Knowledge-lies
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1. In Spartacus (Universal Pictures, 1960), the victorious Roman general, Marcus Licinius Crassus, asks the recaptured slaves to identify Spartacus in exchange for leniency. Spartacus, played by Kirk Douglas, rises to spare his comrades crucifixion. However, the slave on his right, Antoninus, springs to his feet and declares, ‘I am Spartacus!’ Then the slave on Spartacus’ left also stands and declares ‘I am Spartacus!’, then another slave, and another until the whole army of slaves is on their feet shouting, ‘I am Spartacus!’ Each slave is lying. With the exception of Antoninus, none intend to deceive Crassus about who they are. The slaves are preventing Crassus from learning who Spartacus is.

When Crassus addresses the army of slaves, each declaration of ‘I am Spartacus!’ supports a rival epistemic possibility. The slaves express their solidarity by ensuring that any of them might be Spartacus. Crassus has given a sacred vow that Spartacus will either die or be delivered alive to the Senate. Crassus keeps his promise by ordering that all the slaves be killed (and lines the Appian Way, from the battlefield to Rome, with crucified slaves).

The screenwriter, Dalton Trumbo, may have modelled the ‘I am Spartacus!’ scene on a 1943 Daily News report that Danes concealed their Jewish compatriots by wearing the yellow ‘Jude’ badges imposed by the Nazis. The story was planted by Danish propagandists and later popularized in 1958 by Leon Uris’ bestseller Exodus – for which Trumbo had also written a screenplay. Trumbo was a member of the Hollywood Ten. In 1947, this group of filmmakers defied a congressional order to identify fellow communists (to ‘name names’). The production of ‘Spartacus’ was itself an act of defiance. The director, Otto Preminger (at the instigation of Kirk Douglas) violated the Hollywood blacklist by officially crediting Dalton Trumbo as the screenwriter.

A 2005 Pepsi commercial subverted the ‘I am Spartacus!’ scene by switching the lead up: a Roman centurion rides up and announces to the slaves that someone forgot his lunch bag at the last rest stop. The bag has a sandwich and a can of Pepsi – still cold. The owner has written his name on the bag: SPARTACUS. The shot now returns to original footage of Spartacus as he rises to identify himself. The shouts of ‘I am Spartacus!’ now take on a different complexion. Yet the testimonial sabotage remains.

We more readily attribute lies to covetous men than to heroic men. Since the Pepsi variation preserves all the testimonial features of the original scene, it buttresses the judgment that the ‘I am Spartacus!’ shouts are lies.
The Pepsi variation also suggests that ignorance contributes to a *variety* of desirable states – not just anonymity. Ignorance sets up division by lot. It frees you from responsibility and prevents bias. Awareness of ignorance promotes open-mindedness, inquiry and tolerance. Knowledge threatens these advantages. Fear of their loss inspires defences ranging from the simple lies of Spartacus’ comrades to the sceptical doctrines surveyed by Paul Boghossian in *Fear of Knowledge* (Boghossian 2006).

Many agree with Socrates in the *Meno* that knowledge is better than mere true belief. Denying you are hurt can prevent a tormenter from *knowing* he hurt you. If you believe your enemy is vain, you anticipate he will ignore this evidence. So you tell the lie without hope of preventing his true belief that he hurt you. The lie is still worth telling because it degrades the epistemic status of his belief.

2. *The key role of assertion and testimony*

A second subversion helps us recognize that *assertions* are being made in the Spartacus scenario. Eric Douglas lived in the shadow of his father Kirk Douglas and his brother Michael Douglas (who was becoming as famous an actor as his father). When Eric tried stand-up comedy, he was rudely received at one nightclub. Flustered, Eric blurted out ‘You can’t heckle me! I am Kirk Douglas’s son!’ The heckler stood and shouted back ‘No! I am Kirk Douglas’s son!’ Then another heckler stood: ‘I am Kirk Douglas’s son!’ Soon, the whole audience was on its feet. Unlike the slaves, the hecklers’ shouts of ‘I am Kirk Douglas’s son’ did not undermine the informativeness of Eric Douglas’s original assertion. They were only pretending to assert.

Testimony is not just verbal evidence. If the slaves know that Spartacus is to be identified by his Spanish accent, then they can conceal him by faking Spanish accents. Speaking with a fake accent is misleading, not lying.

Testimony does not need to meet a threshold of probability to be evidentially significant. For whatever the proposed minimum, there will be a Spartacus scenario with a compensating large number of false claimants. What counts is the generation of epistemic possibilities.

The Eric Douglas anecdote may be as apocryphal as the Hollywood ‘I am Spartacus!’ scene. But in 2007 British troops really did wear ‘I’m Harry’ T-shirts when the British Ministry of Defence announced that Prince Harry would serve in on the frontline in Iraq. Wearing a T-shirt with a message does not suffice for asserting that message, so this was not an attempt to disguise Harry’s presence.

The Spartacus ruse is so famous that one can imagine its being exploited in a meta-trick: Custodians at the Immanuel Kant State University of Russia discover graffiti covering the new Centre for Utilitarian Studies: ‘Morality is not the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness’, ‘Act only according to that maxim.
whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’, and so on. Security personnel round up 10 members of the philosophy club. The detective asks ‘Who defaced the Centre for Utilitarian Studies?’. Each suspect declares ‘I did!’. The security officers infer that a true confession is being concealed by nine false confessions. In fact, each admission is true. The students conspired to deface the Centre in such a way that all could safely confess. The young Kantians avoided lying by misleading the authorities into thinking that nine of them were lying to protect their Spartacus. (As Kant makes explicit in his Lectures on Ethics [27: 447, 202–03]) intentionally misleading behaviour is not sufficient for lying and is sometimes justified.)

An assertion that $p$ is a knowledge-lie exactly if intended to prevent the addressee from knowing that $p$ is untrue but is not intended to deceive the addressee into believing $p$. A malingerer who seeks only free room and board prefers that the asylum’s psychiatrist not believe he is ill. All he wants is ‘three hot and a cot’, not the annoying therapy. The malingerer titrates his lie.

Some malingerers err on the side of safety rather than risk being refused admission. But then the false belief of the psychiatrist is a side-effect. Foreseen deception must be distinguished from intended deception.

The distinction holds even when the false belief is a welcome byproduct. A tax evader may foresee that a gullible auditor will believe a lie that was calculated to merely achieve ignorance. This liar’s delight in duping the auditor is a bonus. The tax evader would have told the same lie to a more circumspect auditor.

Thousands of knowledge-lies have been televised since the debut of ‘To Tell the Truth’ in 1956. The game show features three challengers: a noteworthy person, such as the author Hunter Thompson, and two imposters who also claim to be the noteworthy person. The noteworthy person is sworn to answer truthfully. The imposters are permitted to lie when answering questions from a panel of four celebrities. These lies are only rarely designed to produce belief (which is difficult given that the panelists know that two of three challengers are imposters). The challengers’ lies are intended to prevent the celebrity panel from discovering which of them is the noteworthy person. The more false guesses, the higher the prize money for the challengers. (Other variants of the game such as ‘The Liar’s Club’ pit a truthful celebrity against a lying celebrity, each of whom describes the function of an enigmatic artifact.)

3. Surgical lies

The lies of Spartacus’ troops are intended to prevent Crassus’ belief as well as his knowledge. Other lies are surgical. The clearest knowledge-lies are intended to undermine knowledge while sparing belief.

Consider the department Head who contemplates terminating Doctor Appendix’s fellowship because his research is weak. To make sure, the Head solicits an expert opinion from Professor Heart. Although Heart
agrees that Appendix’s research is weak, Heart does not want Appendix terminated. So Professor Heart tells the Head that Appendix’s research is strong. Professor Heart’s letter of appraisal is crafted to prevent termination without also misleading the Head into wasting time by re-reading Appendix’s dossier. As hoped by Heart, the Head continues to believe that Appendix’s research is weak but refrains from termination.

When the stakes are high, most people act only on what they know to be true (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). In ‘The Sopranos’ (second season), the mafia godfather Tony suspects Big Pussy is an informant but refrains from killing him until he can get proof of the betrayal.

Defence attorneys amplify the inhibitory effect of the knowledge requirement by raising the standard for what qualifies as knowledge. A conscientious juror who believes the defendant committed the crime may acquit him because she does not know he committed the crime. When the stakes are high, a knowledge-lie can have the same practical effect as a belief-lie.

The aim of knowledge-lies is paralysis, not persuasion. Deception in such cases is overkill. A leader who wants docile but undeluded subordinates, keeps them sufficiently informed to do their jobs but not so knowledgeable as to justify disobedience.

4. Epistemic superiors

Like defence attorneys, authorities sometimes use dialectical devices that raise the standard of knowledge. But these manipulations of the conversational score are rarely needed. For the leadership typically has privileged access to information. This secret evidence is enough to raise the standard.

The standard for knowledge is set by the best-informed people in the epistemic community. At the hospital cafeteria, a nurse may feel entitled to lead discussion about brain injuries until a physician joins the conversation. She no longer knows so much – not because she forgot anything – but rather because the standard was just raised. The physician may in turn be quieted by the arrival of a neuro-surgeon.

Even if the leader’s epistemic inferiors manage to meet the standard of knowledge, the leader can claim to possess evidence that undermines his opposition’s knowledge claims. Often, the leader knows that if he lies about having confidential evidence, his adversary will not believe him. But the leader’s lie does not need to be believed for it to undermine his adversary’s knowledge. Claims to have evidence are themselves evidence.

Some of the leader’s adversaries grasp that they are being manipulated into paralysis. Rather than become inert, they will violate the knowledge requirement for action. Their resistance will appear irresponsible. Consequently, they will have trouble securing public support. This will tempt the dissidents to feign knowledge. The lying now becomes symmetrical, levelling their moral high ground.
5. The moral superiority of knowledge-lies

Most of what is wrong about lying concerns corruption of belief. Avoiding deception therefore reduces the wrongdoing. Since wrongdoers prefer to achieve their goals with the minimum immorality, they prefer a knowledge-lie over a belief-lie. Greater awareness of this category of lying will reveal its hidden popularity.

People rank lying lower than misleading. The punctilious but disappointed gift recipient prefers to deceive grandmother with the tactful truth ‘I do not deserve such a gift!’ rather than deceive her with the polite lie ‘That is just what I wanted!’. This preference for misleading rather than belief-lying raises the question of whether knowledge-lying is better than misleading. On the one hand, knowledge-lying does not aim at deception. On the other hand, knowledge-lies are lies.

6. Meta-knowledge lies

Once we distinguish knowledge-lies from belief-lies, we can recognize more delicate distinctions. Grave deeds may require not just knowledge, but knowledge that one knows. A surgeon will ask a boy which leg has gangrene even though she knows his left leg is gangrenous. The surgeon will proceed with amputation only if she knows that she knows the left leg is gangrenous. Realizing this, the boy can delay the procedure with the lie ‘My left leg is not gangrenous’. Although the procrastinating boy realizes that the surgeon will continue to know that his left leg has gangrene, he also realizes she will need to make time-consuming checks in order to know that she knows.

7. Common-knowledge lies

Group actions often require common knowledge. During World War II, American soldiers would fight only if it was common knowledge that other soldiers would not defect. Knowing that the American soldiers were racially divided, Japanese propagandists assured Negro defectors that they would be well treated. Although the Japanese realized that the Negro soldiers knew they would not be well treated, the Japanese hoped that white soldiers would not know that the Negro soldiers knew this. Even if none of the white soldiers were racists, the white soldiers would believe that some of their white comrades were racists. Thus the mere spectre of racism was enough to undermine common knowledge that Negro soldiers would not defect. Consequently, the Negro units were withdrawn. Thus, the Japanese propagandists succeeded in reducing American troop strength.

A lie can prevent action even when the lie is implausible. All the lie need do is to undermine the common knowledge required for group action. Propagandists who tell implausible lies need not violate a principle of charity.
They may be content to raise epistemic possibilities. A lie that the president of the bank has been indicted for embezzlement can start a run on the bank without that lie being believed by any depositor. Nor do there have to be depositors who believe other depositors believe the lie. All the lie need do is to undermine common knowledge that the bank president has not been indicted for embezzlement.

Although I have stressed action, the same point holds for omissions. A committee can skip a ballot when there is common knowledge that everybody agrees. To slow down the committee, a member may profess ignorance about whether everyone agrees. From confidential conversations, each member of the committee knows that the foot-dragger knows everyone agrees. But they do not know that the other members of the committee know this. Thus the profession of ignorance undermines common knowledge and forces a time-consuming secret ballot.

8. Acknowledgement-lies

The first season of ‘Mad Men’ is set in 1960. Advertising executive Roger Sterling and his wife are at a convivial dinner with his favourite employee Don Draper and his wife. The tipsy Roger confides that a psychiatrist is treating his teenage daughter. This leads Don to ruminate over the weekend about having his wife treated. When Don returns to the topic with Roger at work, Roger denies that a psychiatrist treats his daughter. After momentary surprise, Don realizes that Roger’s denial takes his daughter’s treatment off the record.

Roger Sterling’s lie lets him recover from an indiscrete admission. He avoids uncomfortable conversations predicated on his daughter’s mental problems. The great advocate of privacy, Thomas Nagel, stresses the civilizing effect of these non-deceptive lies:

The essential function of the boundary between what is acknowledged and what is not is to admit or decline to admit potentially significant material into the category of what must be taken into consideration and responded to collectively by all parties in the joint enterprise of discourse, action, and justification that proceeds between individuals when they come into contact. If something is not acknowledged, then even if it is universally known it can be left out of consideration in the collective social process, though it may play an important role separately in the private deliberations of the individual participants. Without such traffic control, any encounter might turn into a collision. (Nagel 2002: 11)

Children lack this sophistication. In addition to speaking what is on their mind, they also speak what is on everybody else’s mind. They are baffled
when adults deny obvious facts (Mother to toddler: ‘No! That lady does not have a moustache!’).

Whereas H. P. Grice was interested in what gets into a conversation, Nagel is concerned with what is kept out. It is self-defeating to acknowledge what is not acknowledged. So we are left with either vague silence or precise acknowledgement-lies: ‘I never told you this’, ‘We were never in the bank’, and so on.

Acknowledgement-lies are a form of conversational cheating. Subterfuge helps most cheating. But some cheating is more effective when done brazenly. When a boss declares that he has won the poker pot, the absurdity of the declaration underscores his subordinates’ impotence.

Reactions to cheating vary with complicity, the stakes, and the type of infraction. When a police officer turns a paternal blind-eye (‘I do not see a broken window’), the reaction of the juvenile delinquent may be life-long gratitude. The Jewish merchant, standing amidst the shattered glass, experiences different emotions.

Conversational cheating solves a moral puzzle about bald-faced lies (Sorensen 2007: 252). These are lies in which it is common knowledge that the speaker does not believe what he is saying is true. Why does this strike us as the most egregious form of lying? There is no intent to deceive. The speaker has not betrayed trust in his truthfulness (because he is ostentatiously lying). And bald-faced lies pose no more threat to the practice of truth telling than sarcasm. So why do bald-faced lies inspire such resentment and alarm?

The answer is that we are crying ‘Foul!’. Sounding the alarm may not be in our self-interest. But we are social animals who evolved to detect cheaters – and to identify them for the edification of our group. By making a scene, we suppress social parasitism.

Lie detection is not limited to the discovery that there is an intent to deceive. It extends to forms of conversational cheating that affect the premisses of joint practical reasoning.

The moral puzzle was not ‘Why is all bald-faced lying wrong?’. For some bald-faced lies are not wrong. (Universal intolerance of cheating is a symptom of social immaturity or impairment.) The problem was to explain how a bald-faced lie could ever be wrong and how it can warrant the drama that goes with accusing someone of a bald-faced lie.1

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References


