When Benjamin Disraeli received unsolicited publications, his standard response was: "Dear Sir: I thank you for sending me a copy of your book, which I shall waste no time in reading."

Why do we prefer to mislead rather than lie? The two are not separated by the intent to deceive. Their consequences are equivalent. The only difference seems to be that misleading requires more ingenuity!

Immanuel Kant’s answer, as we learn from the first of these two collections of essays, *The Philosophy of Deception*, is that the misled participate in the error. They leap to a conclusion from what was said. The greedy customer who recklessly makes the
inference encouraged by the advertiser bears some of the responsibility for his error. Both are to blame.

Some deceivers are to be praised rather than blamed. Kant’s example is the police work of someone who packs his luggage to mislead a suspected thief into believing that he is leaving town.

Yet Kant forbids all lies. He pictures assertion as a promise to reveal what you believe – as an invitation to trust. Lying is betrayal. The liar undertakes an obligation to open his mind, to share his opinion. He then desecrates this rite of communion by poisoning his listener with a falsehood. Although misleading a person has the same result, the process does not involve promise breaking and treachery.

Perjury is lying under oath. Misleading is not enough. This principle was highlighted during President Clinton’s impeachment. His defense cites Bronston v. United States (1973). Samuel Bronston was a movie producer charged with perjury on the basis of testimony concerning his company’s bankruptcy hearing:

Lawyer: Do you have any bank accounts in Swiss banks, Mr Bronston?

Bronston: No, Sir.

Lawyer: Have you ever?

Bronston: The company had an account there for about six months, in Zurich.

Contrary to what Bronston intimated, he did once have a personal bank account in Switzerland. The prosecutor conceded that Bronston’s second answer was true. However, Bronston’s testimony was intended to trick the court into believing he never had a Swiss
bank account. The Supreme Court unanimously ruled that Bronston’s deceptive answer
did not constitute perjury. Thwarting misleading testimony is the job of the cross-
examiner rather than the jailer.

In normal conversation, listeners have little opportunity to probe speakers with
follow-up questions. This limits the extent to which the United States Supreme Court
vindicates Immanuel Kant.

Kant’s preferred jurisdiction is the Kingdom of Ends -- a hypothetical realm of
rational beings who recognize that they ought not to treat each other merely as means.
Kant’s preferred role for ethics is legislative rather than judicial. Each of us is to imagine
choosing laws that all rational beings would follow. According to Kant, one of these laws
would be ‘Never lie’.

What if a murderer is at your door demanding the whereabouts of someone who is
hiding in your house? In the last essay of his career, “On the Supposed Right to Lie from
Benevolent Motives”, Kant forbids lying even to save the life of an innocent man.

Most Kantians try to save the innocent man. For instance, they suggest less
specific rules such as ‘Lie only when there is a more pressing obligation’. In response to
the objection that this is too vague, scholars attempt to list obligations in order of
precedence. To be plausible, there must be further qualifications and exceptions. Too
messy? Defenders of intricate ethics note that the legal system shows that people can
follow complicated rules. Why must the rules of morality be as simple as the Ten
Commandments? Why can’t the instruction manual for morality be longer than that for
your cell phone? Many of these scholars hint that Kant’s strictness is a symptom of his
advanced age. The elderly become censorious, impatient, and rigid. An ethicist can wind up less limber than the system he developed during his prime.

In their contributions to the Philosophy of Deception, James Mahon and David Sussman challenge this dismissive tradition. Mahon is one of the few philosophers who accepts Kant’s absolute prohibition against lying. To Mahon, Kant is just deducing a simple but inconvenient truth from the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."

Mahon argues that the premises are present in Kant’s earlier publications and that Kant rehearsed the inference in his “Lectures on Ethics”.

Did Kant ever lie? I know of only one report: “In his last years his conscience troubled him, because at one time, in order to decline a disagreeable invitation, he pretended to be already invited for the time designated.” This, however, appeared in an issue of the Neue Preussische Provinzialblätter in 1848 and Kant died way back in 1804. Moreover, Kant had detractors who hoped to dent his sterling reputation for truth telling. Perhaps this story about Kant lying is itself a lie!

Sussman complements Mahon’s unblinking deduction with historical breadth. He defends Kant’s essay as a nuanced rejoinder to a veiled attack by the political theorist Benjamin Constant. All in all, the Mahon-Sussman tag-team left me wondering whether aging improves some aspects of intellectual performance. Just as prisoners “age out” of crimes, thinkers may “age out” of fallacies. Someone in his prime has the motive and mental agility to engage in backpedaling and sophistry. At 73, Kant had neither the motive nor the energy to wiggle out of unpleasant commitments.
Failure to face the consequences of one’s principles is a form of lying to yourself. One might expect leniency from Kant because the self-liar has secured consent from his victim.

Think again! Kant excoriates self-lying as the most perverted form of lying.

But is it even possible? In *Being and Nothingness* Jean-Paul Sartre exhales an impossibility proof: To deceive, one must not believe the deception; but to be deceived, one must believe the deception. If the deceiver is identical to the deceived, then he both believes the deception and does not believe the deception. Contradiction.

Sartre’s *reductio ad absurdum* of self-deception haunts many of the essays in both of the collections under review. For self-deception is used to “explain” almost any mystery about any mismatch between belief and evidence. Why do compulsive liars assert obvious falsehoods? Because they have deluded themselves and so believe their own lie. Why do residents of totalitarian states believe preposterous propaganda? Because prudence dictates that they yield to the deception.

For psychologists conducting experiments on lying, the enigma is why people cannot detect lying under laboratory conditions. Even those with a professional interest in detecting lies perform little better than chance. Yet there are plenty of clues to exploit. Performance improves just by switching the question from `Is the person in the video lying?’ to `Does the person in the video look comfortable?’ or `Is this person thinking?’. Or just by turning the volume off!

Poor lie detection is even more mysterious from the perspective of evolutionary psychology. We evolved from hunter-gatherers who needed to detect cheaters. Gullible husbands “fathered” children who did not carry their genes for gullibility.
So how could the descendents of shrewd hunter-gatherers be so poor at separating sincere assertions from lies? A popular explanation is that we want to be deceived. Consider the young lady who dined one evening with William Gladstone and with Benjamin Disraeli the next. Asked for her impressions, she replied, "When I left the dining room after sitting next to Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest man in England. But after sitting next to Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest woman in England." To enjoy flattery, let your guard down.

Amélie Rorty emphasizes this collusion in “User-Friendly Self-Deception”. Instead of viewing self-deception in the individualistic way presupposed by Jean Paul Sartre, Rorty portrays self-deception as social. The only difference with other-deception is that the self-deceiver takes more initiative, becoming the most significant cause of her own deception.

But Disraeli’s dining companion did not entirely drop her guard. She merely lowered it enough to enjoy the flattery (in the way we impair normal perception to enjoy optical illusions and the cinema). Mother Nature will not tolerate really believing you are the cleverest woman in England.

A wife may find it more pleasant to believe her husband’s professions of fidelity. But her genes do not care about her comfort. All Mother Nature thinks about is grandchildren.

Anyone who believes that self-deception is in our reproductive interest also faces the logically prior objection that self-deception is self-contradictory. To overcome this conceptual obstacle, Al Mele heads in the opposite direction from Amelie Rorty. He denies that self-deception is like other-deception. Instead, it is a form of biased thinking.
Critics of this idea wonder how self-deception would then differ from stupidity or wishful thinking or a healthy tendency to distract ourselves from matters that do not reward attention.

Mele tacks and weaves to avoid beaching self-deception on the same shores that are littered with the remains of round squares and perpetual motion machines. His intricate navigation does not build confidence in the explanatory power of self-deception. One cannot solve a mystery by invoking something that is even more incomprehensible.

Expurgating `self-deception' would leave room for more helpful terminology. Harry Frankfurt is ready to fill the void with `bullshit' (the subject of his best-seller On Bullshit -- which is excerpted in The Philosophy of Deception). According to Frankfurt, the liar says something he believes to be false and so “is guided by the authority of the truth”. In contrast, the bullshitter is an anarchist. He says whatever will promote the image he wishes to project. Whereas the liar says X with the intention of deceiving his audience into believing X, the bullshitter says X with the intention of deceiving the audience about his personal attributes. Bullshitting is a form of personal misrepresentation that “falls short of lying”.

When accused of vulgarity, Mel Brooks replied “Bullshit!” This sounds like the liar paradox. If `This is bullshit’ is true, then it is bullshit and so is false. But if `This is bullshit’ is false, then it is not bullshit and so is true.

With the nose of a connoisseur, Frankfurt observes that bullshit accumulates wherever there is an incentive to talk beyond one’s knowledge. Consider essay tests. Most teachers give partial credit for writing almost anything. By the end of exam hour, the students have served up stacks of bullshit.
Tom Carson is the only professor to have been nourished by this cuisine. In “Lying, Deception, and Related Concepts” he points out that students prefer to write down truths because this will raise their grades. So Frankfurt is too sweeping when he characterizes the bullshitter as being indifferent to the truth. Like everyone else, the bullshitter cares about the truth. Like everyone else, he also cares about many things that compete with truth telling. The bullshitter, c’est moi.

Carson goes on to demonstrate that lying is compatible with bullshitting. A chairwoman might protect her atheistic colleague from a religious dean by attesting to her colleague’s life-long piety, his regular attendance at church, and so forth. She heaps it on, perhaps even relishing the bullshitter-bullshittee role reversal.

Carson advances an intricate definition of lying. His larger goal is to systematize many concepts that are in same neighborhood as lying: spin, half-truths, withholding information, keeping someone in the dark, and so forth.

Clancy Martin’s Philosophy of Deception achieves diversity by including a mix of analytic philosophers and continental philosophers, plus a couple of non-philosophers – most notably, the top psychologist in the field of lie detection, Paul Ekman. Ekman wrestles with the problem of reconciling his incredible lie detection results with our evolutionary heritage. The man has more ideas than a barrel of monkeys.

Much more interdisciplinary variety is found in Brooke Harrington’s Deception: From Ancient Empires to Internet Dating. The most unifying aspect of Harrington’s lush though weedy anthology is the word ‘paltering’. This denizen of the sixteenth century is awoken in an essay of the same name by the lawyer Frederick Schauer and the political scientist Richard Zeckhauser. Palters are “the category of statements in which the speaker
intends for the listener to have a misimpression but without that misimpression being a literal or exact falsehood”. It covers the vast sub-lying zone of “fudging, twisting, shading, bending, stretching, slanting, exaggerating, distorting, whitewashing, and selective reporting”.

`Palter’ spreads through the subsequent essays of Harrington’s interdisciplinary anthology encompassing biology, psychology, photography, internet communication, anthropology, sociology, health care, business ethics, military history, and the humanities. Phew!

One might think Harrington’s eclectic survey cannot include any physicists. Atoms in the void have no beliefs or intention. There is no room for deception in the purely physical realm. Recall Richard Feynman’s reminder to NASA administrators after the Challenger space shuttle disaster: "Nature cannot be fooled".

However, the foreword of Deception is written by Murray Gell-Mann. He was resident as a Distinguished Fellow at the Santa Fe Institute where the papers in this anthology were presented. Yet even the gravitas of Gell-Mann is insufficient to pull together ideas that are dispersed at depths ranging from superficial, literary blather to deep-sea applications of game theory.

Conscious of this lack of integration, the authors lash themselves together with ‘palter’. But this is only the verbal unity that arises from interdisciplinary overextension. Instead of sticking with the definition, they treat ‘paltering’ as synonymous with ‘misleading’.

This irresolution is for the best. ‘Mislead’ has the enormous advantage of being grounded in ordinary usage.
Not all of the authors embrace the presupposition of paltering -- that there is a significant distinction between lying and misleading. Two of the authors are psychologists specializing in lie detection. This is where the money is – at least since September 11, 2001.

All of those in the orbit of Paul Ekman define lying as the deliberate presentation of information that a person hopes will mislead others. To get a feeling for how capacious this makes lying, watch an episode of the television series “Lie to Me” (for which Ekman serves as inspiration and a consultant). Tim Roth stars as Dr. Cal Lightman, a genius psychologist who has discovered how to read “micro-expressions”. These are facial expressions of universal emotions (anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise) that occur too fast for detection – by normal, untrained people. When these involuntary flashes of emotion conflict with voluntary expressions, Cal Lightman pounces, accusing even a silent subordinate of lying to his face.

According to Ekman’s definition, a picture can be a lie. No doubt, pictures can be misleading. In “Digital Doctoring” Hany Farid richly illustrates how optical enhancement has always played a role in photography. Computers magnify this interpretative element. Where does optical enhancement end and doctoring begin? Farid hopes to answer partly with measures of the degree of manipulation. Some of this builds on the practice of presenting the “original” photograph jointly with its enhancement.

The cartoonist James Thurber observes, “A drawing is always dragged down to the level of its caption.” The caption tells us how to see the picture. Is it fact or fiction? History or prediction? Beginning or end? By answering these questions, the caption may dragoon the picture into a lie. But the picture itself cannot lie.
Any science of lying should be mindful of a phrase that Mark Twain (perhaps mis-) attributed to Disraeli: "Lies, damned lies, and statistics". If misleading gets counted as lying, then we will get inflated statistics about the frequency of lying. The theory will steamroll over subtle distinctions between candor and honesty, tact and politeness, reticence and stonewalling. The applications will be to imaginary problems.

True, numbers do not lie. But they may mislead.

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