Assert What You Know: The Problem with Bald–Faced Lies

Joanne Park

Abstract. In "Bald–Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive," Roy Sorensen argues that the existence of bald–faced lies, or lies that do not involve deceit, challenge conventional definitions of lying. As part of his argument, he claims that bald–faced lies are not in themselves bad, as most ethical condemnations of lying target deceit and not the lie itself. In this paper, I challenge this aspect of Sorensen's claim by using Timothy Williamson's distinction from "Knowing and Asserting" between conventional and constitutive rules. I argue that bald–faced lies *are* in themselves bad because they place too much emphasis on conventional rules of assertion at the expense of the constitutive rule of assertion: assert only what one knows. Ultimately, Sorensen is wrong to say that bald–faced lies are morally neutral, as bald–faced lies devalue the constitutive rule of assertion and therefore the practice of assertion itself, which plays a critical role in the sharing of knowledge.

Introduction

In his "Bald-Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive," Sorensen claims bald-faced lies challenge standard accounts of lying, which assume lying involves an intent to deceive. As part of his analysis, Sorensen assesses the moral badness of bald-faced lies as compared to lies involving deception. In his view, bald-faced lies are not in themselves bad because most ethical condemnations of lying either target deceit or badness that is "correlated with the lie." In this paper, I ask whether this assessment is correct. Contrary to Sorensen, I will argue that bald-faced lies are in themselves bad by invoking Timothy Williamson's distinction between conventional and constitutive rules. Ultimately, I identify the wrongness of bald-faced lies in how they value conventional rules of assertion over the constitutive rule of assertion. For this paper, I will stipulate that an assertion is a kind of utterance that directly expresses one's belief.[30]

I will begin by outlining Sorensen's argument for why bald-faced lies are merely correlated with wrongdoing, as well as some of my initial reservations with his approach. I will then introduce Williamson's distinction between conventional and constitutive rules as they pertain to assertion. Based on this

---

[30]Bernard Williams, "Truth, Assertion, and Belief," in *Truth and Truthfulness* (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2002), 78.

distinction, I will propose my alternative account of the badness of bald-faced lying, applying this account to three examples of bald-faced lies that appear in Sorensen's paper. Finally, I will end by presenting several advantages of my account.

Bald-faced lies

Sorensen defines bald-faced lies as undisguised lies or lies that "do not fool anyone."[31] Bald-faced lies occur when the intended audience of the lie knows that the utterance is a lie, and the liar knows that the audience knows that the utterance is a lie. As such, the liar has no intention to deceive the audience. One commonly used example of bald-faced lying involves a student who has been accused of plagiarism by their dean. The dean knows that the student has plagiarized, and the student knows that the dean knows that she has plagiarized. But, because the dean has a reputation for not punishing students who deny plagiarizing, the student lies and says that she did not plagiarize. As a result, she goes unpunished.[32] In this example, the student has no intention to deceive the dean that she has not plagiarized; instead, she lies to avoid being punished.

Deceitful lies, on the other hand, are "disguised" as genuine assertions. For example, if I lie to my parents that I have gone to the library when I have gone to my friend's house, I intend for my parents to believe that I have, in fact, gone to the library. If I know that my parents can see my location, I no longer have any reason for telling this lie. Standard definitions of lying, based on such examples, include intentional deception as a necessary condition of lying. Sorensen's paper is primarily a revision of such accounts. Appealing to the intuition that bald-faced lies must be lies, Sorensen re-defines lies as false assertions that could be believed by someone who only had access to the assertion and not any other evidence: e.g., in the student's case, a random bystander who only heard the assertion "I did not plagiarize" could plausibly believe her.[33]

Sorensen's defense of bald-faced lies

The secondary question in Sorensen's paper is about the morality of bald-faced lying; specifically, he refutes the conventional intuition that bald-faced lies are more wrong than lies with an intention to deceive. He first points out how most moral condemnations of lying are derived from the deception involved. For instance, deontological explanations of why lying is bad is based

---

[31] Roy Sorensen, "Bald-Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2007): 252.

[32] Don Fallis, "What is Lying?," *The Journal of Philosophy* 106, no.1 (Jan. 2009): 43.

[33] Sorensen, "Bald-Faced Lies!," 255; Because this paper does not focus on Sorensen's argument, I only offer a rough sketch of Sorensen's proposed definition of lying.

on how lies betray trust, while utilitarian explanations rely on how deception has bad consequences—neither of which apply to bald-faced lies.[34] Therefore, Sorensen argues, intuitions about the wrongness of bald-faced lies are not based on any common moral theories.

Second, Sorensen addresses the apparent moral wrongness of situations involving bald-faced lies. He proposes that, in such cases, the bald-faced lies are symptomatic of or correlated with some other wrongdoing.[35] Under this proposal, the wrongness of the plagiarism case does not come from the student's bald-faced lie, but from the fact that she was attempting to avoid just punishment.[36] Sorensen justifies this by comparing the student's case to an alternative one, in which the dean's unofficial rule is that he will only punish students who confess. If a student stays silent in the second case, the silence would be as wrong as the bald-faced lie, as both equally correlate with the wrongness of avoiding just punishment.[37] Ultimately, Sorensen labels bald-faced lies as "morally neutral": while they might be correlated with morally wrong action, there are no features of bald-faced lies that render them intrinsically immoral.[38]

I find this approach unsatisfying for two reasons. First, there seems to be an intuitive difference between the student who brazenly lies about whether she has plagiarized and the student who chooses to stay silent, even if both are avoiding punishment. By committing to the obviously false assertion, the student seems to be misusing the practice of assertion and is doubling down on their (false) innocence. Furthermore, even if both students are in the wrong, there is certainly something worse about the dean's rule in the first case, which incentivizes students to avoid just punishment by making an obviously false assertion. But, by not distinguishing between the two cases, Sorensen's account does not allow us to condemn such norms.

Second, Sorensen's proposal does not allow us to condemn bald-faced lies that are not straightforwardly correlated with wrongdoing. To see why this is problematic, we can take up a third case: the school has a rule that students are not allowed to raise their voice, but a student will not be punished for doing so if she makes an assertion denying that she has raised her voice. A student who raises her voice to defend a bullied classmate might, to avoid punishment, utter a bald-faced lie about doing so. In this case, there is no clear correlation to wrongdoing; some may even argue that the student is avoiding *unjust* punishment. If Sorensen means to assign rightness or wrongness to bald-faced lies based on how they correlate with some other goal or consequence,

---

[34]Ibid., 252.
[35]Ibid., 260-262.
[36]Ibid., 261.
[37]Ibid., 261.
[38]Ibid., 263.

the student's bald-faced lie might even be morally *right*.[39] Yet there is still something undesirable about the student's approach of asserting that which is blatantly false—as opposed to acknowledging that she raised her voice to defend her classmate or contesting the rule.

Williamson's account of conventional and constitutive rules

Before I outline my account of the wrongness of bald-faced lies, I will offer some background on Williamson's distinction between conventional and constitutive rules. According to Williamson, conventional rules are contingent and arbitrary, meaning they can be replaced by other conventions or change over time.[40] For example, a conventional rule of soccer might be to shake the referee's hand when you lose. The rule is followed by most players, but not shaking the referee's hand does not mean you are deviating from the game of soccer or that you are no longer playing soccer at all. Over time, the rule might even change, and one might be expected to not shake the referee's hand.

In contrast, constitutive rules are essential to the act to which they pertain.[41] A constitutive rule of soccer is that the ball should only be moved around the field by using one's foot. A player who runs around the field with the ball in their hands goes against the very nature of soccer as a game. Furthermore, if the rules of soccer changed to allow players to play with their hands, the game would be constitutively different from the game of soccer that exists now. However, a constitutive rule being broken does not mean that the rule-breaker is no longer participating in the act; a soccer player who touches the ball is still playing soccer, just in a way that is contrary to the game. Thus, while a constitutive rule does not need to be followed in every instance of an act, if it is eliminated or widely ignored, the act is no longer coherent. Williamson uses this distinction to argue that the constitutive norm of assertion is the knowledge norm of assertion: you must only assert what you know.[42] The knowledge norm best captures how ordinary speakers make assertions, which is to convey what they believe to be true—even if they might not fully justify their assertion, or their belief is wrong. For the sake of this paper, I accept that the knowledge norm is the constitutive norm because Sorensen himself takes it to be true.[43]

---

[39]Ibid., 263; I find this interpretation to be plausible because Sorensen deems bald-faced lies as themselves morally neutral, while considering some of the examples (e.g., the plagiarism case) to be morally wrong based on the wrong action it correlates with.

[40]Timothy Williamson, "Knowing and Asserting," *The Philosophical Review* 105, no. 4 (October 1996): 488.

[41]Williamson, "Knowing and Asserting," 488.

[42]Ibid., 495.

[43]Sorensen, "Bald-Faced Lies!," 255.

The knowledge norm proposal

Given this background, I will now lay out my proposal. I first begin with the premise that, by definition, constitutive rules take priority over conventional rules. The knowledge norm is essential to the practice of assertion because the practice of assertion would break down without it, much like how the game of soccer would break down if there was no constitutive rule about playing with your feet. This is because a fundamental aspect of assertions is that they are used to transmit information, and that there is some intellectual authority attached to the person who makes an assertion.[44] For example, if I assert to my classmate that PHIL 3912 meets on Thursdays, my classmate will take me to know that this is the case, and she might even act based on that assertion. Without this the aspect, there would be no purpose to making assertions, as there would be no utility or consequence to making such claims. Conventional rules of assertion, on the other hand, are inessential. For example, take a convention that you should avoid impolite assertions about other people in a social setting. One can make an assertion that breaks this rule without violating the purpose of assertions; for example, you can correctly assert that someone's child is bad at soccer, thus conveying that information to the child's parents, even if the assertion comes off as offensive.

Second, bald-faced lies violate the knowledge norm. Sorensen states that lying involves asserting what one does not believe, and one cannot know something which one does not believe. For the sake of this paper, I stipulate that beliefs generally aim for truth (and that one cannot believe something one does not consider true), because this account of belief is most consistent with Sorensen's paper. Thus, when one utters a bald-faced lie, one asserts what one knows not to be true, which violates the knowledge norm of assertion.

Third, bald-faced lies are often used to follow conventional rules of assertion, as demonstrated by commonly used examples of bald-faced lies. To evidence this claim, I will go over three examples that Sorensen brings up in his paper: the plagiarism case, which I have already introduced, the chicken stealing case, and the accountant case.

In the plagiarism case, student utters the bald-faced lie because of the dean's policy, which incentivizes the student to follow it at the expense of the knowledge norm. As such, the bald-faced lie occurs when the conventional rule is prioritized over the constitutive rule.

The chicken-stealing case is as follows: a chicken thief is caught by his father-in-law with two dead chickens in his hand at 5AM. The father-in-law knows that the son-in-law is the thief, and the son-in-law knows that his father-in-law knows that he is a thief. Yet, the son-in-law asserts that he was checking in on the coop and scared off the real thief. To preserve family unity, the

---

[44]Williams, "Truth, Assertion, and Belief," 78.

father-in-law does not further interrogate his son-in-law. [45] In this case, it is less clear whether the son-in-law was explicitly aware of the fact that, if he lied, the father-in-law would leave him unpunished; however, he was likely betting on the fact that the importance of preserving family unity would incentivize the father-in-law to acquiesce. In this case, the conventional rule is asserting that which is best for family unity; once again, the conventional rule is prioritized over the knowledge norm when the two are in conflict.

The final case is the accountant case, where a corporate accountant tells the public that he had no knowledge of the company's fiscal improprieties. Even though there is public knowledge that the accountant had knowledge of the improprieties, which the accountant is aware of, he makes the assertion because the legal standard of evidence is higher than the standard of evidence for knowledge; until he is legally proven to have known of the improprieties, he cannot be punished, even if most people know that he did.[46] The accountant tells the bald-faced lie to be consistent with the legal norm for what one can assert—i.e., a conventional rule—at the expense of the knowledge norm.

Thus, the problem with bald-faced lying is that when conventional norms of assertion come into conflict with the constitutive norm of assertion, i.e., the knowledge norm, they involve prioritizing the conventional norms. The practice of assertion does not depend on institutional, social, or legal norms, because such norms are arbitrary and subject to change; it is possible for a family to value honest character, or for a school to demand politeness. But, as stated above, the knowledge norm is intrinsic to the practice of assertion.

The value of truth

To elaborate on why violating the knowledge norm is problematic, we can apply a primitive version of Kant's universalizability test to the constitutive norm of assertion. Kant's universalizability test envisions a world in which there is a "law" that permits everyone to lie whenever it is in their self-interest. My primitive version does not involve the creation of a law but envisions the widespread violation of the knowledge norm. This would result in a world in which individuals feel no obligation to make assertions based on knowledge, and feel no obligation to make it appear as though their assertions are based on knowledge. In such a world, the practice of assertion would break down, because statements would no longer be a reliable way to convey information. Deeming bald-faced lies to be morally neutral undermines the practice of assertions and, by extension, their critical role in transmitting knowledge.

This approach addresses the two concerns I identified with Sorensen's account. First, it more precisely explains why bald-faced lies misuse and ultimately undermine the practice of assertions. Additionally, by clarifying the

---

[45] Sorensen, "Bald-Faced Lies!," 254

[46] Ibid., 261.

superior status of the knowledge norm of assertion, it offers a way to condemn constitutive norms that incentivize lying — the most flagrant example being the dean's plagiarism rule. Conventional norms of assertion should not undermine constitutive norms. Second, by identifying what is intrinsically wrong with bald-faced lies, this approach does not rely on the goodness or badness of the actions, circumstances, or consequences that are correlated with bald-faced lies. Regardless of whether the bald-faced lie is told to achieve a good or bad objective, it is wrong because it undermines the knowledge norm of assertion; widespread use of the bald-faced lie to achieve good objectives would still lead to the breakdown of information transmission.

Sorensen objects that this approach fails to consider lying to oneself. He argues that "[t]here is no hope of a successful (synchronic) deception when you are lying to yourself," even if you might believe the lie later. Because the perpetuator of the lie is identical to the recipient, there is no asymmetry that makes the lie problematic.[47] Such an objection, however, still operates on the assumption that lies are only wrong if they involve a power imbalance or violation of trust between the perpetuator and the recipient. This assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, there are many instances in which lies are condemned, even if the recipient is in a position of power over the perpetuator: a child who lies to their parent, and even the plagiarism kid of the student lying to the dean. Second, does not contest that there might be something intrinsically wrong with making a false assertion for "external reasons," which is what my account is concerned with. Finally, Sorensen's argument only proves that lying to oneself might be less bad than lies to others; it does not contest the common intuition that self-lying can be harmful to oneself.

Another objection might be that bald-faced lies cannot truly harm the practice of assertion because they occur in isolated instances in response to specific conventional rules. For instance, the dean knows not to believe the student's statement—even if he uses it to determine whether she will be punished—because he is aware of his own conventional rule. However, the examples given for bald-faced lying indicate that there are a wide-ranging set of contexts in which conventional rules disincentivize telling the truth. Indeed, the scope of social norms that concern assertion, whether it be politeness, respect, or family unity, suggest that bald-faced lies do not require specifically delineated rules, like in the plagiarism case.

Furthermore, this objection does not consider an additional dimension of bald-faced lying: what Sorensen calls "escalating absurdity." Because the bald-faced liar wants to be on the record for their lie, they are willing to continually make statement that "double down" on their original lie and are increasingly more absurd.[48] If, after the student stated that she did not plagiarize, the dean asked her if her paper was identical to the paper she plagiarized (assuming the

---

[47]Ibid., 263.
[48]Ibid., 253.

student did copy it word-for-word), the student might further state that they are different. This escalates the absurdity of the original lie, because the fact that the papers are identical is even more obvious to the recipient than the fact that she did not plagiarize. Not only does this phenomenon evidence the self-reinforcing nature of bald-faced lies, but it further emphasizes the importance of condemning bald-faced lies in themselves, as "escalating absurdity" is inherent to the bald-faced lie and how it clearly contradicts what all relevant parties know to be the case.

Conclusion

Ultimately, though Sorensen may be right to criticize those condemnations of bald-faced lies that merely rely on the wrongness of deception, he is wrong to conclude that they are morally neutral. By focusing on the relationship between bald-faced lies and the knowledge norm of assertion, it is possible to condemn bald-faced lies in themselves—as well as the conventions that incentivize them to occur.

Bibliography

Fallis, Don. "What is Lying?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 106, no.1 (Jan. 2009): 43.

Sorensen, Roy. "Bald-Faced Lies! Lying Without the Intent to Deceive." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88 (2007): 252.

Williams, Bernard. "Truth, Assertion, and Belief." In *Truth and Truthfulness*, 78. United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Williamson, Timothy. "Knowing and Asserting." *The Philosophical Review* 105, no. 4 (October 1996): 488.