

Dark Side Epistemology

Josh Cogliati

2020-August-9

1 Intro story

Lies can be contagious. This fictional example is from Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality by Eliezer Yudkowsky:

Harry ate another bite of his cereal, his eyes going distant now, no longer meeting her own. “Think of it this way: You skip school one day, and you lie and tell your teacher you were sick. The teacher tells you to bring a doctor’s note, so you forge one. The teacher says she’s going to call the doctor to check, so you have to give her a fake number for the doctor, and get a friend to pretend to be the doctor when she calls —”

[Hermione said:] “You did what?”

Harry looked up from his cereal then, and now he was smiling. “I’m not saying I really did that, Hermione...” Then his eyes abruptly dropped back down to his cereal. “No. Just an example. Lies propagate, that’s what I’m saying. You’ve got to tell more lies to cover them up, lie about every fact that’s connected to the first lie.”¹

Like Eliezer Yudkowsky’s example, trying to

¹Eliezer Yudkowsky, Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality, <http://www.hpmor.com/chapter/65>

keep a lie from being found out often requires more lies, and then results in more trouble than if you had just admitted the mistake at the start. Lies can be contagious.

2 Sermon

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.² 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

²Former 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>

a lie, the truth is ever after your enemy.”³

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 detecting a breaking of 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.”⁴

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 F. 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 Romney, Ursula K. Le Guin wrote:

³Eliezer Yudkowsky, Dark Side Epistemology <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/XTWkjCJScy2GFAgDt/dark-side-epistemology>

⁴<https://www.politico.com/story/2018/08/29/this-day-in-politics-aug-29-1972-796889>

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.⁵

Can America go on living on spin and illusion, hot air and hogwash, and still be my country? I don’t know.⁶

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 makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that

⁵See for example Dubious Denver Debate Declarations <https://www.factcheck.org/2012/10/dubious-denver-debate-declarations/>

⁶Ursula K. Le Guin, No Time to Spare, pg 117-118

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.⁷

Not being able to believe anything is a problem. Truth can be hard to find but very useful. 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 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

⁷Hannah Arendt, 1978, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview/>

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.⁸

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. 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.

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.

⁸Eliezer Yudkowsky discusses things like this in *Dark Side Epistemology*