Bald-Faced Lies!
Lying Without the Intent to Deceive

By

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Abstract: Surprisingly, the fact that the speaker is lying is sometimes common knowledge between everyone involved (the addressee, the general audience, bystanders, etc.). Strangely, we condemn these bald-faced lies more severely than disguised lies. The wrongness of lying springs from the intent to deceive — just the feature missing in the case of bald-faced lies. These puzzling lies arise systematically when assertions are forced. Intellectual duress helps to explain another type of non-deceptive false assertion: lying to yourself. In the end, I conclude that the apparent intensity of our disapproval of non-deceptive lies is a rhetorical illusion.

“Everything [President Saddam Hussein] did in the past was good and everything he will do in the future is good” (Seierstad, 2003, p. 30). “How can you be so sure about that?” Asne Seierstad asks her Iraqi minder. With a glare Takhlef answers “I know it as a result of my belief in the party and his leadership.” Asne Seierstad does not press Takhlef. She does not want to join the many reporters expelled from Iraq. Instead of voicing her disgust at the overwhelming number of Saddam Hussein portraits, she makes flattering remarks about the President’s appearance. Asne Seierstad knows Takhlef is not stupid. She privately wonders:

What sort of game is this? How long will it continue? How much longer must I praise Saddam’s shining hair? How often will Takhlef boast about the victories of the revolution and how wonderful everything would be in Iraq but for the sanctions? He knows he is lying, he knows I am lying, he knows that I know that he knows that I am lying. I keep my mouth shut. To report my questions and attitudes is one of Takhlef’s duties. (Seierstad, 2003, p. 30)

Takhlef’s superior, Uday al-Taiz at the Information Ministry, is not stupid. Nor is Uday’s pseudo-subordinate, the intelligence officer Kadim, whose job is to keep an eye on Uday. Everybody realizes that Takhlef’s
description of Saddam Hussein’s performance is a lie. Everybody knows Takhlef is lying and everybody knows everyone knows it.

If lying requires an intention to deceive, then common knowledge that Takhlef is lying is impossible. Yet this common knowledge of Takhlef’s lie actually took place in the weeks preceding the 2003 Iraq war. That was not the first time. Bald-faced lies are commonplace throughout human history.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines ‘bald-faced lie’ as an undisguised lie. If lying requires an intention to deceive, then lies must be disguised. Undisguised lies would be like anonymous celebrities.

Thus the first mystery about bald-faced lies is semantic: Why isn’t ‘bald-faced lie’ a contradiction in terms? Why, instead, is the bald-faced lie the most obvious kind of lie?

The second mystery is moral: Why are people outraged by bald-faced lies? Why do they condemn bald-faced lies more stridently than disguised lies?

The utilitarian explanation of why lying is wrong is that deception has bad consequences. But bald-faced lies are not deceptive. Deontological explanations of why lying is bad turn on the *intent* to deceive. Immanuel Kant notes that the liar cannot will the maxim ‘Lie when it is in your interest’ to be a universal law. The practice of assertion would break down. But bald-faced lies do not fool anyone. They are no more a threat to truth telling than sarcastic remarks. Another deontological explanation is that lying involves a betrayal of trust. The liar invites the hearer to take his word for it. But the bald-faced liar has no hope of such treachery. He realizes that his hearer is not going to believe the falsehood.

### Pretending to assert

Takhlef is not merely pretending to assert that Saddam’s leadership is perfect. He wants to be on the record. He defends the proposition by words and deeds.

Takhlef persistently offers evidence of President Saddam’s excellent leadership. Would Asne like to see the collection of gifts that appreciative statesmen have presented to the President? Would Asne like to visit the Mother of all Battles mosque? The mosque commemorates the President’s victory in the first gulf war and contains a Koran written with Saddam’s blood (twenty-eight liters donated over the course of two years). What about the Ark of the Clenched Fists?

Asne Seierstad agrees to Takhlef’s final suggestion; a peace demonstration by Baghdad’s artists. The actors in the march express the same sentiments about Saddam Hussein as Takhlef. This is not a make-believe demonstration.

Asne Seierstad asks a marcher what would happen if someone refused to participate. “Nothing, this is a free country.” Seierstad does not regard
this as a make-believe assertion (like an utterance from an actor playing the part of a demonstrator). Seierstad regards it as a lie.

**Escalating absurdity**

After the war starts, Asne Seierstad sneaks into a civilian hospital. She is surprised to see a ward with wounded soldiers. This suggests that Iraqi military hospitals are already overcrowded.

> – How may soldiers have you admitted today? I ask a doctor.
> – There are no soldiers here, the doctor says.
> – But they are wearing uniforms?
> – I see no uniforms, he says, and pushes me out. – You must go now, do you hear? (Seierstad, 2003, p. 262)

The proverb “Lies have no legs” alludes to their lack of support from reality. Lies tend to collapse without the assistance of secondary lies. These secondary lies are also legless and so often must themselves be propped up with another round of lies. Lying is mentally taxing because you cannot depend on reality to be your memory bank.

But the doctor’s secondary lie, “I see no uniforms”, is effortless. He is not bothering to provide a credible reply to the reporter’s objection. Indeed, the doctor prefers that his secondary lie be implausible to the reporter. He wants her to quickly infer that a frank answer would be dangerous.

Once when the pianist Anton Rubinstein was practicing, the telephone rang inconveniently. His servant François picked up the phone and reported to the female caller that the maestro was not home. She objected “But I hear him playing”. “You are mistaken, Madame” insisted François “I’m dusting the piano keys” (Fadiman, 1985, p. 481).

François loyally sustains the pretext that the maestro is not home. However, he is not being deceptive because he does not intend the caller to be taken in by such a preposterous lie.

The bald-faced liar often wants there to be common knowledge that he is lying. So he will “support” his lie with an even more flagrant secondary lie. One of the marks of a bald-faced lie is that the speaker allows (and sometimes even welcomes) the increase of absurdity.

**Replacing the intent to deceive**

There are philosophers in the natural law tradition who deny that lying requires intent to deceive. They draw inspiration from Aristotle who says “Falsehood is base in its own right and deserves blame” (*Nichomachean...*)
Ethics, Bk. IV, 1127a28-30). Thomas Aquinas condemned lies as a perversion of the practice of assertion: “Words by their nature being signs of thought, it is contrary to their nature and out of order for anyone to convey in words something other than what he thinks” (Summa Theologiae 2a2ae, 110, 3).

Specific counterexamples to ‘Lying requires the intent to deceive’ were generated inadvertently in Gricean commentary on the relationship between meaning, assertion, and common knowledge. For instance, James Cargile (1970, p. 154) describes a chicken thief who is finally caught by his father-in-law – to their mutual surprise and embarrassment. The son-in-law “explains” the two dead chickens in his hands at 5 AM by asserting that he was checking in his father-in-law’s chicken coop and must have scared off the thief. The father-in-law knows this is not so, knows his son-in-law knows he knows, and so on. But for the sake of family unity, the father-in-law acquiesces to the lame story.

Tom Carson (2006, p. 298) defines a lie as a falsehood that the speaker insincerely warrants to be true. He avoids commitment to ‘Lying requires the intention to deceive’. One of his counterexamples to this widely endorsed “requirement” is a witness who lies in court even though it is common knowledge that he is lying. Another of Carson’s counterexamples is a student who knows that the dean will punish him only if he confesses. The student stands his ground and denies he cheated – even though he knows everyone knows he cheated.

Carson’s counterexamples show that standard definitions of lying are too narrow. However, Carson’s definition does not relieve the narrowness. The concept of warrant is not broad enough to explain how we can lie in the face of common knowledge. One can warrant p only if p might be the case. When the falsehood of p is common knowledge, no party to the common knowledge can warrant p because p is epistemically impossible.

Carson does make remarks that suggest a broader conception of warrant. Following J. L. Austin’s analogy between knowing and promising, Carson says that the warrantor guarantees the truth of p. But this conception of warrant is too broad. Consider a witness who says “Rocco shot the Mafia boss but I give you my word that Rocco did not shoot him”. This is not even a lie. Nor can the witness make it a lie by meeting obligations incurred by saying “Rocco did not shoot him”.

If the assertion of p entails a promise not to lie about p (Ross, 1930, p. 21), then the assertor should not be able to abstain from this implicit promise. But some men are too proud to promise. Consider President Saddam Hussein who is asked by his spokesman to swear that he has no nerve gas. The President may refuse to swear on the grounds that he, as supreme ruler of Iraq, owes nothing to anyone: “There is no nerve gas and this remark in no way constitutes a promise about anything to anyone.” Saddam Hussein’s refusal might shame his subordinate into
concluding that the President would never deign to lie to an underling. Hussein might have predicted this reaction and used it to lie all the more effectively.

Assertion does not entail an invitation to agree with the speaker. A captured American spy could tell Saddam Hussein “President, there is a large force of American soldiers hidden along the Turkish border but I am not inviting you to agree with me; I hope you disagree and are blindsided by those soldiers”.

A speaker can assert p without authorizing the hearer to assume p. When Jeremy Bentham asserted that “ipsedixitism” (the appeal to authority) is fallacious, he did not want his reader to take this judgment on Bentham’s authority.

**Narrow plausibility**

My substitute for the intent to deceive is a distinction between narrow and wide plausibility. Narrow plausibility, like apriority, is a restricted epistemic notion. All assertions must at least have narrow plausibility because we need to figure out what the speaker means. What would it be like for the assertor to be speaking from knowledge? Once we have the meaning of the assertion in the foreground, we can test it against our background knowledge and against future evidence.

To qualify as an assertion, a lie must have narrow plausibility. Thus, someone who only had access to the assertion might believe it. This is the grain of truth behind ‘Lying requires the intention to deceive’. Bald-faced lies show that assertions do not need to meet a requirement of wide plausibility, that is, credibility relative to one’s total evidence.

The notion of narrow plausibility underlies the debating games Aristotle sets out to codify in the *Topics*. One adopts a point of view and then parries challenges. The defender loses if the interrogator can force the defender to contradict himself (Sorensen, 2003, pp. 204–206).

Participants in debating games need only pretend to assert. But the game is training for advocacy. Spokesmen do make assertions. An attorney does not merely repeat what his client believes. The lawyer uses his legal knowledge to develop his client’s position – often making inferences that surprise his client. When the lawyer does not believe the conclusions, he is lying. However, we believers in competitive trials do not blame lawyers for this kind of lying. The lawyers on each side are supposed to make the best case they can.

The constitutive rule for assertion is to assert only what you know (Williamson, 1996). Constitutive rules are practice-defining norms rather than necessary conditions. They can be overridden by other norms. However, constitutive norms cannot be cancelled. A suspect cannot tell the
police ‘I do not believe I am being framed but I tell you I am being framed’. Generic norms can be cancelled. The suspect can tell the police ‘I realize that you will never believe me but I tell you that I am being framed’.

The content of the suspect’s assertion cannot clearly entail a violation of a constitutive rule of assertion. Epimenides’ remark “I am lying” is not a bald-faced lie; it isn’t even an assertion.

Gestures affect assertoric force. When a woman is lying to a police officer, she can consistently signal her lack of belief to her husband by crossing her fingers behind her back. But if she exhibits the crossed fingers to the police officer, then her utterance will not qualify as a lie because it will not count as an assertion.

The woman’s oxymoronic behavior could still qualify as a clever verbal deception, perhaps as a ruse that persuades the police officer that she is too jovial to be guilty.

Lying is just asserting what one does not believe. Much of what we say does not constitute assertion. We signal a lack of assertive force by clear falsity (as with metaphor) or by implausibility. When there is doubt about whether we are asserting, we can clarify the illocutionary force of the remark: “I am not kidding”, “I was describing the consequences, not threatening”, and by adopting a straight face and sober tone to evince sincerity.

Bald-faced liars will clarify the assertive status of their remarks. Takhlef will assure Asne Seierstad that he is dead serious. There will be no nod or wink to show that this is a game. Under cross-examination, Carson’s intimidated perjurer will solemnly re-affirm the truthfulness of his testimony. He will be embarrassed if the prosecutor catches him in contradictions. Similarly, Carson’s cheater will not achieve his aim if he presents his denial as sarcasm. Only assertion will do the trick.

**Forced assertions**

According to H. P. Grice (1989), the assertor invites his audience to believe that he has the intention to say something true. Michael Dummett objects that purely conventional assertions are counterexamples:

There is an infrequent class of cases in which assertion belongs to the more formalized type of utterance. In a times of religious persecution, a man may be subjected to or threatened with torture to induce him to offer incense to the Emperor or trample on the crucifix; in the same spirit, what he is forced to do may be to say, e.g., “Jesus Christ is the offspring of the devil.” . . . [H]ere it is the saying that counts. The victim may know that his persecutors will be quite aware that, even if he says what they want him to, he will not believe it: what is important to both of them is whether he says it or not. (Dummett, 1981, p. 331)
Dummett and other conventionalists such as Robert Brandom (1983) compare assertions with bets. The bettor commits himself to paying if a specified condition is satisfied. The assertor commits himself to any further evidence bearing out the truth of what he said. But unlike the bettor, the assertor further commits himself to defending or retracting the utterance upon the receipt of unfavorable evidence. Assertions “commit both speaker and hearer, if the latter accepts what is said, to a line of action, linguistic and non-linguistic.” (Dummett, 1981, p. 357)

However, the commitment is sometimes overridden by the element of duress. J. L. Austin rounds out his classic discussion of performatives by noting that in many cases “we may even say the act was ‘void’ (or voidable for duress or undue influence) and so forth.” (1962, p. 21). Tim Kenyon goes further: “in a wide class of cases, duress seems to eliminate not merely the force of assertion, but also the relevance of content altogether, turning the utterance into a semantically structureless act of capitulation.” (2003, p. 245) Boys admit defeat by saying “Uncle” without understanding why this word has been chosen to mark capitulation. Kenyon thinks many forced statements have the same semantic inertness.

Kenyon overstates the extent to which duress nullifies assertions. As evident from the passage quoted above, Michael Dummett is happy to mention the sentence “Jesus Christ is the offspring of the devil.” But he will refuse to remove the quotation marks. Dummett might be coerced into using the sentence to make an assertion. Why would saying it under duress be more repugnant than saying it under quotation marks? Why would Dummett prefer to say “Uncle”?

My answer is that Dummett would prefer not make a blasphemous assertion. Michel Dummett’s fellow Catholic, Thomas More, accepted execution in 1535 rather than swear an anti-papal oath. More was canonized on the four hundredth anniversary of his martyrdom largely on the basis of his lonely refusal.

A coerced oath can create an obligation (Gilbert, 1993). When the Cardinal Inquisitors compelled Galileo to recant heliocentrism in 1633, Galileo was obliged to stop disseminating this heresy. Scholars scoff at the legend that Galileo rose from his knees after the renunciation and said “But it does move.” Heretics who reneged on their renunciations, such as Giordano Bruno, were burned at the stake. (Unlike the Protestants, the Catholics only burned heretics who returned to their heresies.) Galileo faithfully adhered to his renunciation for his remaining nine years of life.

Many contemporary legal systems refuse to admit statements made under duress as evidence. But the wisdom of this policy is not essentially grounded on the premise that the statements are not assertions.

As notorious from plea-bargaining, people are routinely put under enormous, perfectly legal pressure to make assertions. The assertions are not nullified by the threat of fines, imprisonment, or judicial execution.
New protection against duress often comes at the expense of increased duress elsewhere. Unions force employers not to coerce promises from employees. Unless the employer signs a contract acknowledging the worker’s right to be free of coercive promises, the union will strike. The employer cannot repudiate the contract by proving that he only signed out of fear of being driven out of business. His coerced promise not to coerce promises is binding.

Duress plays an obvious role in settling the boundary disputes between nations. Yesterday’s gunboat diplomacy becomes tomorrow’s geography lesson.

Agreement can be forced by threatening any good: commerce, transportation, clean air. Violence is not always the worst threat. Many merchants prefer a beating over bankruptcy.

St. Augustine cared more about spiritual wellbeing than health or material goods. But this detachment did not make him immune from coercion. Augustine’s enemies did not need to torture him to force painful admissions. For instance, they used Augustine’s faith in the Biblical doctrine of original sin to force him to assert that unbaptized babies are punished in hell.

Joseph Priestly put years of work into his phlogiston theory of combustion. Antoine Lavoisier conducted experiments that forced Joseph Priestly to assert that phlogiston had negative weight.

As with physical coercion, assertions made under intellectual coercion make us “unwilling to say of some such act simply that it was done or that he did it.” (Austin, 1962, p. 21) An intellectual historian will explain the reasoning that compels St. Augustine’s hard-hearted assertion. But he will not explain away Augustine’s assertion. After placing Augustine’s remarks in context, the historian will concede that Augustine did indeed assert that unbaptized babies are punished in hell.

Lying to yourself

Under the pressure of debate, a theorist will concede that a strange corollary follows from his principles and wait for conviction to catch up with the new commitment. The longer conviction lags, the more apt the theorist is to suspect that he is lying to himself.

If a liar must know that he is lying, then the worried theorist fears the impossible. He should comfort himself with an argumentum ad ignorantiam: "All lies are intentional. All intentional acts are done wittingly. I do not know that I am lying. Therefore, I am not lying.”

This is false comfort because lying is not self-intimating. People frequently wonder whether the following are lies: blurting out a falsehood, oversimplifications told to children, remarks that are ambiguous between
a truth and a more likely to be believed falsehood, half-beliefs, puffery, strained compliments, and falsely replying ‘Fine’ to the routine greeting ‘How are you?’ and arbitrary adjudication (as when an umpire declares someone safe simply for the sake of decisiveness). The speaker may be unsure whether an assertion would be a lie and not wait to figure out whether it is a lie. He plows ahead with the questionable assertion. The speaker’s uncertainty does not ensure that he did not lie. He may eventually and correctly conclude that it was a lie.

A man in the grip of a theory often seems to only half-believe his forced assertion. On the one hand, he can argue well for the strange corollary (that all solids are mostly empty space, that no object is colored, and so on). Thanks to all his anxious study, he has a quick reply to any objection. He can cite precedents in which preposterous corollaries were vindicated such as Fresnel’s ring and Einstein’s twin paradox. On the other hand, the theorist’s words often seemed betrayed by his behavior. When caught off-guard, he makes remarks that conflict with the corollary.

Of course, the theorist can also explain these lapses. A statistician may commit the gambler’s fallacy when his expertise is not cued. But this does not show that he really thinks that the law of large numbers works by compensation. Similarly, physicists revert to folk physics when caught off guard. This just shows that pearls of wisdom require a strenuous dive. Without continuous effort, the diver bobs to the surface of common sense.

If lying entails the intent to deceive, then lying to yourself requires navigation through the dilemma of self-deception: Either you believe the deception (and so are not a deceiver) or you do not believe the deception (and so are not deceived). Bald-faced lies show that some lies do not involve the intent to deceive. Lying to yourself may be another counterexample. Under intellectual duress, you are forced to tell yourself something that borders on a lie. You may eventually conclude that the forced assertion crosses this border and that you have been lying to yourself.

Liberation

Bertrand Russell’s early idealism forced him to assert many extraordinary propositions. The burden of this defense eventually became too great. He switched from Georg Hegel’s esoteric system to G. E. Moore’s common sense philosophy. Russell’s transition was experienced:

as a great liberation, as if I had escaped from a hot-house on to a wind-swept headland. I hated the stuffiness involved in supposing that space and time were only in my mind. I liked the starry heavens even better than the moral law, and could not bear Kant’s view
that the one I liked best was only a subjective figment. In the first exuberance of liberation, I became a naive realist, and rejoiced in the thought that grass is really green, in spite of the adverse opinions of all philosophers from Locke onwards. (Russell, 1959, pp. 61–62)

Russell was experiencing the relief people get when they stop lying to themselves. Russell was no longer forced to assert what he could not make himself believe.

G. E. Moore’s appeals to common sense often border on the accusation that idealists and skeptics are bald-faced liars. Moore holds up his finger and chastises those who deny the truth or knowability of ‘This is a finger’:

It seems to me a sufficient refutation of such views as these, simply to point to cases in which we do know such things. This, after all, you know, really is a finger: there is no doubt about it: I know it and you all know it. (Moore, 1922, p. 228)

Thomas Reid anticipates some of Moore’s exasperation. Reid began as a follower of George Berkeley and so had to echo Berkeley’s paradoxical tenets. David Hume’s writings pushed Reid’s allegiance to British Empiricism beyond the breaking point. Reid became a proponent of common sense philosophy.

Liberation is followed by reconstruction. At the end of the Iraq war, Asne Seierstad debriefs Iraqis. They are now free to speak without fear of Saddam Hussein. They bitterly untie the knots of lies that had bound their earlier lives together. Haidar the painter explains that his first grade teacher forbade him to speak after he made a remark about the Presidential palace:

So when I was seven we understood that we were not free, that we lived in danger. I learnt how to behave like a good Iraqi – in other words, to lie. Always and everywhere. I have been a liar ever since. . . . The tyrant has gone and I need lie no longer. But for thirty years I have lived under the skin of a liar. Now I must free myself. (Seierstad, 1993, p. 306)

Many bald-faced lies spring from force of habit. The reformed liar must break the habit and disentangle himself from earlier lies.

Cynical assertions

Tim Kenyon recognizes a second class of apparent counterexamples to “Lying requires the intent to deceive”. These are voluntary “cynical assertions” in which the speaker is manifestly insincere. Kenyon describes an elected official who says at a press conference “Our policies have improved the quality of life for all citizens.” Kenyon’s (2003, p. 242) second example is a corporate accountant who tells the audience at a public inquiry “I had no knowledge of fiscal improprieties within our company.” The accountant is hoping that legally decisive evidence against
his assertion will not surface. Kenyon requires intent to deceive for lies. He denies that cynical assertions are lies.

If the public official is merely using the rhetorical device of hyperbole, then he is not lying because he is not inviting his audience to believe his sweeping generalization. Since Kenyon does not want his public official interpreted in this innocent fashion, I conclude that Kenyon's official is telling a bald-faced lie. Kenyon's accountant is exploiting the fact that the legal standard of evidence can exceed the evidence needed for knowledge.

“Disguise” is relative to the means of detection. Decoy planes fool enemy aviators. But from the ground the decoys are laughably crude. The contraptions are disguised as planes relative to an aerial perspective but are not disguised as planes from a terrestrial perspective. Moral, legal and scientific scruples force a lofty perspective. A statement that is a disguised lie from a perspective restricted by legal blinders can be an undisguised lie from an unfettered perspective. Consider a blond-haired, blue-eyed Swedish immigrant to Canada who obtains a subsidy for Eskimos by simply swearing he is an Eskimo. He is exploiting a loophole. For administrative simplicity, government bureaucrats do not use any further test. The bureaucrat may tell the Swede that he is telling a bald-faced lie. The Swede can stand on his rights and prevail.

What is wrong with bald-faced lies?

If you approve of subsidies for Eskimos, then you will regard the Swede as a brazen thief. If you think Eskimos are no more entitled to subsidies than any other race, you may wish more Canadians would sabotage government orchestrated racism. Theft is wrong and resistance to racism is admirable but what about bald-faced lying itself?

If the dean punishes only those cheaters who confess, then a student can evade justice by silence. If the dean punishes only those cheaters who do not deny the accusation, then the evasive student must lie. What is wrong here is the evasion of just punishment, not the silence or the bald-faced lie.

Consider a pathological liar who has lost control over what he is saying. He has a compulsion to lie just as a kleptomaniac has a compulsion to steal. The normal end of theft is to enjoy the loot. But the kleptomaniac steals even without this aim. His impulse to steal is so strong that he will steal even when it is clear he will be caught. An “irresistible impulse” will lead the pathological liar to lie even when he knows that others will realize he is lying.

Bald-faced lies can be a symptom of mental illness (especially when accompanied by other evidence, say, a recent head injury). Bald-faced lies can also be symptoms of immorality. The bald-faced lies of Kenyon's accountant are symptoms of financial wrongdoing. The Iraqi demonstrator's
bald-faced lie “This is a free country” is a symptom of tyranny. But a symptom of immorality need not itself be immoral.

Healthy people engage in bald-faced lying when they have reasons to assert what they do not believe. The narrow reason for asserting $p$ is a reason for the truth of $p$. You typically also have a reason for asserting $p$ that is not a reason for the truth of $p$. After all, you only bother to assert $p$ when that assertion would be of interest. Lies occur because the reasons for asserting $p$ are wider than the reasons for the truth of $p$.

People are more forgiving of a lie made in response to a threat than a lie made in response to an offer. The distinction between threats and offers becomes less clear in competitive circumstances. An interest in fair competition may lead to lying in self-defense. Many people feel that they cannot safely state the truth when bargaining. After all, buyers and sellers tend to split the difference between the maximum the buyer is willing to offer and the minimum the seller willing to accept. Each party fears the other will get an advantage by exaggerating their limits. A willingness to lie in self-defense sets the stage for a pre-emptive lie. A primary lie about the buyer’s maximum offer leads to secondary lies about the buyer’s beliefs and desires. These secondary lies are buttressed with displays of emotion that fit these advertised beliefs and desires. Simulated emotion spills over into the real thing (just as play aggression spills over into real aggression). Given that lies and histrionics are common in bargaining, the speaker may further feel it is impossible to tell the truth without being misleading. So the speaker may prefer to tell a falsehood that will lead to better coordination between buyer and seller. When this is common knowledge, conditions are ripe for bald-faced lies.

Much political debate is an extension of bargaining (over a large peace dividend). Consequently, bald-faced lies are as common in politics as they are in negotiation.

The histrionic atmosphere that generates the speaker’s bald-faced lies also envelops his audience. The hearer counters the speaker’s extravagant assertion with an extravagant rebuttal. Hearers transfer the emotional charge of ‘bald-faced lie’ to condemn disguised lies. Disguised lies are actually worse than bald-faced lies. But, paradoxically, outrage can be expressed by putting a disguised lie into this less serious category.

A similar inversion occurs when heinous evil, such as the 1994 Rwandan massacre, is described as an obscenity. Obscenity is insignificant compared to 937,000 murders. Most of the wrong of an obscenity lies in our emotional reaction to it. Speakers are attempting to transfer the emotional force of the obscenity charge. Perhaps the speaker is worried that the very obviousness of the wrongdoing will dull the emotional focus needed to appropriately react to the crime.

The rhetorical misclassification of disguised lies as bald-faced lies also occurs for poorly disguised lies. We disparage the lie by scorning a weak
disguise as no disguise at all. From a logical point of view, the exaggeration backfires (as when speakers exaggerate a change of mind by saying that their opinion has turned around “360 degrees”).

If bald-faced lies were so bad, then we should also excoriate the bald-faced lie of calling a disguised lie a bald-faced lie. The meta-lying does have the bad effect of mixing bad lies with intrinsically innocent lies. Guilt by association leads us to feel there is something intrinsically wrong with bald-faced lies.

Doubts about the immorality of bald-faced lying are especially vivid when the liar is lying to himself. There is no hope of a successful (synchronic) deception when you are lying to yourself. Your forced assertions may cause you to believe the lie later on. But for now, you are only asserting a position for external reasons. If you are addressing the lie to yourself, the issue of consent does not arise. Since the perpetrator of the lie is identical to the addressee of the lie, there is no abusive asymmetry of power, no violation of a trust, and no other asymmetry upon which to condemn you.

Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant condemn all lies. W. D. Ross says lying is wrong except when overridden by a more stringent moral consideration. The plausibility of a strong condemnation of lying is normally protected with a narrow definition of ‘lie’. Since no bald-faced lie involves the intent to deceive, I suspect Kant and Ross would regard the bald-faced lie as no more a lie than metaphor, hyperbole, or sarcasm.

Theories that aim to explain the wrongness of lying do not imply that bald-faced lies are wrong. Utilitarianism and contemporary deontology allow that bald-faced lies correlate with wrongdoing. Both could also allow that bald-faced lies are bad under other descriptions. For instance, the shopkeeper in the Monty Python “Parrot” sketch wrongly refuses to accept the customer’s complaint that he was sold dead parrot. The shopkeeper wastes the customer’s time by asserting that the parrot is just resting. He exasperates the customer with a string of further lies: the parrot is stunned; the parrot is a “Norwegian Blue” and is pining for the fiords; this species prefers to be on its back (and so had to be nailed to its perch). The shopkeeper eventually offers a replacement. But he should have done that immediately.

Bald-faced lying is comical – from a safe distance. Those enmeshed in the absurdity are generally annoyed by it. But much that is morally neutral annoys us: snoring, late buses, ugly décor, stinky garbage, and monotonous spam. The bald-faced lie is at home among these noxious neighbors. You have good reasons to refrain from bald-faced lying but these are not the moral reasons that condemn disguised lies.

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