Telling lies for a better world?

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Introduction

Lies have a bad reputation. Telling the truth is normally considered to be a good thing. One conventional view of lying is that it is bad in itself and should be avoided at all costs. This is the absolutist view of Immanuel Kant. Another conventional view is that the consequences of lying are often bad, so lying should be avoided except in extreme circumstances. Bok (1978), in a classic treatment, argues that lying should be kept to a minimum because its consequences are so often undesirable.

Scholars have followed virtue, devoting vast efforts to studying truth and all but ignoring the study of lying. In the past two decades, though, a number of authors have challenged conventional wisdom, arguing that lying is not as bad as normally thought and that a number of other beliefs about lying are misconceived (Bailey, 1991; Barnes, 1994; Ekman, 1985; Ford, 1996; Lewis and Saarni, 1993; Nyberg, 1993; Robinson, 1996).

This revisionist approach to lying has developed in parallel with postmodernism but is largely separate from it. Postmodernists reject the idea that there is a single truth, especially in the form of a grand explanatory narrative, instead focussing on processes for establishing regimes of truth and falsehood. But postmodernists have little to say about lying; few of them would be happy with the allegation that their own writings are intentional deceptions.[1]

Anarchists have adopted various attitudes to truth, ranging from the conventional positivist belief in the existence of objective reality that can be approached through scientific inquiry to various formulations of relativism, but seem not to have given much scrutiny to lying. Many anarchists have seen it as important to make people aware of the lies of governments, as a means of promoting their support for social change. Anarchists have been prominent in exposing the deceptions of revolutionary parties that promise liberation for the proletariat but deliver new forms of domination.

Governments and revolutionary leaders may lie, but should anarchists? Can lying be a valid part of a participatory process of human emancipation?

Many anarchists put a high value on rational persuasion. For example, this perspective is often expressed in columns in the anarchist fortnightly *Freedom*. Lying

does not seem to mesh well with such an approach. Another anarchist approach is direct action, typified by the Black Bloc in anticapitalist protests. Although participants might hide their identity and their plans, they are not systematically deceptive about their goals or methods. On the contrary, it is police infiltrators and agents provocateurs who are most prone to lie about their intentions and behave deceptively. These examples suggest that anarchists are likely to be opposed to systematic lying. For my purposes, though, it is not necessary to identify a single anarchist orientation to truth and lying.

My approach here is to survey revisionist ideas about lying, highlighting points that might be relevant to the anarchist project. This survey will begin with a few preliminary definitional points and then proceed to look at individual lying and institutional lying. The final section outlines some implications for anarchists.

Preliminaries

Ekman (1985: 41) defines lying as "a deliberate choice to mislead a target without giving any notification of the intent to do so." This includes both falsehoods and concealing the truth, an important point because many people rationalise their deceptions by thinking that the only real lies are intentional falsehoods. Ekman's definition also encompasses nonverbal deception. A smile or gesture can be a lie just as much as a statement.

Another part of the definition is that lying involves a choice that is deliberate. An unintentional falsehood is not a lie. A person who sincerely believes that the Holocaust did not occur does not lie by saying so, though others may be able to show that there are deceptions involved in the case for Holocaust denial (Evans, 2001). People who have delusions, such as that they are being spied upon by aliens, are not liars.

Ekman's definition excludes from the category of lying what might be called "domains of acknowledged deception." Novels and other works of fiction involve deliberate falsehoods, but because everyone knows they are not intended to describe reality accurately, they are seldom counted as lying. (When fiction aims to depict a "deeper truth" beyond superficial facts, deception is certainly possible.) Similarly, in games such as poker, deception is expected and not counted as lying. In a game of soccer, when a player feints one way and runs another, wrong-footing the opponent, this is considered skilful play rather than unfair deception. Magicians impress their audiences with amazing deceptions, again without anyone suggesting that they are lying. It is only when the domains of truth-telling and deliberate deception are mixed that there is cause for concern. A work of fiction posing as non-fiction — such as the fake Hitler diaries — may be condemned as a fraud. In poker, giving deceptive clues about one's hand is considered part of the game but stacking the deck is not.

A clear definition is vital in discussions of lying because so many people think that lying is a terrible thing. The emotional weight attached to the idea is suggested by the fact that there is no formal penalty for lying in the British parliament, but accusing another member of parliament of being a liar is enough to be thrown out of the chamber. Therefore, when people lie, or want to say that someone else is lying, they are likely to call it something else or otherwise define it away. Euphemisms abound, with new ones coined regularly, such as "being economical with the truth." Ironically, such euphemisms are themselves a form of lying.

Individual Lying

Although truth is put on a pedestal, lying in ubiquitous. Children learn to lie at an early age, often being carefully taught. "Tell grandmother how much you like her gift." "You should never say that to your father!" Parents regularly lie to their children, by commission or omission, and children eventually find out and learn from their parents' example. In the classic double bind, children are expected to join in a lie that everyone pretends does not exist, such as statements of "We love you children dearly" while they are starved of affection.

Some literal lies, such as the greeting "How are you?" and the response "Fine," are matters of convention and do not even fit Ekman's definition of lying, assuming everyone involved knows what is expected. Lies in the course of business are routine: "It was a pleasure to assist you." Lies of politeness, such as "I really enjoyed that party," are standard. Lies are commonly used to bolster someone's self-esteem, often being invited by the target: "How do I look?" "You look great." In relationships, some deceptions are ongoing, because to speak the truth would be too damaging. This might involve not voicing thoughts about sexual performance or simply laughing at the same unfunny jokes.

Revisionists believe that the prevalence of lying should be acknowledged. Most of them also argue that in many cases lying is better than telling the truth. The classic case is when you live in Nazi-occupied Europe and Nazis come to the door asking "Are there any Jews here?" Most people would say that lying to save the Jews' lives is morally justified.[2] There are also less dramatic examples. A person about to die may be told various comforting things. If a person has low self-esteem, lies may make their life more tolerable, without significant harm to them or others. The general point is that though there is value in truth-telling, it is not an overriding value: sometimes other values — such as saving lives or improving the quality of life — are more important than truth. Revisionists would say that the value of telling the truth is often overrated.

This only applies to some sorts of lies, though, namely those that can be called benign. It is reasonable to oppose malicious lies intended to harm others. Barnes

(1994: 164) says that by being better aware of the prevalence of lying, people will be in a better position to accept benign lies and oppose malicious lies.

Distinguishing between different sorts of lies is not always easy and, indeed, deciding what counts as a lie can be tricky. Commentators on lying frequently remark on how lying is situation-specific. Bailey (1991: 6) gives the following example:

> I was puzzled and offended by polite young Indians who responded to a request by assuring me that they would 'do the necessary,' all the time (as I realized later) having no intention of doing it. Eventually I came to learn that in their world the direct refusal of a request constitutes a forceful claim to superiority. Indeed, it suggests gross disrespect and would be near enough in our [US] culture to saying 'The hell I will! Go find some other sucker!' So the apparent false promises are not that at all; they count not as lies but rather as polite fictions that preserve someone's identity and self-respect and maintain harmonious relations.

Bailey gives examples from various cultures, concluding that it is often difficult to determine what is a lie, a problem that undermines some of the more moralistic and philosophical assessments of lying, such as the well-known treatment by Bok (1978), who focusses on clear-cut lies. The general point here is that lying cannot be deduced directly from a statement, but requires a careful assessment of the culture and situation (Barnes 1994: 166).

One of the most challenging concepts associated with lying is self-deception, which can be characterised as lying to oneself. This seems to assume that there are two selves, one that knows the truth and the other that refuses to acknowledge it, but a careful examination (Ford, 1996; Nyberg, 1993) can make the concept of practical value.[3] Like lying, self-deception is widespread. For example, most people overrate their own abilities, contributions and attractiveness. Surveys reveal that something like 80% of people believe they are better than average drivers (Frank and Cook, 1995: 103ff). When co-authors of a scientific paper are asked separately about their percentage contributions, the sum of the parts usually adds up to more than 100% and, in the case of papers with many authors, sometimes to more than 200%!

Ford (1996) says that a key reason for lying is to aid self-deception, which in turn is carried out to maintain self-esteem. For example, a person whose self-worth is tied to involvement in an activist group might maintain the self-deception that the group is really important, facilitating this by lies about the reputation of the group or the number of people who attended rallies, and lying by omitting to mention the group's failures and in-fighting. Not only does self-deception stimulate a person to lie, but it also encourages *others* to lie. Those who listen to the

self-deceiving activist may conspire in the lies about the group, not challenging exaggerations and omissions. It takes a peculiar courage — or foolishness — to tell someone that their committed efforts are useless or misdirected and that their personal style is annoying. Concerning lies for maintaining one's self-esteem and the self-esteem of others, Ford (1996: 278) concludes that "People who are told what they want to hear usually do not regard it as a lie." This is not just a minority, either: "Few people can tolerate the unadulterated truth on a nonstop basis."

There is research showing that most people have exaggerated ideas of their own importance in the world, exaggerated compared to the assessments of others. This inflated sense of importance seems linked to mental health, because many of those who have a more realistic assessment of their role in the world suffer from depression. As a result, it can be argued that some level of lying and self-deception is necessary for normal mental functioning.

Most people believe that they can detect when someone is lying, but actually few can tell the difference. This is not surprising, given that children at a relatively young age learn to lie to their parents. Ekman (1985) carried out experiments in which potential nursing students were informed they needed to hide their emotions on seeing a graphic video of burn victims and amputations — a career-relevant skill. Some students could disguise their emotions much more successfully than others, but there were no great differences between the good and bad liars on personality tests. This experiment is just one of many investigations that Ekman has made into the practicalities of lying. He has found that only a very few individuals are really good at detecting lies, whereas many who think they are good at it — such as police who interrogate suspects — can do no better than chance.

In order to lie convincingly, it is helpful to prepare one's story carefully (to avoid being caught out in contradictions), to practise, and to mask one's emotions. This is because lies can be revealed through both words and through the body, especially the face. Ekman found that most lies are accompanied by tell-tale body markers, notably by tiny movements of muscles in certain facial muscles, occurring just before a deceptive "mask" — such as a smile — is imposed. Observing these body markers can reveal when a person is lying, but sensitivity is needed. It is not a simple matter of saying that people lie when they sweat, blink their eyes rapidly or look away, since some people do these things, or adopt other gestures or micro-muscle movements, on a regular basis. Markers need to be assessed in context, in particular in relation to a person's normal non-lying behaviour.

Ekman believes that it is easier to teach people to detect lies — by showing how to observe markers in context — than it is to teach them to be convincing liars, and has laid out a scientific foundation for lie detection. Similarly, Dimitrius and Mazzarella (1998) set out an approach to "people-reading," observing as much as possible about a person and then making a judgement. They recommend interact-

ing with a person, looking for patterns, paying attention to physical appearance, the wider environment, speech and actions, and then making a judgement.

Lie-detection techniques do not work for all liars. So-called "natural liars" do not exhibit the normal physiological signs of lying. Polygraph machines, so-called "lie detectors," are really emotion detectors and can be fooled in various ways. Natural liars cannot be picked up through a polygraph. However, many lies, even by the most convincing liars, can be detected by observing discrepancies between what they say and external evidence: if a person claims to have been in a particular place at a particular time but photographic and other evidence reveals the person's presence elsewhere, this makes a strong case for either lying or delusion.

Despite the ubiquity of lying, there is a widespread "truth bias," namely an assumption that most people are telling the truth. The truth bias varies from person to person, with those in higher status positions more likely to be thought to tell the truth. This works to the advantage of white-collar criminals, for example, because judges and juries have a harder time believing they will blatantly lie (Robinson, 1996: 86). The truth bias also varies from culture to culture.

In summary, lying is ubiquitous in everyday life, yet few people can reliably tell when someone else is lying. Self-deception is possibly even more difficult to detect — in oneself — since others are subtly encouraged to lie to maintain self-deceptions. Only some lies are damaging. Many lies are beneficial for targets and other lies help to regulate self-esteem. It may be worthwhile to make people aware of the prevalence of lying, in order to better be able to oppose malicious lies.

Institutional Lying

When lies are made on behalf of large groups, this can be called institutional lying. Ultimately, individuals create institutional lies, though responsibility can be difficult to assign. More generally, it is possible to refer to "public lying," namely lying in the public sphere, in contrast to individual lying which is commonly in the private sphere, though the boundaries between private and public lying can be difficult to draw.

Government-related politics is a prime area for institutional lying (Edelman, 1971). Politicians regularly lie, though they just as regularly deny it. When politicians' lies are exposed, this is conventionally interpreted as an individual failure, with no implications for other politicians or for political life generally. President Richard Nixon lied about his knowledge of the Watergate affair until tapes were made public, making his lies untenable. Politicians become adept at speaking ambiguously so that their lies can more easily be denied. George Bush Sr made the mistake of being too prominent and definite in his famous promise "Read my lips, no new taxes," which he subsequently broke as president. More commonly,

campaign promises are quietly ditched after elections with little justification or publicity.

Institutional lying is pervasive in war time, and often the existence of censorship and disinformation is acknowledged. Reports of military victories and enemy atrocities are routine. Hitler was a master of political and military lying, but such methods are far from rare. The so-called Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964, used by the US administration to gain Congressional support for the Vietnam war, was a lie. Lies of omission are even more common. When, in the countdown to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, US officials castigated Iraqi military use of chemical weapons in the 1980s, they neglected to mention that at the time the US government supported Saddam Hussein's regime, supplied it with weapons and did not seriously criticise its use of chemical weapons.

Government lies and self-deception about atrocities feed into the individual human penchant for denial and self-deception. Human rights groups such as Amnesty International must develop sophisticated strategies to overcome these powerful mechanisms of government and individual denial (Cohen, 2001).

Another prime area for institutional lying is advertising, a haven for deception. Some of the most effective lies are image ads, where for example cigarette smoking is associated with clean mountain air or masculine cowboys. There is no verbal lying here, but the deception is deep-seated.

Some occupations are built on lying. Lawyers have been called serial liars because, as part of their job, they argue on behalf of clients who they know are guilty. Lying is built into most large organisations. Most top managers like to be told only good news such as how brilliantly they are doing their jobs or how well the organisation is faring. Attentive subordinates soon learn not to puncture these illusions. Because of this dynamic, it is far easier for leaders than subordinates to initiate lies (Robinson, 1996: 107, 321). Pressures for conformity can be so intense that dissent becomes unthinkable, so that there is no one to question policies or their justifications (Jackall, 1988; Margolis, 1979). Whistleblowers speak truth to power at their peril and often are destroyed. When levels of internal institutional deception become extreme, necessary feedback channels are blocked and organisational failure becomes more likely (Schwartz, 1990), as in the case of Enron.

The same dynamic occurs at the level of the state. Those who lie on behalf of the state are lauded, whereas lying for the enemy is the most heinous crime, considered traitorous. Arguably, the greater the level of central control, the greater the risk from pervasive deception. Chinese leaders knew of the disastrous consequences of the Great Leap Forward but persisted in their policy, imposing a system of deception; due to lack of free debate that would stimulate action, tens of millions of people died of starvation in the years 1959-1961 (Article 19, 1990;

Becker, 1998). Furthermore, the occurrence of this preventable tragedy was hidden for many years.

The mass media are involved in systemic misrepresentation, not only through the ads they purvey but through suppression of certain types of stories (Borjesson 2002; Project Censored). "News values" such as prominence and conflict are used to assess potential stories, leading to uncritical emphasis on statements by leaders and systematic neglect of underlying processes such as racism and degradation of work. The mass media create an illusion that they reflect reality, despite gross distortions. Journalists know that most news is artificial, in that it is created by the agendas of news-makers, especially governments and corporations, but their awareness of the constructed nature of the news agenda is seldom acknowledged publicly (Weaver, 1994). Television is perhaps the most deceptive medium because, from available footage, editors extract just a few images that are often quite misleading, such as shots of a few aggressive protesters at an otherwise peaceful rally.

There are some arenas, though, where truth-telling is the norm. One of these is scholarly and scientific research. Although research agendas are shaped by money and power, and much scholarship is sloppy, nevertheless it is uncommon for scholars to be consciously deceptive in their published work. Those who are deceptive risk being exposed as frauds. Maintaining a system of ethical research is a precarious business (Ravetz, 1971) but, for all its limitations, it does show that systems of organised truth-telling are possible. For example, most censorship of historical writing can be attributed to governments and other institutional interests, with many individual historians seeking to reveal truths as they understand them (De Baets, 2002).

Although much lying and self-deception at an individual level can be justified as beneficial or harmless, at the institutional level the likelihood of harm seems much greater. The lies and self-deceits of governments, corporations, professionals and the media are far more likely to serve the interests of those who are powerful and privileged than of the wider society. In this context, the rhetorical demand for truthfulness serves the interests of the powerful and privileged. Ford (1996: 282) says that moralising about truth-telling serves those with power, who themselves manage information but demand the truth from others: "Lies by those who are in power are rationalized as necessary for the good of the organization; lies by the common person are regarded as harmful to the organization."

Robinson (1996: 306) says that elites have an interest in promoting justifications for the systems of inequality from which they benefit. These justifications, however flawed, become mantras that are seldom questioned. For example, Robinson (1996: 304) questions the standard argument that extraordinary rewards are needed to attract the right people to be top managers, whereas a

reserve body of the unemployed is needed to keep workers' wages low. He proposes an alternative argument: a pool of unemployed executives should be created to improve the cost effectiveness of corporations!

In Robinson's view, whereas elites have much to gain by promoting rationalisations for their privileged roles, scholars with contrary ideas — such as sociologists and psychologists who study egalitarian work arrangements — have comparatively little to gain by promoting their insights. The physical and biological sciences are given massive funding, with little risk to elites, but social and behavioural sciences are not given equivalent funding, for example to experiment with alternative political and social systems: "power elites have resisted the growth of the human sciences, correctly spotting them as threats to the status quo" (Robinson, 1996: 337).

Bailey (1991) says that the social order is built as on what he calls "basic lies," such as that we live in a free society and that only a small number of people are fit to govern. He says that subjects believe that rulers are self-interested but also believe that authorities can provide justice. The resolution of this apparent paradox is that people believe in the existence of "champions of justice." In a western society this might include courts, ombudsmen, consumer advocates or honest politicians. Unfortunately, these champions of justice unwittingly serve to maintain basic lies such as that most people are inert and need to be helped. Bailey (1991: 84) says that these champions are like a safety valve; furthermore, "Certain popular institutions work the same way. They appear to stand for justice, defying unjust authorities; but in fact they help to keep the rulers in power." This includes investigative journalists who usually target individuals rather than the system. Bailey (1991: 125) recommends that when power is involved, the main thing is to enter the debate: "when basic lies (which, as I said, masquerade as basic truths) are questioned, they are not so much tested as *con*tested."

In summary, institutional lies are usually far more objectionable and damaging than private lies. Power systems are sustained by lies. Challenging these lies can be one part of a challenge to systems of inequality and oppression.

Implicatons for Anarchists

Having outlined revisionist perspectives on lying with an eye to their relevance for anarchists, it is now possible to spell out some implications. Anarchism covers a range of views, including those of classical anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin (see Marshall, 1992), the pragmatic everyday approach of Colin Ward (1973) and various recent positions (Ehrlich, 1996; Purkis and Bowen, 1997). For purposes here, contemporary anarchism is taken as a broad political philosophy based on opposition to all systems of domination, often with special emphasis on the state, and supportive of egalitarian social arrangements constructed and run by the people themselves. In its dimension of social critique, anarchism freely

draws on other traditions, including Marxism and feminism. As a method of social transformation, anarchism is generally built on the philosophy of prefiguration, namely that the means should reflect the ends (Franks, 2003). This is in sharp contrast to Marxism-Leninism, in which capturing state power is supposed to be a prelude to the withering away of the state, as well as reformist traditions such as social democracy which also rely on the state.

If prefiguration is taken as a central value in an anarchist approach to lying, then it is necessary to have some idea of what is to be prefigured. Specifically, what is the likely role of lying in a society that maximises human freedom and autonomy and minimises the scope for domination? First consider two polar positions. One position is that any lie is okay. This can be ruled out as an ideal both because it leads to too many undesirable consequences — lying about matters of safety can put lives in jeopardy — and because it reflects, at both individual and institutional levels, a view that the end justifies the means.

The opposite position is that lying is rejected entirely. Is a society with no lying desirable? Could such a society even exist? It might be unpleasant. It could include telling young children that their drawings are pathetic, telling certain elderly people that their lives have been a waste, and telling friends and family exactly what nasty thoughts are going through one's mind at any given time. It might be that people can adjust to brutally frank expressions of judgement and feeling, especially if they grow up in this sort of environment. In any case, this possible future is so divergent from everyday behaviour today that prefiguring a lie-free world by invariably telling the truth (and never withholding it) is likely to be disastrous. Many members of action groups, for example, might decide to leave if they were told their understanding and skills were superficial, their attitudes regressive and their odour unpleasant.

Another problem with total refusal to lie, as prefiguration of a lie-less society, is that it may undermine allies. For example, in writing references, it is standard to exaggerate positive attributes and minimise or omit negative ones, at least to some degree. A reference-writer who does not conform to implicit expectations is likely to undermine a candidate's chances. Imagine the effect of saying "Smith is one of the most honest people I know; she lies only occasionally." Telling the police or the media about all your friends' foibles is likely to damage the effectiveness of a social action group. Although some activists — especially those in the principled Gandhian tradition — believe in openness, including informing police about actions to be taken, this is not normally taken to the extreme that all personal information about group members, including every statement and action, is available to outsiders.

Even assuming that a society without lies is possible, the difficulties in prefiguring such a society suggest that it is worthwhile considering an intermediate

position, namely that for anarchists today, some lies are acceptable and some are not. A central criterion would be whether a statement or behaviour serves to bolster or undermine domination. The easiest case is institutional lies in support of domination: these should be detected, exposed and opposed in all instances, especially those "basic lies" that sustain the system. This sort of lie-detection has long been a staple of anarchist efforts, with pamphlets dedicated to exposing the lies of government and corporate leaders.

Disappointingly, though, even unequivocal evidence that formal leaders lie does not by itself undermine acceptance of hierarchies, because there is the alternative solution of getting rid of "bad apples," namely those rulers exposed as corrupt liars, rather than getting rid of the barrel, namely the system of rule itself. Therefore, as well as exposing institutional lying, anarchists might well decide to help make people more aware of the omnipresence of lying. In other words, rather than just try to expose lies, anarchists could foster a greater popular awareness of lying and competence in detecting lies. If, as Ekman (1985) thinks, it is easier to train people to detect lies than to tell them, then making people aware of lying and how to detect institutional lies is likely to be largely beneficial. As well as training in lie detection, training in social analysis should be encouraged, so as to better cut through justifications for systems of power. The goal might be taken as undermining the presumption that others, especially those in positions of power, are telling the truth.

Another easy case is malicious individual lies. Because these have no redeeming value in terms of overcoming domination, they also should be opposed.

It is not so easy to decide what to do when telling the truth is detrimental, at least in the short term, to efforts to challenge systems of domination. Consider the case of an effective, energetic, well-respected leader in a vital struggle. Unsavoury information about this individual could be very damaging to a campaign or even undermine a movement. What the information reveals may not be all that important, in the wider scheme of things, but can be used by opponents to trash the image of the movement. The individual might be prone to occasional angry outbursts, use illegal drugs, enjoy unusual sexual experiences, cheat on income tax, require regular therapy, lie to the police or have sloppy scholarship practices. Those in the movement might think that such behaviours are not important, or even admirable, but they could be very damaging if known more widely. It was revealed, after his death, that Martin Luther King, Jr. had plagiarised in his PhD dissertation. Although, arguably, this was not central to his leadership of the US civil rights movement, it could have been damaging if known at the time. Certainly the FBI spent considerable effort trying to find out about King's sexual affairs in order to blackmail him.

Anarchists might argue that there should be no prominent leaders anyway, but imagine if the failings of every member of a group were made available to critics. Very few people are above reproach, so there are political advantages in withholding certain types of information. It would be possible to argue that the behaviours revealed are not that important, but there are limits to what can be achieved. Revealing that fellow activists take illegal drugs could, in some circumstances, lead to arrest and imprisonment. Should the truth be told in such circumstances, or is a discrete silence better for the cause? In such a case, there are conflicting imperatives: to oppose domination, it is better to lie; to prefigure a lie-free society, it is better to tell the truth.[4]

There is no easy answer in such dilemmas, so it is sensible to argue that judgements should be made on the basis of careful analysis and discussion, with attention to diverse forms of domination. Exposing private behaviour might weaken the effectiveness of an anti-capitalist activist, but if the private behaviour involves abuse of female partners, then covering it up entails complicity with male domination. Another consideration is whether the behaviour might be exposed by others. If so, then it may be better to expose it oneself.

Finally there is the case of benign individual lies. In most cases, these do not appear to make a great deal of difference to systems of domination. Furthermore, it is possible that some benign individual lies might be acceptable in a self-managed society, so the principle of prefiguration does not give a clear directive. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that anarchists should feel no great concern about benign individual lies, always ensuring that they are indeed benign. An example is offering words of encouragement: "You've made a good start. Keep trying." Another is focussing on people's strengths and drawing attention away from their weaknesses, for example saying "We'd really like you to write the media release" rather than "You're hopeless at speaking."

In summary, a total refusal to lie is not viable in many circumstances. A central criterion for anarchists to decide whether a lie is acceptable is whether it serves to undermine domination. This leads to the conclusion that institutional lies and individual malicious lies should normally be exposed and opposed. Lying to oppose domination is more likely to be justifiable, but care needs to be taken, especially when multiple systems of domination are involved. Even though some lying to oppose domination can be justified, it is safer to err on the side of telling the truth, given the widespread castigation of lying. Lying may support the cause but being exposed in a lie can hurt it. Benign individual lies seldom support domination and so are not a great concern. In order for these issues to be discussed sensibly, it is desirable to foster greater awareness of the prevalence, contexts and implications of lying.

As well as exposing the lies of others and carefully assessing one's own lies to others, an equally important task is exposing the lies told to oneself. Anarchists are no more immune to self-deception than anyone else. Of special interest here is self-deception linked to social and personal change. Some possible self-deceptions are that the world is ripe for revolution, that one's insights into society are far superior to those of others, and that making a mess of personal relationships doesn't really matter given the importance of one's activism. It's useful to remember that lying and self-deception thrive on each other. An activist group can be built around mutually promoted deceptions, for example that the group is functioning well. Some collective deceptions will be benign but others will reduce political and personal effectiveness.

Uncovering these damaging deceptions and dealing with them is likely to be a challenging task. Revisionist treatments help to reveal the prevalence of lying and to suggest different ways to think about it, but they have little to say about the practical problems of dealing with lies — both benign and malicious — in groups and networks seeking social change. The general philosophy in many revisionist studies is that lying and truth-telling should be mobilised for human benefit (Nyberg, 1993). For those who adopt this insight, there is still much to learn. 🅐

Footnotes

1. An example is plagiarism. Scholars have done an admirable job of deconstructing the concept of authorship, in particular exposing the assumptions of the view that individuals create new ideas on their own (e.g., Coombe 1998). Yet few would be so foolish as to claim authorship of the text "On a supposed right to lie from benevolent motives," conventionally attributed to Immanuel Kant, or the text *Lying*, conventionally attributed to Sissela Bok (1978). Those who recognise the constructed nature of truth(s) usually accept that some constructions have so little credibility that others would treat them as conscious deceptions.

2. Kantians, opposed to all lies, would not lie in this situation. Utilitarians, judging statements by their effects, would.

3. Wilson (2002) surveys recent experiments compatible with the view that each person has two selves, one built on consciousness and the other on unconscious mental processes, what he calls the "adaptive unconscious" (as distinct from the Freudian unconscious). According to Wilson, the conscious mind has no direct access to unconscious mental processing and the conscious self does not have a good understanding of one's unconscious thoughts and emotions. For example, a person may be completely unbiased at a conscious level but harbour unconscious prejudices that are manifest in behaviour, at least to others. In this picture, self-deception is not only possible but difficult to avoid.

4. Although experienced activists are aware that many groups have dysfunctional dynamics or worse, there are relatively few insider exposes of the unsavoury side to social change movements. One example is Siegel et al. (1987).

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