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SECRETS: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation. By Sissela Bok. Pantheon Books, New York; 1982; 332 pp.

Secret rites, secret codes, secret crimes, secret trials, secret loves, secret treasures, secret plans, secret deals, secret societies, secrets of the confessional, secrets of state, trade secrets, professional secrets, military secrets. Even this brief list shows us how pervasive and important the practice of secrecy is in our personal and social lives. As a topic for ethical reflection, it is then bound to be both important and elusive. It is in fact elusive in a double way. For what is secret is meant to be placed beyond the reach of our investigation and our analysis. At the same time a comprehensive view of secrecy as a moral problem is hard to attain; for it cuts across the customary divisions in applied ethics, since it concerns private individuals, professionals in many different fields, and institutions both public and private. Because of the elusiveness and complexity of the subject, Sissela Bok's Secrets is particularly welcome and valuable. Bok has been teaching applied ethics in Harvard's professional schools for years and has already published an important book on Lying (1978). Her work shows a breadth of sympathy and a willingness to use a diversity of sources; this is both a welcome change from the often parochial concerns and professional jargon of academic moralists and an absolute necessity for covering so extensive a topic. The result is a book which exhibits many of the virtues of good philosophical discourse and which preserves the sense of dealing with the dilemmas and the aspirations of persons who are, like ourselves, reflective and ignorant, pragmatic and vulnerable.

Bok adopts a broadly phenomenological approach to secrecy, that is, she explores the various patterns of secrecy in our lives and in other societies and the different attitudes that we have toward secrecy before she offers moral principles and judgments. This is particularly important, since as she observes in the beginning of her book, there is no standing negative presumption against secrecy as there is against lying. She writes: "Whereas every lie stands in need of justification, all secrets do not. Secrecy may accompany the most innocent as well as the most lethal acts; it is needed for human survival, yet it enhances every form of abuse." (p. xv) The study of secrecy, she argues, brings us to some of the deepest values and deepest conflicts of our lives; for these are "rooted in the most basic experience of what it is to live as one human being among others, needing both to hide and to share, both to explore and to beware of the unknown." (p. 281) On the other hand, secrecy is not confined to a few experiences of exceptional depth and intimacy. Bok traces its many manifestations in personal relations, secret societies, the religious and nonreligious practice of confession, in business and scientific competition, in government and the military, in social science research, investigative journalism, and undercover police work. On most of these topics she has perceptive and judicious things to say. She is attentive to the diverse interests that are affected by secrecy and to the different perspectives and values of the actors in the dilėmmas she describes.

Although she does not have an explicit treatment of the necessity and limits of secrecy in intelligence work, most of the second half of the book, beginning with her treatment of secrets of state in chapter 12, is directly or

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indirectly relevant to the work of the intelligence community. The value of these chapters does not lie so much in their resolution of the issues, which is often unsatisfactory because of a certain systematic bias on the subject of power, but in their statement of the values at stake and in the example they set of tracing many aspects of a complex theme.

Bok is deeply impressed by the connections between secrecy and power. Both the capacity to keep things secret and the capacity to penetrate the secrets of others are forms of power. Secrecy is no more eliminable from human relationships than power is. Bok explicitly rejects the view that secrecy is to be regarded as inherently deceptive or as concealing primarily what is "discreditable." (p. 14) But she is very impressed by the connections between secrecy and power:

When power is joined to secrecy, therefore, and when the practices are of long duration, the danger of spread and abuse and deterioration increases. The power may be in the hands of individuals, either because of the authority they are known to wield or the unscrupulous means they are prepared to adopt. Or it may be collective power. (p. 110)

The general tendency in Bok's argument is to take a notably more favorable view of secrecy which protects the privacy and identity of individuals and a notably more suspicious view of secrecy when it is the instrument of power. So it is not surprising that her preferred way of resolving many problems in professional and institutional life is to diminish the scope of secrecy. So her treatment of whistle blowing and leaks reaches the following conclusion:

The alarms of whistleblowers would be unnecessary were it not for the many threats to the public interest shielded by practices of secrecy in such domains as law, medicine, commerce, industry, science, and government.... The most important task is to reduce the various practices of collective secrecy in order to permit the normal channels of public inquiry to take the place of whistleblowing and of leaking. (p. 228)

Bok does not deny that there may be appropriate and justifiable forms of official and corporate secrecy. She has a subtle and interesting treatment of Jeremy Bentham's dictum that "secrecy, being an instrument of conspiracy, ought never to be the system of a regular government." (p. 171) She does affirm the need for personnel information and for private information gathered about individuals for tax and other government purposes to be kept secret. It is characteristic of her approach that the legitimation of government secrecy is put in terms of protecting individuals. Thus she concludes that "though one may argue about its limits, government secrecy is at times not only legitimate but also indispensable; the call for total publicity would ride roughshod over many just claims to secrecy." (p. 174) She recognizes some of the limitations in the Wilsonian program of open government and open negotiations, but her preference is very strongly for openness in government. For, as she observes, "secret negotiations like all practices of secrecy in government go against democratic principles." (p. 187)

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The end result, then, of Bok's reflections on secrecy and power is a strong emphasis on the individual's privacy and on secrecy as a necessary element in the identity and autonomy of human beings (p. 282) and a strong presumption against government secrecy. These positions are a not surprising conclusion from the liberal individualism which carries most of the burden of the argument in Bok's work and which influences so much of our legal culture.

The problem that Bok fails to address is the necessity of secrecy as a standard operating feature in large sections of a government that is engaged in a serious political struggle with a formidable adversary which functions with a much higher level of secrecy and internal control and which is intent, so far as we can tell, on eliminating openness in political processes generally. In this situation, there have to be certain restrictions on openness in the long run and also for the sake of protecting personal secrecy (which does not fare well in communist regimes). This is parallel to the justifiable restriction of liberty for the sake of liberty which Harvard's most distinguished political philosopher, John Rawls, accepted in his major work, A *Theory of Justice* (1971). The values of openness, of access to information for participants in democratic political processes and of personal autonomy which are central to Bok's approach have been and are of fundamental importance for our political community. They are not to be relegated to some "peaceable kingdom" of the imaginary future. Rather, they have to be maintained and cherished.

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Restrictions on openness in the name of security do need justification, as Bok clearly sees; but the character of the present world conflict and the responsibility of the US Government (which is considerably more open than most regimes in human history) to protect its citizens and its allies requires the institutionalization and maintenance of certain forms of secrecy. Some of these forms of secrecy are, so far as an outsider can tell, necessary if the work of intelligence is to be done well. So our attitude toward them cannot be one of grudging acceptance but should rather be willing compliance. Maintaining patterns of secrecy for the sake of preserving an open society will always have elements of paradox. It requires a trust on the part of the public, which surrenders its claim to certain types of information and imposes a responsibility on those who have access to the information and control of the discipline of secrecy. Both the trust and the responsibility are alien to the minds of orthodox civil libertarians, but they have to serve as an integral part of our moral response as a political community to the threats which we face in the world. If that responsibility is not well exercised and if secrecy is used to protect abuses of power or to conceal incompetence rather than for the protection of a free and open society, then trust will not be forthcoming.

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