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Does lying necessarily involve stating falsehoods?

Abstract:

This article addresses the question of whether lying inherently requires the expression of objective falsehood. While traditional subjectivist approaches focus on the divergence between a speaker's beliefs and their statements, some contemporary theorists of lying argue that lying necessitates objectively false utterances. I offer a critical analysis of six thought experiments to illuminate the intuitiveness of the subjectivist claim. In explaining the intuitiveness of the traditional view of lying, I point to its fundamentally moral nature—namely, that lying is rooted in acts of will rather than external outcomes.

Keywords:

lying, subjectivism, objectivism, thought experiment

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Introduction

One of the debated issues concerning the concept of lying is whether lying necessarily involves making an objectively false statement. According to the traditional view, lying occurs when (assuming other conditions for lying are met) the liar expresses a statement they believe to be false. Decisive, in this case, is the mismatch between the statement and the speaker's belief. Hence, the traditional position on this condition is referred to as subjectivism.

In recent years, publications have emerged advocating for an objectivist position, according to which one of the necessary conditions for lying is the assertion of an objectively false statement. This means that, for example, if a person mistakenly believing that no one is currently in their house says, "There is someone in my house," they would not be lying if, in fact, someone is in their house at the time of the statement. Several arguments have been proposed in favour of this position. Some (Turi & Turi, 2015; Turi, 2021; Carson, 2006) appeal to intuition, while others refer to the very nature of lying, claiming that lying, by definition, requires a certain potential for effective deception, which can only be achieved by asserting (or implying) an objectively false statement (see Grimaltos & Rosell, 2013; Kallestrup, 2023). Still others argue that lying must involve the assertion of objectively false statements by virtue of the constitutive rules of the practice of assertion (see, e.g., Teichmann, 2024).

In this article, I focus on one aspect of the aforementioned debate: the question of which position, subjectivism or objectivism, is more intuitive. To formulate a compelling answer, I propose considering six thought experiments. Two of these, serving as a starting point, are experiments introduced by Neri Marsili (2021): one referencing the so-called "evil demon scenario" and the other illustrating the possibility of lying in a situation of uncertainty. The subsequent experiments aim to emphasize further the intuitiveness of the subjectivist position on lying. The ultimate explanation for these intuitions seems to lie in the

fact that terms such as “lying” are inherently moral and primarily pertain to acts of will while only secondarily (and not always necessarily) to external outcomes.

Empirical research

Before presenting the announced thought experiments, it is worth dedicating a few words to the argument that the objectivist position is more aligned with the intuitions of most ordinary people. John and Angela Turi conducted empirical studies in which participants were presented with a scenario involving a person named Karen. When asked by government officials where her acquaintance Mary was, Karen replied (believing Mary to be elsewhere) that Mary was at the store, only for it to turn out that Mary was indeed at the store (Turi & Turi, 2015, 2021; Turi, 2021).

In one version of the experiment, participants were asked simple yes-or-no questions, such as whether the protagonist (Karen) lied. The majority of respondents answered in line with subjectivist intuitions. The researchers hypothesized that two factors might have influenced the subjectivist results: i) participants unconsciously identifying with the protagonist’s perspective and ii) their failing to distinguish lying from a failed attempt to lie. In modified versions of the experiment, the questions allowed for more nuanced answers. Instead of simply choosing “yes” or “no,” participants could select options such as (a) “She lied and stated an objective falsehood” or (b) “She attempted to lie but stated the truth.” In these cases, the majority chose objectivist answers.

Wiegmann and his colleagues (Wiegmann, Samland & Waldmann, 2016; Wiegmann & Meibauer, 2019; Wiegmann, 2023) critically evaluated Turi & Turi’s studies by conducting their own empirical research on ordinary people’s intuitions about lying. In one experiment, Wiegmann’s team presented participants with response pairs structured similarly to those in Turi & Turi’s research: “He tried and succeeded” versus “He tried but objectively failed.” In the experiment

relevant to this discussion, the questions pertained to making a promise. The protagonist in the story presented to participants made a promise, which they either managed to keep or failed to keep, depending on the scenario.

Interestingly, in scenarios where the protagonist failed to keep his promise, participants were asked whether the protagonist had actually made a promise or merely attempted to make one (notably, the question did not include the phrase “keep the promise”). Most participants responded that the protagonist merely attempted to make a promise. Wiegmann interprets this result as a priming effect caused by the construction of the question, which may have misled participants into choosing the “tried but failed” option, even in situations where the protagonist had indeed made a promise.

This raises the possibility that participants in Turi & Turi’s experiments were similarly influenced by priming effects. As a result, their responses may not provide reliable evidence for the claim that the objectivist position is more intuitive for ordinary people.

The fact that most people hold subjectivist intuitions about lying does not necessarily mean that the subjectivist thesis itself is intuitive, especially given that some philosophers consider objectivism linguistically intuitive (e.g., Carson, 2006). Therefore, it is important to propose compelling examples of thought experiments that help illustrate the truth of the thesis that, for lying to occur (in addition to other conditions not discussed here), it is not necessary to assert an objectively false statement but rather a statement that the person making it does not believe to be true. These thought experiments aim to enable the reader to assess for themselves which position in the presented debate is more convincing.

Thought Experiments

It seems that the most compelling examples of thought experiments in the currently available literature have been proposed by Neri Marsili (2022). Here are two of them:

Experiment 1. The Vicious Demon

Pinocchio, living in our world, witnessed Lucignolo stealing an apple. He knowingly asserts, “Eugenio stole the apple,” and thus knowingly lies. His twin, Bucocchio, lives in a “vicious demon” world, where the demon deceives the senses of its inhabitants, and he experiences the same phenomena as Pinocchio. Bucocchio also asserts, “Eugenio stole the apple.” Unfortunately, he does not know that his statement is false, but intuitively, both seem to be lying.

Experiment 2. A New Hole

Pinocchio has 20 liras in his pocket and says, “I don’t have 15 liras,” knowing this is false. Bucocchio, his twin, has a new hole in his pocket, and some of his 20 liras have fallen out without him realizing it. He also says, “I don’t have 15 liras.” Intuitively, it seems that both are lying.

Both examples suggest (not only, as Marsili claims, that a liar does not need to know they are stating an objective falsehood, but also) that an objective falsehood does not necessarily have to be uttered for a communicative act to be considered a lie. The protagonists of both experiments are characters possessing the vice of lying. The first experiment can be interpreted as depicting the placement of a consistent liar in two different worlds, W_1 and W_2 . In W_1 , the liar has access to knowledge that enables him to make objectively false statements. In W_2 , he is deprived of the possibility of knowledge but not of his vice as a liar.

If we understand the vice of lying as a disposition to make lies reliably and agree that both Pinocchio and his moral twin, Bucocchio, are employing their disposition to lie, we should conclude that both are lying. Adopting objectivism would lead to the counterintuitive conclusion that Bucocchio lives in a world where external circumstances (beyond Bucocchio's intentions and decisions) prevent his vice as a liar from manifesting in his statements.

In response to the above comment, one could counterargue that the vice of lying manifests not only in actual cases of lying but also in attempts to lie. Thus, thought experiments like the vicious demon scenario may be insufficient to demonstrate the intuitiveness of the subjectivist position. Further experiments might be necessary. Nevertheless, Experiment 2 reveals another flaw in the objectivist thesis. It shows that we apply the concept of lying—contrary to objectivist claims—even in cases where the facts concerning the content of the lie are uncertain.

It is unclear whether Bucocchio in Experiment 2 is making an objectively false statement. He may have lost more than 5 liras, in which case his statement would not qualify as an objective falsehood, and, according to objectivists, he would not be lying. Conversely, if he lost less than 5 liras, objectivists would consider his statement a lie. However, as I assume with Marsili, we have the intuition that determining whether Bucocchio is lying does not require resolving the discussion about the facts. The objectivist position, by contrast, insists that lying cannot be judged until it is definitively established that the statement conflicts with reality.

Experiment 3. The Omnipotent Vicious Demon

Let us return to the malicious demon scenario. Experiment 1 can be reinforced by slightly altering the demon's role. Let us assume that Pinocchio's twin does not merely fall prey to the illusions generated by the demon. Instead, the demon, endowed with almost god-like attributes,

adjusts reality to match the liar's statement, knowing in advance what Bucocchio intends to say.

For example, if Bucocchio says, "I have 100 liras in my pocket," while clearly remembering that he last saw only 20 lire there, the demon intervenes (say, 500 milliseconds before Bucocchio opens his mouth to speak—or precisely at the moment his decision to lie manifests) and ensures that 100 liras appear in his pocket. Under such circumstances, would we say that Bucocchio merely attempted to lie but failed? Or rather, should we conclude that he lied and is a liar as a result of his lies, regardless of the demon's intervention?

If the above modification of the vicious demon experiment is insufficient to address the argument concerning the lack of a clear distinction between lying and a failed attempt to lie, I propose considering additional experiments.

Experiment 4. Marital Infidelity

Mrs. X suspects that her husband is planning to cheat on her. Taking on another identity, she contacts him online. They arrange to meet at a café. Here, we must assume that Mrs. X, by some miraculous means, manages to change her appearance (the choice is left to the reader: she either uses magic or advanced technology). After some time, they both go to a hotel, where the expected act occurs. Then, Mrs. X "removes her mask" and exclaims, "Got you, cheater!"

Analogously to Bucocchio's case of lying, Mr. X's actions seem not to fulfil the condition of objectivity; they do not involve being with someone other than Mr. X's wife. One could say that Mr. X merely believes he is with a woman other than his wife. However, would we not agree with Mrs. X's claim that her husband has indeed cheated on her?

Essentially Moral Terms

What could explain the intuition that lying or infidelity does not require certain external states of affairs (objective falsehood, actual physical interaction with someone other than one's partner)? A strong candidate for such an explanation seems to be that both terms have a distinctly moral character—they are essentially moral. From a moral perspective, the external outcome of an action does not always matter. At least in some cases, particularly those where the external consequences of an act may be beyond the agent's control, the decisive factor for moral evaluation is the intention realized in the decision and the actions taken. An act becomes infidelity at the very moment the intention is carried out in an act, which either coincides with the moment of decision or follows directly afterwards and involves the act of a free (as we assume) will.

Experiment 5. What if We Live in a Simulation?

To support the above thesis, I propose another thought experiment. Let us assume that we are living immersed in a computer simulation. All our actions—such as lying, infidelity, theft, or murder—if we were to follow the objectivist reasoning would ultimately have to be considered failed attempts at these actions. One would have to conclude that, in fact, no acts of infidelity, lying, or similar behaviours ever occur within the simulation.

An objectivist might argue that even a failed attempt can carry negative moral value, for example, through unintended consequences. For instance, a failed act of infidelity can still hurt the would-be betrayed partner; a failed lie, when the intent is exposed, can also cause harm; and a failed murder, although it does not result in death, undermines a sense of security and provokes a desire for revenge, etc. Thus, it would be claimed, the above scenarios do not necessarily support the subjectivist thesis.

Experiment 6. Solipsistic Simulation

In response to such an argument, it is worth considering yet another scenario. Let us assume that each real person has their own simulation, in which they are the only genuine subject with a mind capable of experiences. In the objectivist sense, all essentially moral acts analogous to lying in such a simulation would not be actualized. However, it seems that even in this situation, since decisions were made (and carried out) to state something believed to be false, to betray someone perceived as a real person, or to engage with someone also believed to be real, there is a basis to claim that authentic lies and authentic acts of infidelity occurred. It is so because the terms “lying” and “infidelity” pertain to what occurs within a person’s inner self, which constitutes their distinctly moral character. The examples presented in this article, appealing to our intuitions, seem to support this thesis.

Conclusions

The focus of this reflection was the question of whether lying requires the objective falsehood of a statement. The analysis conducted in this article and the thought experiments suggest that objective falsehood is not necessary for lying. The examples discussed demonstrated that the speaker’s subjective attitude toward the content of their statement can suffice to classify it as a lie, even if the statement is objectively true or its objective truth is unknown.

The fact that lying does not require the objective falsehood of a statement could be explained by recognizing that the concept of lying—like many other concepts, such as that of infidelity—is inherently moral. It pertains primarily to acts of will and the moral stance of the subject, for which their objective consequences do not always play a central role.

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