when god fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be rulers (which is why their prestige is greatest); he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and other workers. (415aff)

Of course, the lie which is told in Plato’s Republic is a ‘noble lie’ – it is a lie that is necessary in order to further the best interests of the state, not in order to secure personal gain or advancement for the rulers themselves. It is, we might say, the kind of lie that John Major told in the examples given above, not the kind of lie that Jonathan Aitken told.

However, if Plato believed that, even in an ideal world, the noble ends of politics would require a willingness to lie, Aristotle took the matter further and reflected on the fact that, in the real – non-ideal – world, politicians might lie in order to secure private gain. As Arlene Saxonhouse puts it, ‘The Athenians were not innocent about the honey-tasting public official. Relying on a lottery system to fill virtually all of their public offices, the Athenian democrats recognized that not all citizens filling those offices would be motivated by a disinterested love of country’ (Saxonhouse, 2004, p. 29).

It is clear, then, that questions about the relationship between politics and morality have a long history. They arise both in ideal circumstances and in the circumstances