Liar!

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Abstract

We have good reason to condemn lying more strongly than misleading and to condemn bullshit assertion less harshly than lying but more harshly than misleading. We each have good reason to mislead rather than make bullshit assertions, but to make bullshit assertions rather than lie. This is because these forms of deception damage credibility in different ways. We can trust the misleader to assert only what they believe to be true. We can trust the bullshitter not to assert what they believe to be false. We cannot trust the liar at all.

Successful lying and misleading are both forms of intentional deception by means of language. The liar deceives by false assertion, the misleader by false conversational implicature. I argue that society has good reason to respond with greater opprobrium to the liar than to the misleader, that each member of society has good reason to disdain lying more than mere misleading, and that each of us would be wise to avoid the greater dishonour of being branded a liar. My argument rests on the point that lying damages both credibility in assertion and credibility in implicature whereas misleading damages only credibility in implicature.

I further argue that deceptive communication without regard to truth value, which Frankfurt memorably identified as the essence of bullshit, should be understood in the same framework. Bullshit conversational implicature damages credibility in the same way as does misleading. Bullshit assertion damages one variety of credibility in assertion, and thereby damages credibility in implicature, but leaves the other variety of credibility in assertion intact. Since lying damages both varieties of credibility in assertion, it damages credibility more comprehensively.

1. Credibility in Assertion and Implicature

Assertion is the direct expression of a proposition. But the utterance of an assertion also conveys meaning beyond the proposition asserted. Implicature is meaning conveyed that is neither asserted nor logically entailed by what is asserted. Conversational implicature is communicated as a result of the conversational context of an assertion. It rests on the assumption that the speaker is cooperating in furthering the ends of the conversation. In conversations where credibility is at stake, cooperation requires being informative. To lie is to express a proposition one believes to be false. To mislead is to express a proposition with the intention that it carry in the context a particular false conversational implicature. Both lying and misleading are therefore forms of deception, and so violate the requirement to be informative.

To be caught lying damages your credibility in assertion. If you have deceived by assertion in the past, then those who know this should be wary of trusting your assertions. If the lie had concerned a trivial matter, of course, then it should not damage your credibility with respect to important matters. The more important the lie, the more generally it damages your credibility. Deception by implicature likewise damages your credibility in implicature. If you have been caught making misleading statements, then those who know this about you should be wary of believing the conversational implicatures of your assertions.

One can damage one's credibility in implicature without thereby damaging one's credibility in assertion. In a famous television interview, journalist Jeremy Paxman asked Michael Howard, who had recently ceased to be UK Home Secretary, the same question twelve times within two minutes. It was a simple question, requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Howard gave neither, filibustering instead. The repetition made it clear that he had attempted to implicate that the answer was not 'yes', but would not say 'no'. It seems that he allowed it to become obvious that he had attempted to give a false conversational implicature rather than running the risk of being caught lying. Indeed, his persistence in refusing to lie even though this exposed him as having attempted to mislead arguably enhances his credibility in assertion.[1]

Although one can preserve and even enhance one's credibility in assertion through speech that damages one's credibility in implicature, the converse is not possible. Implicature depends on the assumption that the speaker is cooperating in furthering the ends of the conversation (Adler 1997: 445; Saul 2012: 5-6). On this assumption, Howard's response implicates that the correct answer to Paxman's question is not 'yes', for if it were then it would have been more informative, hence more

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[1] You can find this interview by typing "did you threaten to overrule him?" into the search box at www.youtube.com.

cooperative, to say 'yes'. A cooperative speaker would not make assertions they do not believe to be true, unless the shared ends of the conversation required it. For this reason, the assumption that grounds implicature also implies credibility in assertion. To damage one's own credibility in assertion, therefore, is also to damage one's credibility in implicature.

2. Asymmetric Credibility and Degrees of Badness

Discussions of the relative ethical status of lying and misleading focus on whether the two stand in different positions on some ethically relevant scale. One argument of this kind holds that the liar is wholly responsible for their deception whereas the misleader shares this responsibility with the deceived. This is mistaken on two counts. First, conversational implicature is not the result of optional inference, but the outcome of an assumption that conversational partners are obliged to make, namely the assumption of cooperation (Adler 1997: 445; Saul 2012: 5-6). Second, it is not generally true that my action of harming you is less bad in proportion to the degree to which you are responsible for the harm coming about (Saul 2012: 4-5).

Strudler takes a different form of this approach, arguing that lying reduces the deceived's control over the conversation to a greater degree than does misleading, that a reduction in such control is a harm, and thus that lying inflicts a greater harm on the deceived than does misleading. Strudler rests this argument on the claim that 'one may lose credibility as trustworthy in implicature about a proposition but retain credibility as trustworthy in assertion about the very same proposition' (2010: 176). If you suspect you are being misled, you can question the implicated proposition without engendering the 'collapse of trust' that would result from questioning whether an assertion was an outright lie (2010: 176). Thus, on this view, the liar leaves their victim with fewer conversational options than does the misleader.

Strudler has not explained why questioning someone's assertion is more destructive of trust than is questioning their conversational implicature. Perhaps it is an empirical fact, in our culture at least, that this is so, but the point that you are obliged to accept your conversational partner's implicatures suggests that it ought not be so (see also Saul 2012: 7 n5). The asymmetric dependency of credibility in implicature on credibility in assertion, however, does directly entail that questioning someone's assertion is more destructive of trust than is questioning their conversational implicature. For the former implies that they are not trusted in assertion or implicature, the latter only in implicature.

Once this point about asymmetric dependence between the two domains of credibility is established, there is no longer any need to derive the further claim that it grounds a difference in degree of harm done to the victim. For that asymmetry itself justifies society in reserving a more severe opprobrium for lying than is to be employed in response to misleading. An act that damages an informant's credibility across the board is considerably more detrimental to our collective needs as an epistemic community than is an act that only damages the credibility of that informant's conversational implicatures. The latter leaves us with the option of checking such implicatures by asking the same informant the requisite simple question, as Paxman did to Howard, or indeed by asking the catch-all question 'to the best of your knowledge, are there other relevant facts?' (Adler 1997: 440). But if we cannot trust someone's assertions, we cannot use them as an informant at all.

3. Never Lie When You Can Mislead

Because it is right in this way for society to treat liars more severely than misleaders, each of us has good reason to mislead rather than to lie when faced with that choice. For each member of society has good reason to have a stronger negative attitude towards lying than towards misleading. Each of us needs to be able to rely on others

as informants. We can still rely on misleaders, though we need to be careful, but cannot rely on liars. Each of us, therefore, has good reason to prefer to mislead than to lie, because according to the standards we ourselves ought to have, lying is more condemnable than misleading.

Moreover, one needs to be able to rely on one's own status as an informant of other people. If one is caught lying, then that status generally is damaged. If one is caught misleading, one retains credibility in one's assertions and can even have enhanced it. Had the boy who cried wolf instead had his fun by merely implicating that there were wolves, he would still have been able to communicate the later actual presence of a wolf by explicit assertion. He would have had a greater chance, that is to say, of avoiding his sheep being eaten by a wolf.

It is not only your ability to communicate truths that suffers more if you are caught lying than if you are caught misleading. There is the same differential effect on your ability to deceive. If you are caught misleading, your credibility in implicature will be damaged, but your credibility in assertion will remain intact and may be enhanced. Thus you would retain the option of lying in future. But if you are caught lying, you have damaged your credibility in assertion and in implicature. You have damaged your chances of successfully deceiving by either method.

None of this is to say that every discovered lie must destroy the liar's credibility altogether. With both lying and misleading, the damage done depends on the importance of the information withheld and perhaps whether it is the first offence or part of a pattern. The damage can also be undone by remorse and forgiveness, or just by better behaviour over a sufficiently sustained period. The point is simply that, when all other aspects of the case are equal, lying is more damaging than misleading. Saul is thus mistaken to claim that 'you might as well just go ahead and lie' (2012: 8).

Really, that is the very last thing you should do. And we should continue to discourage lying more strongly than we discourage misleading.

4. Assertion, Implicature, and Bullshit

Frankfurt has argued that bullshit is 'a greater enemy of the truth than lies are' because it involves disregard for the truth value of what is said whereas lies are guided by the truth they aim to conceal (1988: 132). If this is right, then it would seem that we ought to censure bullshit more harshly than we censure lies. We will see, however, that bullshit is not a greater enemy of the truth since lies damage credibility more comprehensively than bullshit does. But first, some clarification.

Frankfurt intends his idea of disregard for the truth to mean that the bullshitter may believe some of what they say, may disbelieve some of what they say, and willingly says things they neither believe nor disbelieve. The bullshitter simply 'does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly' (1988: 131). However, saying what one believes to be false makes one a liar irrespective of whether the falsehood of the content is essential to one's purpose in communicating that content. So the only aspect of bullshitting that has a distinct relation to credibility is the willingness to say things one neither believes nor disbelieves. What is the effect of this hard core of bullshit on one's credibility?

The distinction between assertion and conversational implicature applies here. Frankfurt does not employ this distinction, which is why some of his examples appear to contradict his central thesis that bullshit is not guided by the truth. He considers, for example, the advice 'never lie when you can bullshit your way through' (1988: 129-30). Since one is tempted to lie only when one knows the truth and wants to conceal it, this bullshit is guided by the truth to some extent. We can make this example consistent with Frankfurt's central thesis by distinguishing the

assertions made without regard for their truth value from the conversational implicatures intended to conceal the truth. Since this is deception by conversational implicature, it is a form of misleading. It is misleading by bullshit assertion.

Conversely, one can communicate bullshit conversational implicatures. If one's intention is to instil in one's audience a particular belief that one neither believes nor disbelieves, then one can pursue this aim by making assertions that carry the target proposition as a conversational implicature. One could implicate it by asserting only truths, which might be a wise strategy for politicians or advertisers. But one could implicate it through assertions one believes to be false. Thus, there is bullshit through truth-telling and there can be bullshit through lying.

Finally, there is pure bullshit. This is where the speaker neither believes nor disbelieves either their assertions or their conversational implicatures. Such pure bullshit might be motivated by the desire to present oneself to a naive audience as an expert in some area in which one is not, in fact, an expert.

Frankfurt's examples are thus not inconsistent, but track different linguistic roles that bullshit can play. Cohen is mistaken, therefore, to argue that the variety of speaker intentions in Frankfurt's examples indicates that bullshit cannot be understood primarily in terms of speaker intention but must rather be a feature of the content communicated (2002: 325-31). If we distinguish what speakers assert from what they conversationally implicate, there remains an identifiable phenomenon of intentionally communicating content without regard for its truth value, the hard core case of which is intentionally communicating a content that one neither believes nor disbelieves. We can ask of this phenomenon whether it is a greater threat to truth than lying, or than misleading, and whether we should respond to it with greater opprobrium.

5. Bullshit and Credibility in Implicature

Frankfurt describes disregard for truth value as 'of the essence of bullshit' (1988: 125). But it is not the whole of the essence. For other kinds of speech, such as telling stories or jokes, involve a disregard for the truth of what is said. It is also essential to bullshit that the speaker intends to conceal the fact that they are speaking without regard to the truth (1988: 130). Neither assertions nor conversational implicatures can count as bullshit unless the speaker has this deceptive intention.

Bullshit has this deception in common with both lying and misleading. It is at the heart of the damage done to credibility by each of these kinds of speech. Telling stories or jokes leaves credibility undamaged precisely because these are not presented as informative. If falsehood or bullshit is presented as informative, it becomes difficult to identify the occasions on which that speaker really is being informative. It thus becomes difficult to rely on that person as an informant.

Whether we should condemn bullshit as harshly as we condemn lying is therefore a matter of the kind of damage it does to credibility. It is clear that bullshit damages the assumption of cooperation. Misleading by bullshit assertion and intentionally giving bullshit implicatures are both ways of misinforming. Because it damages the assumption of cooperation, all bullshit damages credibility in implicature. We therefore should not treat cases of bullshit less harshly than cases of misleading.

The question remains, however, whether we should treat bullshit assertion more harshly than misleading. We should do so if bullshit damages credibility in assertion. If it does, then the way in which it does so will address the issue Frankfurt raises: should we treat bullshit less harshly than, with the same harshness as, or more harshly than lying?

6. Bullshit and Credibility in Assertion

To what extent does assertion without belief in the truth or falsehood of what is asserted, irrespective of the status of its implicatures, damage credibility in assertion? The answer to this question depends on the nature of the assumption underlying that credibility. We have seen that this assumption is entailed by the assumption of cooperation, but does not entail it. This is why lying damages credibility in implicature but misleading does not damage credibility in assertion. There are two candidate assumptions that would fit this bill. One is the assumption that the speaker would only make assertions they believe to be true. The other is that the speaker would not make assertions they believe to be false.

That these two assumptions are genuinely distinct is shown by the fact that assertion without belief in the truth or falsehood of what is asserted contravenes the first but not the second. So if you know that someone engages in this core variety of bullshit assertion, you are no longer warranted in assuming that they say only what they believe to be true. But you are not warranted in ceasing to assume that they would not knowingly assert a falsehood.

For this reason, suspected cases of hard core bullshit assertion can be challenged in a parallel way to suspected false conversational implicatures. With conversational implicature, one can ask a simple question about the truth of that implicature. This forces the speaker to lie, to admit that the implicature is false, or to reveal the falsehood of the implicature by attempting to avoid answering the question.

In the case of bullshit assertion, one cannot simply ask whether the assertion is true. For the speaker could answer that question with more bullshit. One must rather exploit the fact that bullshit involves the intention to conceal the lack of concern for truth value. One can challenge a hard core bullshit assertion, therefore, by enquiring

directly whether the speaker believes the assertion to be true. The simplest, though least polite, way to raise this challenge is a one-word sentence: Bullshit!

Faced with this enquiry, the bullshitter has good reason not to claim that they believe the assertion to be true. For this would make them a liar. Just as there are good reasons to opt for being discovered as a misleader rather than risk being branded a liar, reasons that Howard recognised in his interview with Paxman, the same reasons support being discovered as having made bullshit assertions rather than lying.

The damage done to one's credibility by this discovery is greater than the damage done by being seen as a misleader. For hard core bullshit assertion damages the assumption that one would assert only what one believes to be true. But it leaves intact the assumption that one would not make assertions one believes to be false. One retains some of the credibility that would be lost were one to be caught lying.

7. The Importance of Being Honest

We should not agree with Frankfurt's proposal that bullshit is a greater threat to truth than is lying. We have good reason to respond with a greater opprobrium to lies than to bullshit. But we should respond to bullshit assertion with greater opprobrium than we employ in response to mere misleading. And we should treat misleading and truth-telling with bullshit implicature equivalently. For the different types of deception damage credibility in different ways.

As an epistemic community, we have good reason to protect the credibility of the members of the community in general. So we have good reason to reproach those who damage their own credibility. Moreover, we have good reason to grade our reproach according to the degree of damage done to credibility by different forms of deception. This is because, as Adler (1997: 448-9) points out, people will occasionally

feel a need to deceive. To accommodate that felt need by allowing deception under specific circumstances, as Saul (2012: 6) suggests, would require agreement on the relevant range of circumstances. Graded responses to varieties of deception allow us to exert pressure to preserve credibility without agreeing on circumstances in which deception is permissible.

None of this is to say that we should view every instance of lying as morally worse than any instance of bullshit or of misleading. Neither is it to say that the damage done to credibility is the only reason we have to reproach a deceiver. For any act of deception will also fall under other descriptions that may be morally relevant and any act of deception will have consequences that may be morally relevant. Bullshit medical advice is worse than lying to ensure a surprise party remains a surprise.

The point is just that the degree of opprobrium with which we should respond to a case of insincere communication depends in part on whether that insincerity concerns assertion or conversational implicature, and if it concerns assertion then it also depends on whether at the time the offender held the assertion to be false or had no belief about its truth value. These graded responses should be reflected in the attitudes of each member of society, not only because that is required for society to exert this pressure but also because each person has good reasons to preserve their own credibility. Honesty is the best policy. But if you must depart from it, then you should mislead first, bullshit second, and lie only as a last resort.[2]

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