

Contagious Lies

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In Australia, there was a former judge named Marcus Einfeld. In 2006, a speed camera caught his car going 60 km/h in a 50 km/h zone. He got an \$77 Australian dollar fine for this. Marcus Einfeld went to court and contested it stating that his car was being driven by his friend Teresa Brennan at the time. After this was investigated, it was found out that his friend Teresa Brennan had died in 2003. Marcus then said that it was a different Teresa Brennan. The end result was that instead of a \$77 Australian dollar fine Marcus Einfeld ended up sentenced to two years in prison for perjury and perverting the course of justice.¹ The truth became the enemy of Marcus Einfeld and he tried to make lies on top of lies to cover it up.

Eliezer Yudkowsky has said: “If you once tell a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy.”²

Covering up the truth has happened too many times in our own country’s history. Watergate is one of them. On June 17th, 1972, security guard Frank Wills noticed tape covering the door

latches on some doors in the Watergate complex. This led to discovering a break-in at the Democratic National Committee’s headquarters. On August 29th Nixon stated that “an internal investigation into the June break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office building revealed that no one on the White House staff, in his administration, or anyone ‘presently employed’ was involved.”³

Despite President Nixon’s reassurances, by May 1973, Archibald Cox was appointed to investigate Watergate. As part of his investigation, Archibald Cox subpoenaed tapes of Nixon’s conversations. Nixon refused to provide the tapes citing executive privilege. When Archibald Cox refused to drop the subpoena Nixon ordered Attorney General Elliot Richardson to fire Archibald Cox. Richardson refused and resigned instead. Nixon told Deputy Attorney General William French Smith to fire Archibald Cox. Smith refused and resigned. Solicitor General Robert Bork finally dismissed Archibald Cox.

The truth was Nixon’s enemy because he lied and then did not want the truth discovered. Fortunately for the United States, he was found out.

Lying in politics continues. After the first 2012 presidential debate between Obama and Rom-

¹Former judge Einfeld gets at least two years’ jail ... all for lying about a \$77 traffic fine, by Malcolm Knox, March 20, 2009. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/former-judge-einfeld-gets-at-least-two-years-jail--all-for-lying-about-a-77-traffic-fine-20090320-93sr.html>

²Eliezer Yudkowsky, Dark Side Epistemology <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/XTWkjCJScy2GFAgDt/dark-side-epistemology>

³<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/29/this-day-in-politics-aug-29-1972-796889>

ney, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote:

Sure, politicians always lied, but Adolf Hitler was the first one who made it into a policy. American politicians didn't use to lie as if they knew that nobody cared whether they lied or not, though Nixon and Reagan began testing those waters of moral indifference. Now we're deep in them. What was appalling to me about Obama's false figures and false promises in the first debate was that they were *unnecessary*. If he'd told the truth, he would have supported his candidacy better, as well as putting Romney's faked figures and evasive vagueness to shame. He would have given us a moral choice instead of a fudge-throwing match.⁴

Can America go on living on spin and illusion, hot air and hogwash, and still be my country? I don't know.⁵

In some sense, the lies Ursula K. Le Guin was talking about, about things like the exact number of jobs created and how much health care premiums have gone up might seem small, but she has a point, if we let smaller lies be accepted, then in the future bigger lies will be told.

And like Ursula K. Le Guin, I worry for my country. Too many lies are numbing, and confusing. In 1978 the philosopher Hannah Arendt said in relation to lies:

The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What

⁴See for example Dubious Denver Debate Declarations <https://www.factcheck.org/2012/10/dubious-denver-debate-declarations/>

⁵Ursula K. Le Guin, No Time to Spare, pg 117-118

makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please.⁶

Not being able to believe anything is a problem since it makes it hard to judge and to act as Hannah Arendt said. It is hard to figure out the Truth, but it is very important to do so. On the other hand, believing the wrong thing too strongly can also cause problems.

If you have something that is false which you keep defending, you must also stop any methods of finding truth from working.

So, for example, if you believe the bible is literally true, then from that you can read the genealogy of all the people that lived starting with Adam and Eve and add them up and come up with an estimate that the Earth is only about

⁶Hannah Arendt, 1978, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/>

6000 years old. Of course, you also have to ignore or explain any evidence that contradicts this theory.

So in order not to contradict the Earth being about 6000 years old, you would have to stop believing in Geology, since it has events that take millions of years to happen, and you would have to stop believing in Astronomy because it has light that travels for millions and billions of years. Even subjects that seem unrelated to the age of the Earth, like nuclear engineering, become suspicious. My nuclear engineering books contradict the Earth being 6000 years old.

Pretty soon, you would stop trusting the scientific method as a valid method for finding truth, and start arguing about ideas like what a theory means.⁷

For example, some young earth creationists have said that since evolution is just a theory, not a law like Newton's law of gravity, evolution is much less certain than Newton's law of gravity. Scientists are not absolutely certain about anything, so ideas are called theories in acknowledgment of that. For what it is worth, the theory of evolution fits the facts, but we have discovered that Newton's law of gravitation is only an approximation.

So we started with a seemingly innocent belief that the Bible is literally true, and ended up messing with our epistemology. Believing in the literal truth of Buddhist scriptures would have the same result.⁸ Basically, any belief for which you would be willing to bend your perception of

reality and your methods of figuring out reality can cause this. On an individual level, absolute beliefs cause mental failures. On a societal level, absolute beliefs cause faulty epistemology.

It is much easier to look at others and see where they fail be truthful, than to notice it in ourselves. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Plain, we notice the speck in our neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in our own eye. Jesus went on to say we need to clear our own eyes before helping clear others' eyes.⁹ It has been hypothesized that human reasoning evolved to win arguments, and as such, we are not very good at finding flaws in our own minds. As Jonathan Haidt¹⁰ said, we think intuitively and justify later.

So it is very difficult to only have truth in our minds, and it is much easier to see mistakes in others than ourselves.

Also, it is emotionally painful to admit that we were wrong, so it makes it hard to switch when we start to realize we might have made a mistake. As Carl Sagan wrote:

One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It's simply too painful to acknowledge, even to ourselves, that we've been taken. Once you give a charlatan power over you, you almost never get it back. So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new ones rise.¹¹

⁷Eliezer Yudkowsky discusses things like this in *Dark Side Epistemology*

⁸For example the *Treasury of Higher Knowledge* (*Abhidharmakosha*) has similar facts about the universe that are contradicted by current science, and I disagree with the marks of a great man that appear in multiple places including *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Sutta 91 Brahmayu*

⁹Luke 6:41-42

¹⁰Argued in the book *The Righteous Mind*

¹¹Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, pg 241

Unfortunately, there is a new bamboozle since Sagan wrote that, and it is a contagious lie. First, Donald Trump lied about winning the 2020 election. “If you once tell a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy.” Trump then had to lie about election officials, and the justice department, and news organizations, and fact checking and it kept going.¹² This has sucked in millions of people, and wrecked family relationships, and friendships, and resulted in deaths.

Sometime around January of 2024, I stopped commenting on Donald Trump’s mental fitness. The reason was I didn’t want to have to compare Trump’s mental fitness with Joe Biden’s mental fitness. That was lying to myself to avoid thinking about Biden’s fitness to be president for four more years. If I was being honest, instead of avoiding the topic, when someone brought up Trump’s mental fitness, that conversation should have included a “And now if we apply that same standard to Biden” discussion. Part of the reason Donald Trump is now president is that lie I told myself, and a lot of other people in the Democratic party failed to be truthful about this. When it became more obvious that this was not true, the Democratic party lost trust. The 2024 presidential election was fairly close with the popular vote being 49.8% Trump to 48.3% Harris. The election could have had a different result. There were a lot of different things that could have shifted the vote by a percent or two, but the people not being truthful about Biden’s ability to be president for four more years was one.

If we want others to see the truth, first we have to see it ourselves. We have to remove the logs and the specks in our own eyes until we see the truth, and only then others might look to us for

the truth.

If I want truth, if I want justice, if I want loving-kindness, I have to create it myself. If we want truth, if we want justice, if we want loving-kindness, we have to create it ourselves.

Be careful of what you believe. Be careful of how you come to what you believe. When you discover something is false, admit it and get it over with before the lie compounds.

¹²See for example the January 6th Report