



Epsilon Theory

Even When I Lie

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So what does that make you? Good guys? Don't kid yourselves. You're no better'n me. You just know how to hide...and how to lie. Me? I don't have that problem. I always tell the truth. Even when I lie.

- *Tony Montana's speech to restaurant patrons from Scarface (1983)*

Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow. The totalitarian mass leaders based their propaganda on the correct psychological assumption that, under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness.

- *The Origins of Totalitarianism by Hannah Arendt (1951)*

Justice and honesty will be the first topics of our speech, especially as we are asking for alliance; because we know that there can never be any solid friendship between individuals, or union between communities that is worth the name, unless the parties be persuaded of each other's honesty.

- *History of the Peloponnesian War, Book 3, by Thucydides*

When I was young, a Sunday School teacher presented our class with a hypothetical.

Imagine for a moment, he said, that a criminal came into the church today and seized your parents. He took them up to the front of the church and pointed a gun at both of their heads. Unless you denied your faith, he would kill them both. *What should you do?*

A heavy question for a 12-year old, it always disturbed me. ‘Always’, I say, because it was asked of me more than once. It came up shockingly often, although I suspect given differing sensibilities that you might consider once shocking enough. Perhaps it was the favorite brainteaser of a teacher bored of 30 years of giving the same pictorial lessons of Zacchaeus climbing the tree. I think it was a reflection of some evangelical churches’ occasionally morbid obsession with the end times described in Revelations. There was a time when ‘What will you do *when* you are persecuted for your faith’ occupied much of my mind. ‘What if Jesus returns before a girl ever kisses you?’ occupied most of the rest. There was really no doubt in any of our minds that it was going to happen during our lifetimes. Probably much sooner.

The intended moral of the story was that there is no valid justification for sin. To lie by denying Christ was the greatest of these sins. You will be disappointed to learn that the typical lesson does not discuss the two last people who were asked if they knew Him; the one who lied became Pope, and the one who told the truth hanged himself and, if Luke’s vivid account is to be believed, exploded. Instead, the usual lesson proceeds from Job to a reading from the Sermon on the Mount. You know this sermon, even if you don’t know that you know it. Blessed are the meek, etc. You may not know that this is where it ends up:

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Matthew 5:30

More heavy stuff. In a spectacle to be repeated in a thousand thousand Dodge Caravans and Chevy Suburbans on the way to Old Country Buffet after church, the children turn their Sunday School lesson around on their parents. *What would you do, mom and dad, if I were brought to the front of the church?* I bet that if you could look in on those parents in those minivans, you’d see just about all of them look their children straight in the eyes and tell them the same thing: *I would lie a million times before I let someone hurt you.*

For the most part, our moral systems end up with a similar basic set of rules. Don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t cheat, don’t lie. The problems arise in weighing conflicts between rules within our value system, or between multiple value systems. Common sense allows us to easily resolve some of these conflicts. *Don’t lie, but if the alternative would result in the murder of your children, lie until your lips turn numb.* More often, the units we must weigh are irreducible and incompatible. How many lies offset an act of generosity? The answers to these questions are non-falsifiable, even if various ethical systems purport to have adopted more objective means to answer them. That means that we will disagree. It also means that, as much as we might like to say ‘the ends don’t justify the means’, we are often left with no choice but to judge the rightness of actions by calculating their expected consequences, and by weighing unweighable goods and bads.

This ground was well-trod among ethicists hundreds of years ago. You need a 4,000-word, dime store survey version of it from me today like you need a hole in the head. But if we would be students of the widening gyre of politics and the black hole of financial markets, there is one ethical topic we must grapple with directly and urgently. It is the thing which Thucydides considered a prerequisite for union within a

community. It is what Hannah Arendt considered the first casualty of a state veering toward totalitarianism.

Honesty.

Like any other ethical idea, honesty may inevitably come into conflict with other principles. It is these conflicts and how they are resolved or justified, whether rightly or wrongly, that empower the widening gyre. In simpler terms: our differing reasons for becoming liars are what are causing us to fall apart. Understanding those reasons will play a large role in how we chart a path back to sanity. **The way I see it, there are three reasons a man becomes a liar: he believes that he must, he believes that he may, or he believes it serves a Greater Truth.**

Because He Believes He Must

You may not remember the name Muhammad Saeed al-Sahhaf. A one-time attendee of the University of Arizona and erstwhile aspiring English teacher, this man is probably better known to you as Baghdad Bob. In his capacity as Information Minister for the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, he gained fame for issuing preposterous lies at regular press briefings during the US-led invasion in 2003, like announcing 'there are no American infidels in Baghdad' over the unique whine of the turbine engines used to power the American M1A1 tanks that were maybe a few hundred yards away from where he stood.

There's something else you may not know about Baghdad Bob: He also used to read the names of the political enemies Hussein's government executed.

I think most people, if asked whether Baghdad Bob's must-see pressers made him evil, would say 'no.' That isn't because those people don't believe that lying is wrong. They probably do. It's because they have thought through the likely consequences of his lying. It's because they regarded Al-Sahaaf with empathy. Everyone knew that everyone knew that he was lying, and Al-Sahaaf knew that they knew it. We all concluded that there was probably little harm caused by his lying, and knew as well as he that his life expectancy was very much in question if he told the truth.



Even when there are ascertainable consequences to lying to protect our lives, most of us still demonstrate a great deal of empathy. In the Vietnam War, John McCain lent his voice to a Radio Hanoi propaganda recording. In it, he attested to being the aggressor, and praised the quality medical care, food and treatment he received at the hands of the North Vietnamese. Would this have been demoralizing to other POWs? Empowering to the enemy? Yes, possibly. Yet McCain underwent such torture and abuse to extract those statements that few – except for some meta-game morons who used this in campaigns against him for public office – would take any moral issue with his actions. Even if he hadn't layered on years of courage and selflessness as a POW, McCain would almost certainly have been forgiven this lapse on one simple basis: None of us, being honest, could imagine doing otherwise.

As a rule, our willingness to tolerate those of us who become liars because we must is dependent on our capacity for **empathy**.

Because He Believes He May

I have two sons - a 2-year old and a 3-year old.

When the boys come down from their room together in the morning, our routine includes asking the older of the two if he slept well. *And did you have any dreams?* At this point, his eyes begin to scan the room for objects. *Yes, Daddy, I dreamt about a...robot...dinosaur...in a rocket ship to...Jupiter!* The younger of the two witnesses our eager response and conjures up a slightly modified story, usually with some detail to make it more impressive. *I dreamt about TWO Jovian robot dinosaur astronauts, daddy.*

In the same way that I lied to you by implying that either of my sons have ever even heard the word 'Jovian' because it's funny (to me) and because I know that you know that I'm making that up, each of my sons is lying through his baby teeth. Because of course they are. Two-year olds are liars. And that's OK, because we all know that we all know that two-year olds are liars.

Our permissiveness toward certain lies extends far beyond childish boundary-stretching, of course. In most kinds of small talk, we are culturally expected to lie. When we ask Janice about her weekend, we expect her to tell us that it was fine, even if it wasn't. When we ask Marvin how the kids' soccer games went, we expect him to tell us how much he enjoyed watching children run around in a horde very, very slowly for several hours. Even our question is a bit of a lie, standing in for something else. It's us telling a person we love that we were thinking about their family. In exchange, they express gratitude for our concern by not giving us more details about the drying paint that is kids' soccer. Even in most negotiations (at least in most western cultures), there is some expectation of dishonesty. We expect the car salesman to tell us he's got to speak to his manager, even though he knows and we know he's just going to go check his phone – or if the dealership is dumb enough to put the 'manager's office' in view – to sit with the manager for 5-10 minutes of complete unproductivity for all involved. We must find a place to tell someone that something is our final offer, even if we know that it isn't.

People tell all sorts of other lies because it is common knowledge that they may. It is common knowledge to expect home-team bias from local sportswriters and journalists. It is common knowledge that the cable guy's 9-12 window means 1:30. It is common knowledge that when someone says they are 5 minutes away, they are 10-15 minutes away. It is common knowledge that the old '24-hour bug' probably doesn't exist. Most of us learn to adopt patience with those who lie because they may, but that patience is not infinite.

Sometimes, of course, we tolerate those who lie because they may because the lies really don't matter, or because we are indifferent and lazy. But in just as many cases, our willingness to tolerate those of us who become liars because they may is dependent on our capacity for **mercy**.

Because It Serves a Greater Truth

There is a third reason a person becomes a liar, and it is probably the most powerful: He becomes a liar because he believes it is the right thing to do. Because it serves a Greater Truth.

What are these Greater Truths?

Well, they can be all sorts of things, but they are usually grand concepts like duty, loyalty, honor, fidelity, fairness and justice. It is not hard to imagine examples. What if you were hiding someone in your home who was fleeing from oppression? Would you be willing to lie about their whereabouts to keep them safe? As a soldier of your country under interrogation, would you be willing to tell a lie to protect the secret

plans you know? If you were compelled to testify against your spouse, would you lie in their defense? OK, maybe the last one depends on your relationship with your spouse and what they did, but the point is that there are very obviously cases where honesty gives way to some greater moral value.

Fortunately, in modern America we rarely have an interrogator's gun to our heads. We have little need to hide others from persecution. Hell, many courts in the US cannot even compel you to testify against your spouse. Our civil society provides ample remedies and avenues for redress to conflicts between things we know to be true and things we believe to be *important*. And so we are rarely called to consider the relative merits of truth and Greater Truth. Rarely, but not never. There are some social and cultural ideas which are true, which are important, and for which we nevertheless reach an impasse where huge political or social blocs believe – not without reason – that there is no civil redress for their concern. This is invariably the result of the perception of an *uneven playing field*.

If you knew that something was true AND you knew that it was critically important AND you knew that nothing else in your power – not voting, not debating, not engaging other people – could change it, *then* would you lie? Then would it be...*right* to lie? In a sense, you see, like Tony Montana, we would be telling the truth, even when we were lying. It is bewitching logic.

I think there are two such Greater Truths governing our politics.

Our Greater Truths	
Political Left	Political Right
The deck is stacked in favor of the wealthy, the white and the male, probably in that order. Systems responsible for dispensing justice do not serve society equally.	The media, academia and the entertainment industry have created monopolies on the stories we tell, and they are hopelessly biased against conservative values and citizens.

For my part, I believe that each of these ideas is true AND that each of these ideas is important. But that's what I think and believe. You may disagree. Now let me tell you what I know. I know that for most of us, when we read these two items together, the bile will rise from our stomach to our throat just a bit. I know that for most of us, our skin will get redder, hotter to the touch, just to be forced to *consider* this idea next to this other one, which isn't nearly as important or maybe not even a real thing!

Let me tell you something else I know. I know that there are maybe two hundred million Americans who feel desperate about their Greater Truth right now, regardless of how important it is to you or me. We believe these things so passionately that we will devote our political lives to convincing more people of their truth and importance. We are so fearful of the damage to our society and our values if we lose these battles, because they are existential. We would do just about anything. Argue with relatives and strangers on the internet? Hell, we do that just for fun! Would we campaign? Sure. Would we give money? Sure.

Would we tolerate lying?

Ah. No?

Then let me ask it a different way. If it meant passing policies that helped the historically disadvantaged reclaim the American Dream, would we tolerate the forceful redefinition of words like bigot and racist to refer not to people who we witnessed treating people differently based on some inherent trait (as it did for

hundreds of years), but to refer to people who for some reason opposed our platform of policies designed to tear down unjust institutions? If it meant leveling the playing field dominated by the wealthy and powerful, would we tolerate the presentation of news in ways that actively sought to take those institutions and people to task in exaggerated ways, even if doing so skewed coverage and stepped over the line into opinion and analysis from time to time?

Let me ask it yet another way. If it meant creating a counterbalance to the overwhelmingly biased and unfair media narratives that label every conservative point of view as hate-driven and bigoted, would we tolerate the creation of news networks which are even more aggressive in their mixing of news and opinion? Would we tolerate being led politically by a man who lies constantly and brazenly, just to offset the unbalanced landscape created by our political opponents?

Unlike the other reasons we lie, it isn't empathy or mercy that govern our reaction. Our willingness to tolerate those of us who lie in service of a Greater Truth is dependent on whether or not we share their belief in the primacy of that Greater Truth. We lie and tolerate these lies not because we must. Not because we may. But because we have convinced ourselves that we should.

And THAT is our greatest lie, the principal tool of our present widening gyre.

What Now?

For at least two more years, until the next 'most important election of our lives', parties and people will insist that we must argue about and determine who is more wrong and who is more responsible for our current polarized political state. In fact, I strongly suspect that the majority of email and comment responses will be about exactly those two questions. The word 'bothsideism' will make its inevitable, ignominious appearance. And sure, maybe you could make a compelling argument one way or another that there is no comparison. One side has gone way out on a limb, bears the brunt of the responsibility, and there's no other way around it. Even so, we would still reach the same conclusion:

It. Does. Not. Matter.

I mean, sure, it matters if we're tallying up points in some imaginary competition. It matters if we are so delusional as to think that a single American is sitting out there determining which policy platform to support and vote for based on our arguments about which party or individual is more to blame for present political polarization.

But here's something that does matter: If 40% of us believe that the other 40% is irredeemably hateful and bigoted, and that 40% of us believe the other 40% hates us, our country and its values, **we have no country**. As well-intentioned and well-founded as our Greater Truths may be, if we press ahead with our willingness to pursue fundamentally dishonest strategies with one another in support of those Greater Truths, **we have no country**. Or, as Thucydides put it:

There can never be any solid friendship between individuals, or union between communities that is worth the name, unless the parties be persuaded of each other's honesty.

Unfortunately, I think we're beyond that. Could you really be persuaded? Could I? No. The question for those who still want to be a country together is this: What must I do to **convince** you of my honesty?

What can members of the political left who still want a country do to convince the other 40% of their honesty? They can start openly talking about and stop ignoring and denying the overwhelming influence of progressives in the media, entertainment and academia. They can stop exploiting 'hate' language to adjudicate any disagreement over political policy. **In every political interaction they have, they can work to suspend every instinct that causes them to believe that the worth and moral value of their fellow citizens are defined by their political opinions.**

What can members of the political right who still want a country do to convince the other 40% of their honesty? **They can stop justifying lies and liars in support of the *Greater Truth* of vast left-wing biases in academia, entertainment and media.** Lose elections. Lose control of the government. Yeah, maybe that means Beto skateboards into Washington to nominate Ginsburg's replacement. Do it anyway. And do it for three reasons: do it because, in the long run, it will help the ideas of a party built on individual responsibility and economic freedom. Reagan doesn't happen without Goldwater. Do it because it will be necessary to maintain a functioning, non-authoritarian society. Do it because it's the right thing to do.

The alternative is that we can all keep trying to convince ourselves that we're always *really* telling the truth, even when we lie. But I'm telling you now: that strategy is as poisonous to its source as the target. And it only ends one way.



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