

Creativity and Morality in Deception

Simon Henderson

Independent Deception Consultant, Edinburgh, UK.

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Abstract

Deception is evil. It is unethical, immoral, bad, wrong, unfair, and it causes harm to its 'victims'. It is abhorred in religion, relationships, politics, the workplace, and sport. Its practice is associated with con artists, criminals, shady salespeople, and Presidents.

Deception delights, thrills, mystifies, and surprises. It defends our democracy and safeguards our liberty. It decelerates the spread of cancer and malaria. It helps educate our children, reduces crime, and protects our critical national computer systems. Doctors, teachers, artists, authors, parents, and lovers all reap the benefits of deception. What, then, are we to make of this dichotomy? Why do such different perspectives exist? And do such differences matter? This chapter addresses these questions. It explores the creativity and morality involved in formulating deceptive action and assesses the implications for law, policy formulation, and fighting fake news.

Keywords

deception, misinformation, disinformation, morality, ethics, fake news

Introduction

“It is vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving, wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.”

Locke (1690/2019, p. 480)

Deception is evil. It is unethical, immoral, bad, wrong, unfair, and it causes harm to its ‘victims’. It is abhorred in religion, relationships, politics, the workplace, and sport. Its practice is associated with con artists, criminals, shady salespeople, and Presidents.

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What are we to make of this dichotomy? Why do such different perspectives exist? And do such differences matter?

Deception is ubiquitous at all levels of life, from the microbial to the geopolitical. It occurs in terrestrial, aquatic, and airborne environments and is enacted by fish, reptiles, amphibians, arthropods, birds, and mammals. It is found in almost every field of human endeavor, including such diverse fields as advertising, sports, theatrical design, healthcare, art, and warfare, plus numerous other domains. In the words of artist Jim Sanborn, creator of cryptographic artwork for the CIA (Zetter, 2010):

“Deception is everywhere”.

Zetter (2010, n.p.)

Despite its ubiquity, this chapter argues that conceptualizations of deception are often vague, contradictory, or wrong, and that this can have profound consequences in a variety of settings. It will discuss how establishing a fair and just society is dependent upon a robust

understanding of what deception is, how deception works, and the creative process through which deception comes into being. Deception underpins our moral and ethical basis for differentiating right from wrong at the individual, collective, and societal levels. Moreover, it informs the basis of our laws and legal judgements and underpins societal and workplace policies, prescriptions, and proscriptions. Increasingly, such understanding is essential for identifying and countering fake news and making sense of the ethical dilemmas presented by our interconnected world.

This chapter aims to establish a sound and rigorous understanding of deception. It begins with some examples of how our interpretation of deception has profound implications for society. It critiques a standard definition of deception and proposes one that is more accurate and utilitarian. The chapter considers deceptive thinking and action, including the creative processes involved in formulating deceptive action at individual and organizational levels. The chapter then questions where morality arises in the formulation and execution of deceptive action and how broader ethical norms become established. The chapter concludes by examining the implications of an enhanced understanding of deception in law, policy formulation, and fighting fake news.

To begin, let us consider some of the ways in which the interpretation of deception impacts society.

The Interpretation of Deception Has Real Consequences

Our interpretation of deception establishes our laws

In 2012, Phil Ivey was playing Punto Banco, a form of Baccarat, at the Crockfords Club Casino in Mayfair, London. As a ten-time winner of the World Series of Poker, Ivey was intimately familiar with the minutia of playing card design. So, when he noticed that the printing on the back of the casino's cards was slightly misaligned, he knew his evening was

about to get interesting. Unknown to the casino, asymmetric printing gives each card a discernible orientation, such that rotating a card by 180 degrees enables its differentiation from cards that remain in their original orientation (a process known as ‘edge sorting’). In Punto Banco, players are not allowed to touch the cards. Ivey, therefore, conspired with his partner to trick the croupier into rotating high-value cards before reintroducing them into play, claiming that this action imbued the cards with good luck. Ivey could then track the movement of high-value cards throughout the game. Over the course of the evening, he won £7.7M.

The casino, however, refused to pay Ivey his winnings, claiming that he had not used a legitimate strategy to win. Ivey sued the chain that owned the casino, arguing that he had merely exploited Crockfords’s failure to take proper steps to protect itself against a player of his ability. The case ended up in the English Supreme Court and was followed closely in legal circles. The case, for the first time, tested the court’s fundamental notions about cheating, dishonesty, and deception within the arena of gambling.

The Supreme Court ruled against Ivey on the basis that, in its judgement, neither deception nor dishonesty is necessary for cheating to have occurred. The verdict, however, split the judges, with Lady Justice Sharp stating that:

“...[dishonesty] is an essential ingredient of the criminal offence of cheating... I find the suggestion that someone can be guilty of the criminal offence (in effect) of ‘honest cheating’ at gambling to be a startling one which is not mandated by the language of the statute itself”.

Abbott (2017, n.p.)

The court’s interpretation of the concepts of cheating, dishonesty, and deception set a precedent in English law that now leaves open the possibility of a player acting illegally by

inadvertently deceiving a casino without any intent or awareness. The ruling thus establishes a precedent for a new crime of ‘honest cheating’.

Our attitude towards deception affects public discourse about our governance

In July 2021, Labour Member of Parliament Dawn Butler was ejected from the House of Commons after she accused UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson of repeatedly lying to and misleading fellow parliamentarians and the country over coronavirus (Walker, 2021). Having registered to ask a question of the Prime Minister, when called upon to speak, she stated that:

“The prime minister has lied to this house time and time again,”

Walker (2021, n.p.)

When asked by the Speaker of the House to “reflect on her words”, Butler added:

“It’s funny that we get in trouble in this place for calling out the lie, rather than the person lying.”

Under Commons rules about ‘unparliamentary language’, it is forbidden for Members of Parliament to accuse fellow members of deliberate deceit. Following her ejection, Butler and the previous Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, wrote a joint letter to The Times (Butler & Bercow, 2021). In it, they state that:

“It is high time that the procedure committee envisaged greater scope for MPs who wish to highlight untruthfulness to do just that. The glaring weakness of the present system is that someone lying to tens of millions of citizens knows he or she is protected by an ancient rule. They face no

sanction at all. By contrast, an MP with the guts to tell the truth is judged to be in disgrace.”

Butler and Bercrow (2021, n.p.)

Personal morality frames our use of deception and *vice versa*

In 2017 during the special election for a US Senate seat in Alabama, progressive activists created and maintained a false Facebook page entitled ‘Dry Alabama’ that appeared to support Republican Roy Moore (Falk, 2019). The page praised Moore for proposing a complete state-level ban on the sale of alcohol — a false claim designed to decrease votes for Moore from moderate Republicans. Activist Matt Osborne told *The New York Times* that he had “a moral imperative to do this.” Moore had previously been accused of abusing teenage girls, and Osborne, therefore, felt justified in using deception against him. As William Falk of the news site *The Week* notes:

“Dirty political tricks are, of course, not new, but the brazen defense of them on moral grounds is quite telling. There’s a growing bipartisan conviction that virtually anything — lying, cheating, and spying — is justified because, well, the other tribe is so evil.”

Falk (2019, n.p.)

Societal normalization of deception has significant real-world consequences

On Wednesday, January 6th, 2021, a violent mob stormed the United States Capitol Building in Washington, DC. The mob had assembled following President Donald Trump’s repeated and false claims that the 2020 election was rigged and had been “stolen” from him (Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2021). In a speech, Trump called the assembled crowd to action and demanded that Vice President Mike Pence and Congress reject Biden’s victory. Trump

told the mob that “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” For several hours, the mob occupied and vandalized the Capitol Building. Five people died as a consequence of the riots, and more than 140 people were injured (Yan et al., 2021).

The Capitol riots provide unambiguous evidence that fake news can have very real consequences (see also reviews by Freeman et al., 2020; Gangarosa et al., 1998; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Southwell et al., 2021). Indeed, since the 2016 US elections, there has been an explosion in the proliferation of online fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Actions taken during President Trump’s administration, the worsening climate emergency, and the emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic have further reinforced an information landscape where fragile truths are increasingly hard to discern from bold falsehoods. In today’s interconnected world, the global perpetuation and willing acceptance of false beliefs poses a direct threat to human life and our entire planetary ecosystem.

To begin unpacking these issues, let us first define our terms.

Defining Deception

“One must not let oneself be deceived by the word ‘deception’.”

Kierkegaard (2009, pp. 63-64)

A dictionary would, *prima facie*, be expected to provide a robust basis for establishing a definition of deception. Yet, dictionaries are surprisingly poor sources for those seeking clarity on the topic. For example, the Merriam Webster Dictionary (2021) defines ‘deception’ as:

“The act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid.”

Merriam Webster Dictionary (2021, n.p.)

This definition is inadequate on multiple grounds (Henderson, 2019, p. 5). First, truth and falsehood are not binary constructs. Rather, truth and falsehood are complex, multifaceted, constructs, whose determination is far from straightforward. Dictionary definitions typically cannot accommodate factors such as varying degrees of truth, partial truths, subjective truths, contested truths, and unknown truths. For an excellent exposition of the complex nature of truth, see MacDonald (2018). Second, this definition omits situations where a deceiver wishes their target to *not* believe a true situation — for example, when a deceiver is operating covertly and wishes the target to remain unaware as to their real identity or actions. Third, a deceiver can fool a target without resorting to lying and by communicating nothing but the truth (Or et al., 2017; Vincent & Castelfranchi, 1981). This type of strategy is known as ‘paltering’ (Rogers et al., 2017; Schauer & Zeckhauser, 2009) and may be lingual or temporal. Paltering can include linguistic fudging, twisting, shading, bending, stretching, slanting, exaggerating, distorting, whitewashing, and selective reporting (Schauer & Zeckhauser, 2009, p. 39).

Further differentiations between deception and lying include:

- Deception does not require any false statement to be made, or indeed any statement at all.
- Deception suggests success, as the target must be fooled or misled for deception to have occurred. A recipient may not believe a lie, which thereby fails to deceive.
- A liar may intentionally communicate what he or she knows to be false, recognizing that the recipient will not believe the lie. In this case, the liar has no intent to deceive, so the lie cannot classify as deception.

- A deceiver may also tell the truth, knowing that the recipient will not believe it. The deceiver, therefore, intentionally communicates the truth to deceive the recipient.

Despite the frequent conflation of deception with lying, these critical and often overlooked differentiations highlight the limited utility and value of lying and lie-detection paradigms for making sense of the broader field of deception. Lying paradigms cannot, for example, support an understanding of animal or plant deception, military deception, scams, magic, deceptive plays in sport, and deception within many other domains.

Some years ago, the author sought to address these concerns by formulating a more contemporary, pragmatic, and utilitarian definition (Henderson, 2011). Over the intervening years, the definition has remained extant in the face of extensive road-testing, critique, and use by many hundreds of deception practitioners from across a wide variety of different domains.

Deception is defined as:

“Deliberate measures to induce erroneous sensemaking and subsequent behaviour within a target audience, to achieve and exploit an advantage.”

Henderson (2011, n.p.)

The elements of this definition are now described.

Deception is a deliberate act. Deception is a deliberate, intentional, and motivated act.

Activities that unintentionally or accidentally induce erroneous sensemaking are thus non-deceptive acts that should more accurately be labelled as mistakes, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or gaffs, etc. It is not possible to deceive by accident. As Jean-Paul Sartre succinctly surmises:

“A man does not lie about what he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is the dupe; he does not lie when he is mistaken.”

Sartre (1956, p. 48)

Deception is induced. Deception is brought about via an intentional act of *induction*.

Deception does not, and cannot, happen by itself.

Deception induces errors in sensemaking. A deceiver intentionally induces some aspect of the target’s understanding of the world to be wrong or in error. This dependency on erroneous understanding differentiates deception from other related concepts such as influence, persuasion, or coercion. For detailed explanations of the sensemaking process, see Klein et al. (2006a, 2006b); and Klein et al. (2007).

The goal of deception is behavior change. The goal of deception is to change the future behavior of the target to the deceiver’s benefit. If the deception does not result in behavior change, the same outcome could and would have been achieved without taking action.

Deception is directed towards a defined target audience. The target audience may comprise a clearly identified and bounded individual, group, organization, larger populous, or, potentially, even a nation-state. The target may also comprise any system that exhibits behavior, including an animal, software algorithm, a hardware control system, etc.

Successful deception creates an advantage for the deceiver (and sometimes also the target). Deceivers conduct deception for financial, material, professional, social, or emotional gain. In many cases, a deceiver’s gain brings about a consequent loss to the target. For example, the deceiver may con a target into handing over money, thereby benefitting the deceiver while causing loss to the target. Such actions constitute *malevolent* deception, as the deception benefits the deceiver while causing harm to the target. Deception can also be *benevolent* (i.e., well-meaning and kindly). For example, a magician thrills and delights her

audience by performing magic effects. Further, deception can be *altruistic* (i.e., selflessly concerned with improving the well-being of others). For example, a wife tells her husband that she loves his new shirt when, in reality, she hates it. In cases of benevolent or altruistic deception, ample evidence suggests that the deceiver still derives some form of benefit from their actions — even if that benefit is the mere satisfaction that the deception has succeeded (Anik et al., 2009; Gino et al., 2013; Post, 2005; Pressman et al., 2015; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010).

Is It Feasible to Deceive Oneself?

Deception is a transactional act committed intentionally by one person or organization (the deceiver) against another (the target). However, various theories purport that it is not the deceiver who fools the target — instead, it is always the target who deceives themselves. For example, see Demosthenes (349 BCE/1852, p. 57); Hoffer (1955, p. 260); La Rochefoucauld (1678/1871, p. 16); Rousseau (1762/1889, p. 150); and von Goeth (1908, p. 94). The notion of a target somehow fooling themselves seems intrinsically paradoxical. Three broad theories seek to account for this paradox:

- **The Intentionalist perspective** (e.g., Talbott, 1995) postulates that deceivers intentionally seek to induce their own erroneous beliefs. They therefore hold a true belief while concurrently holding a parallel contradictory belief. The dichotomy is tolerable due to extenuating contextual factors, compartmentalization, mutual accommodations between the beliefs, and alternating focus between different belief states.
- **The Motivationist perspective** (e.g., Nelkin, 2002) posits that an ardent desire for certain incorrect beliefs about the world to be true can lead to these desired beliefs forming a powerful source of internal focus, overriding and eventually replacing the original correct beliefs about the world.

- **The Deflationist perspective** (e.g., Scott-Kakures, 2012) suggests that self-deception occurs as a consequence of the motivational state of the subject bringing about biased information seeking and cognitive processing. These biases thereby support erroneous sensemaking and the formulation of false beliefs.

Trivers links self-deception with transactional deception in his theory of “self-deception in the service of deception” (Trivers, 2002, pp. 271-293). He suggests that self-deception arises so that we can be better at deceiving others, as, when a person convinces themselves of a falsehood, they better mask the signs of deception. Kriegman et al. (2020) have applied this idea to explain how Donald Trump could lie with such impunity while in office.

The act of deconstructing a definition of deception precipitates a host of concerns about creativity and morality. Deception is an intentional act. Establishing and prosecuting deceptive intent is an exercise in creative problem solving. And a deceiver gains benefit by surreptitiously imposing their intent upon a target to change their behavior. Questions regarding the morality of such actions are inescapable. Issues of creativity and morality are thus intrinsic to all deceptive action, and as such are addressed in more detail later.

Having defined our terms, let us now consider some recurring patterns that emerge across cases of deception from entirely different domains.

The Building Blocks of Deception

“There are only patterns, patterns on top of patterns, patterns that affect other patterns. Patterns hidden by patterns. Patterns within patterns. If you watch close, history does nothing but repeat itself.”

Palahniuk (1999, p. 82)

On first consideration, cases of deception appear to differ widely from one another. However, by deconstructing cases and contrasting their components, common features soon emerge.

Cases begin to mirror aspects of other cases drawn from entirely unrelated domains. For example:

- A Plover that simulates a broken wing to lure a fox away from its ground-nesting chicks has commonalities with the Second World War Starfish decoys that simulated burning buildings to lure enemy bombers away from dropping their bombs on densely populated UK cities. At a generic level, the deception goals and the deceptive strategies employed are the same.
- A software worm that records and later plays back routine uranium enrichment centrifuge data while it surreptitiously spins the devices out-of-control, causing them to explode, employs the same one-ahead strategy that underpins a card trick simulating precognition of a spectator's future choices. In both cases, real-time information is surreptitiously acquired and later presented as if contemporary.

Studying deceptive phenomena across multiple domains reveals how deception targets and manipulates a common set of psychological processes that humans use to make sense of the world and generate action. Analogs of these processes exist and are similarly targeted in non-human deception, including within plant deception, animal deception, and cyber deception, etc. These processes can be considered the 'building blocks' of deception and comprise:

- **Attention.** The process of determining where to orientate sensory systems (eyes, ears, touch, technological sensors, etc.) to collect information about the world.
- **Perception.** The perceptual process of determining (via our senses —i.e., seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting, etc.) the features, objects, and actions that are occurring in the environment.
- **Sensemaking.** Cognitive integration and recognition of perceptual environmental patterns to determine what is happening, what this means, and what to do about it.

- **Expectations.** Use of mental simulation to anticipate what will happen next and how the situation will change if it is acted upon.
- **Emotion.** The emotional state resulting from an understanding of the current and envisaged future situation.
- **Behavior.** The kinetic or communicative action taken in response to an understanding and anticipation of the world.

All deception (including non-human deception) involves a deceiver manipulating these processes (or their analogs) to achieve a desired outcome. Deception is thus an entirely generic phenomenon that transcends domain, target type, target scale, and any intervening technologies. By noticing, capturing, and appropriately packaging deceptive manipulations of these processes, it becomes feasible to:

- Recognize and understand deceptive strategies in a given case, enabling deconstruction, analysis, and insight.
- Detect and recognize others' use of deception, thereby establishing a basis for counter-deception.
- Design deceptive action by sequencing these psychological manipulations.

Next, we will consider how humans develop the capacity to deceive.

The Development of Deceptive Skills in Children and Adults

Four levels of deception

Deception occurs throughout nature and confers evolutionary advantage upon both predator and prey (Bond & Robinson, 1988; Covacio, 2003; Mokkonen & Lindstedt, 2014; Mokkonen &

Lindstedt, 2016). Evolution has brought about a wide variety of deceptive behaviors that Mitchell (1986) classifies into four levels of complexity:

- **Level 1.** The deceiver has an immutable deceptive appearance or behavior. For example, some butterflies have evolved to mimic the markings of a poisonous species to deter predators.
- **Level 2.** The deceiver selects its deceptive behavior from among a set of options programmed by evolution based on its perception of the environment. For example, some birds will feign injury to lure a predator away from its nest (and will only exhibit such behavior in their presence).
- **Level 3.** The deceiver learns from experience and will repeat deceptive behaviors that have previously proven beneficial (for example, a behavior that has delivered a reward). This action is intentional, but it is not intentionally deceptive, as the deceiver does not understand the target's belief. For example, some songbirds mimic various other birds' songs to simulate a crowded habitat, thereby dissuading new birds from nesting nearby.
- **Level 4.** The deceiver learns to be deceptive through self-awareness and insight, plans its deceptive behavior, and monitors and adapts its deception in response to the target's behavior. Examples include primates deceiving others about the location of food and human deception.

Level 4 in Mitchell's typology differentiates human and other primate deception from other forms of deception based on the higher-level cognitive functions involved, including self-awareness, insight, and adaptation. Studying how and why these skills develop in children reveals a great deal about the development of deceptive abilities in general.

The development of lying in children

Hyman (1989) suggests that the study of children's social and cognitive development reveals much about the origins of human deception. Children exhibit deceptive behavior as young as two years of age (Evans & Lee, 2013; Sinclair, 1996; Triplett, 1900), and by the time they are four, they engage actively in lying (Evans & Lee, 2011; Polak & Harris, 1999; Popliger et al., 2011; Talwar et al., 2007; Vasek, 1986).

During the first couple of years of their development, children's lies tend to be extremely unconvincing. The transition from being a poor liar to a better liar reflects the development of the cognitive capacity to imagine the world from another person's (i.e. the target's) perspective, a capacity known as 'theory of mind' (Chandler, 1988; Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). Recognition of perspective variability marks a critical stage in a child's acquisition of higher-level cognitive reasoning skills (Ding et al., 2015; Spence et al., 2004). And a variety of studies suggest a correlation between early exhibition in children of these high-level deception skills and subsequent academic success (Evans & Lee, 2011; Lee & Ross, 1997).

After experimenting with lying for several years, children become reasonably skilled in deception just before adolescence as they begin to deceive in a wider variety of settings (Newman, 1986).

Deception in adults

As children transition into adults, they experience a broader range of deceptive situations compared to those encountered by younger children. Accordingly, adult deceivers rely upon a broader range of traits and skills, including intelligence, creativity, theory of mind, lateral thinking, and the ability to overcome functional fixedness (not seeing and using things as they are but in terms of what they could be), etc. For example, in a review of the personalities of many well-known deceivers from the Second World War, Whaley (2010) found that most were mavericks, non-conformists, and independent-thinkers who were unorthodox in how they approached their careers and work. Most had, at some point, found creative, devious,

or even deceptive ways to work around the rules and go against (although not disobey outright) their orders.

In his book on the language used by pickpockets, Maurer (1955) uses the term 'grift sense' to refer to the hard-to-define internal sense that pickpockets and conmen have for fooling and manipulating others, suggesting that it is both inherent and learned socially. Learning deception skills vicariously (in addition to learning from explicit training) happens in many different communities, including pickpockets, scammers, magicians, hackers, prisoners, artists, etc.

Let us now turn to the role of creativity in deception.

Deception as a Creative Act

Deception is a creative act. Its formulation relies upon creativity, and its successful execution creates change that otherwise would not have occurred. Successful deception is elegant, economical, and effective, and its design and execution (although not necessarily its impact) have an almost aesthetic dimension. Deception is as much an art as it is a science.

Many factors can give rise to the desire and intent to deceive others. In all cases, the deceiver identifies a problem or opportunity and recognizes the potential for deception to deliver some kind of advantage. Precipitating factors may include:

- **Desperation.** The deceiver has no alternative means for survival (e.g., children turn to pickpocketing or shoplifting to support their struggling family).
- **Asymmetry.** Deception provides a means to level the playing field in the face of overwhelming odds (e.g., a small guerrilla force uses deception to defeat a larger and better-equipped enemy).
- **Efficiency.** Deception provides a cheaper, more straightforward, or more economical means to gain an advantage over a target in comparison to non-deceptive means

(e.g., it is more reliable for a card sharp to use their skills to cheat at poker than to rely on pure chance).

- **Opportunity.** The deceiver discovers an unexpected opportunity to gain an advantage over others (e.g., a scammer notices that an unattended shop till is covered in sticky-notes indicating which customers are owed a refund, so takes the opportunity to add one with her name).
- **Social contagion.** Deceptive behavior is acquired, normalized, and practiced via a process of enculturation (e.g., children learn to lie from their parents, who routinely tell blatant white lies among the family to lubricate social interactions).
- **Problem-solving.** Deception may arise as a viable solution to a complex social challenge (e.g., subtly blending live action with Computer Generated Imagery provides a viable means to simulate events that are too difficult, risky, or costly to create for real).
- **Profession.** The deceiver works in a profession that necessitates deceiving others (e.g., undercover police, military deceivers, magicians, etc.).

Deception entails a creative battle between deceiver and target. The deceiver seeks to impose a constructed artificial reality upon the target and must develop the means to do so. The target seeks to maintain an accurate understanding of reality in the face of the deceiver's actions. Successful deception, therefore, relies upon the deceiver's ability to outmaneuver and outgun the target intellectually and creatively. Novelty and surprise are essential to formulating deception that operates outside of a target's ability to make accurate sense of reality.

Multiple studies suggests that effective deceivers exhibit high degrees of creativity. For example, Walczyk et al. (2008) found that creative liars tend to exhibit more divergent thinking and are more ideational. Kapoor and Khan (2017) identified that deceptive

individuals exhibit higher degrees of creativity and originality. Further, Wiseman et al. (2021) found that children who are taught magic demonstrate more significant gains in divergent thinking compared to those participating in a matched art-based intervention. This relationship also seems to work in reverse, in so far as highly creative individuals appear to possess a greater potential for deception. For example, Beaussart et al. (2013) found that creative individuals more often failed an objective test of behavioral integrity. Moreover, Gino and Ariely (2012) discovered that creative individuals are more morally flexible and are more likely to cheat and be dishonest as they are more likely to generate justifications that rationalize their unethical behavior.

However, a significant conceptual leap remains from possessing or exhibiting such traits to designing and executing successful deception. Deceivers must learn experientially to become better at fooling others by operationalizing their inherent traits and skills and making a conscious effort to learn experientially from their successes and failures. Deception planning is a creative problem-solving activity. It involves the planner envisaging a desired future state and establishing how, given available time and resources, to transition from the current state to the future state using deception. Deceivers rely upon their experience to inform their problem-solving and may employ analogous reasoning, mental simulation, and adaptation of previous solutions to fit the problem at hand. Mental simulation also enables evaluation of the consequences of prospective deceptive action, which will likely trigger consideration of the ethical dimensions of their plan. This is addressed next.

The Ethics of Deceiving

“Because of the stigma associated with deception — in many cases rightfully so — the research community has focused its energy on

eradicating malicious deception, and ignored instances in which deception is positively employed.”

Adar et al. (2013, p. 1863)

Deliberation about the ethics of deception has been ongoing for millennia within the fields of philosophy, psychology, sociology, religion, and law. Many debates and arguments conflate the ethics of deception with the ethics of lying, which (for reasons explained earlier) can result in a simplistic, incomplete, and impoverished view of the issues involved. Some studies consider ethics against a more expansive view of deception, including non-verbal deception and deception without lying. Other studies have sought to differentiate lying from deception and have addressed separate ethical issues for each.

Despite the variety of different perspectives and approaches, two broad schools of thought have emerged concerning the ethics of deception:

1. Deception is always wrong.
2. Deception is sometimes legitimate, desirable, and even necessary.

A discussion of each of these views now follows.

The view that deception is *always* wrong

A well-established tranche of thinking contends that *all* deception is wrong, irrespective of the deceiver’s intent, context, or outcome (e.g., Aquinas, 1485/1911; Augustine; Finnis, 1998; Grisez, 1993; Kant, 1898; Sartre, 1956). This *deontological* viewpoint asserts an overriding moral imperative *never* to deceive — and that there can be no exceptions. This stance contends that it is even wrong to deceive to save the life of a friend, for self-defense, to deceive another deceiver, to deceive a target about one thing in order to reveal the truth of another thing, or to deceive in pursuit of other noble ends.

Arguments supporting an absolute prohibition of deception stem primarily from religious doctrine. Augustine (A.D. 395/1952), in his treatise *On Lying (De Mendacio)* viewed lying as a fundamental evil and the origin of all sin. Thomas Aquinas (1485/1911), heavily influenced by Augustine, reinterpreted Greek philosophy on lying to conclude that it serves only to corrupt and denigrate the spoken word, the primary purpose of which is to praise God.

The writings of Augustine and Aquinas had a significant impact on the thinking of Immanuel Kant, who sought to reframe their religious arguments against lying as arguments of reason. In his book *Critique of Practical Reason* (Kant, 1788), he included an appendix entitled *On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives*. Kant's system of ethics was built on the basis that we should treat each human being as an end and never as a mere means. Lying to someone does not treat the person as an end in themselves, but merely a means for the liar to get what they want. Kant reasoned that a *categorical imperative* exists to always be truthful, as truthfulness is fundamental to all social intercourse and lying causes injury by violating the recipient's right to justice and fair treatment.

While there exists a wide range of different interpretations and positions on the thoughts of Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant, their work provides the foundation for most subsequent absolutist perspectives on deception. Contemporary absolutist viewpoints include those expressed by Grisez (1993) and Finnis (1998).

An alternative school of thought on the ethics of deception adopts more a utilitarian and consequentialist view that acknowledges and addresses these arguments.

The view that deception is sometimes legitimate, desirable, and even necessary

A significant number of philosophers advocate a more utilitarian and consequentialist view of deception, suggesting that it is sometimes legitimate, desirable, and even necessary (for example, see Aristotle, 340 BCE/1906; de Spinoza, 1677/2017; Derrida, 2002; Hegel,

1821/2001; Kierkegaard, 2009; Nietzsche, 1873/1954; Plato, 370 BCE/1868, 390 BCE/1999; and Sidgwick, 1874).

Plato (375 BCE/2017) argued that moral principles always trump truth-telling, as telling the truth can itself be immoral and cause harm to its recipient. He exemplified this argument by introducing the concept of the 'noble lie' — a myth or untruth that is knowingly propagated (often by an elite) to maintain social harmony or advance a positive agenda within a populous. Plato viewed the lie as noble as its recipients benefit from hearing it.

Some philosophers also argue that the very notion of telling the truth is compromised because the truth is often not clear, objective, knowable, or communicable. For example, Nietzsche (1873/1954) argued that as an objective, knowable truth does not and cannot exist, so refusing to tell the truth is, in a sense, a form of truthfulness, and insisting on the truth becomes a philosophically venal form of lie. Nietzsche further suggests that it is not the presence of deception itself that raises objections from people. Instead, objections relate to deception's potential adverse consequences.

Sidgwick (1874, p. 293) builds on this notion, arguing that to assess the ethics of a case of deception, one needs always to weigh up the potential harm caused by deception against its potential benefits. Various studies support Sidgwick's position. For example, Levine and Schweitzer (2014) found that the public perceives some lies to be more ethical than honest statements, and individuals who tell prosocial lies are perceived to be more moral than individuals who tell the truth. Later experiments (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015) demonstrated that prosocial deception can also increase trust between a deceiver and their target, as the deceiver's intent is more significant than the means used to achieve that intent. Walczyk and Newman (2020) found that observers of lies intuitively put themselves in the position of the liar. Their tolerance, ranging from condemnation to acceptance, is determined by the degree to which the social norms of reciprocity and social responsibility are perceived to be upheld or violated overall. Loewenstein et al. (2015) also discovered that people are not necessarily

negatively disposed towards being manipulated, even when they know that such manipulation is occurring. Their findings may help address concerns that behavioral interventions are necessarily duplicitous or manipulative.

The Ubiquity of Prosocial Deception

Cases of prosocial deception exist everywhere one looks, yet we rarely notice, let alone acknowledge these positive applications. Prosocial deception relies upon the same building blocks and manipulative processes as malevolent deception. It requires the same planning activities be undertaken. And it has the same dependence upon creativity throughout its process to enable success.

Examples of prosocial deception include:

- A neurologist administering a placebo to lessen dramatically the impact of Parkinson's disease on a patient's motor control functions.
- Military commanders fooling their enemy into surrendering without the need for bloodshed.
- An undercover police unit infiltrating and disrupting a people trafficking and modern slavery operation.
- Cybersecurity specialists tricking a hacker into disclosing their real identity, leading to an arrest and protecting critical information (such as individuals' health records).
- Increases in self-confidence and self-esteem resulting from wearing concealer, makeup, lipstick, high heels, slimming clothing, accentuated clothing, perfume, etc.
- Bluffing within sport and gambling.

Society also benefits from applications of deception that are directed towards non-human targets, such as an oncologist who deceives a patient's cancer cells into binding with decoy molecules that misdirect and lessen the spread of the disease (Denichenko et al., 2019). Or

an epidemiologist who uses hormones to deceive female mosquitos into believing that they have already mated, thereby disrupting their reproductive cycle and reducing the spread of malaria (Childs et al., 2016) — mosquitos only mate once, and the parasite *Plasmodium Falciparum* is only spread by females that bite to obtain blood to nurture their eggs. While the target in these cases is not human, the deception directly benefits society and is therefore prosocial.

Animals also engage in prosocial deception, suggesting that such phenomena could be ingrained more deeply within nature. For example, Birch (2019) found that, following an alarm call, an adult pied babbler will emit a purr call that fledglings associate with food, to lead their young away from predators. However, he suggests that such phenomena appear rare and are certainly less well studied than other forms of animal deception.

As common forms of manipulation enable both malevolent and benevolent deception, deception itself must be value-neutral. It is therefore imperative to not confound deceptiveness with ethicality. Careful ethical scrutiny should seek instead to determine:

- The intent behind the deception.
- The justification for its use.
- How it was planned.
- How it was executed.
- The effects it achieved.
- The resultant outcome.

Deception is like a house brick. A deceiver can use the brick to build somebody a house or use it to hit them over the head. Both the brick and deception have no intrinsic ethical value.

Where in the deceptive process do moral and ethical considerations arise?

Ethical and moral considerations permeate the entire deceptive process. Societal ethics refer to collective attitudes towards deception as enshrined in laws, policies, and societal norms. These factors serve to shape standards of practice in organizations that employ deception professionally, such as the military or undercover police. They also inform and regulate the personal morality of the deceiver.

During the deception formulation process, societal ethics, organizational standards, and personal morality come together to guide the planner's decision making concerning perceived boundaries between right and wrong. In organizations with a professional requirement to conduct deception, deception plans are subject to further ethical scrutiny from compliance functions within the organization prior to sign-off or rejection (governmental, legal, managerial, or oversight committees, etc.).

During plan execution, the deceiver will monitor its impact and adjust the plan if pertinent ethical concerns arise. Following execution, an after-action review process (that may be formal or informal) will serve to identify any moral or ethical lessons arising and seek to convert these into lessons learned so as to inform future deceptive action.

Next, we shall address some of the practical implications of using an enhanced understanding of deception and its moral and ethical considerations within various societal settings.

Practical Implications for Exploiting an Enhanced Understanding of Deception

“A word to the wise is seldom sufficient.”

Bell and Whaley (1991, p. 327)

An accurate understanding of deception and its moral and ethical considerations is paramount in various social settings. To begin, the enhanced definition of deception provided in this chapter has sufficient rigor that it could inform assessment of an individual's actions to establish whether or not they were deceptive. This capability could be helpful in legal, disciplinary, and educational settings.

The psychological building blocks outlined provide an analytical and explanatory framework that can guide deconstruction and understanding of any given case of deception. The framework can facilitate and structure insights about how a deceiver has manipulated and fooled their target. *Lessons identified* about the functioning of deception within a given case can become *lessons learned* by developing counter-deception defenses that target and disrupt attempted future manipulations.

Understanding how deception works is vital to detecting and responding effectively to falsehood in many walks of life. However, understanding alone is (as per the quotation from Bell & Whaley) insufficient. For real change to occur, future behavior must be adjusted to account for previous experience. Change can occur as a result of education, societal pressure, or the imposition of and adherence to rules. For example, after being targeted with fake news stories by Russia in 2014, the Finnish government instituted a major national program of fake news education to ensure that everyone from pupil to politician could detect and do their bit to fight false information (Henley, 2020). Finland now tops, by some margin, an annual index measuring resistance to fake news in 35 European countries (Open Society Institute, 2019). The frameworks and constructs described in this chapter could bolster and

illuminate such efforts, providing a better reflection of, and applicability to, a wider range of domains in which deception is practiced.

Cunning and creative forms of deception necessitate cunning and creative counter-deception efforts. For example, the frameworks identified could provide a basis for the development of automated systems that detect misinformation and disinformation online, using approaches such as source validation, profile verification, thematic and sentiment analysis, etc. Such efforts also necessitate effective responses to misinformation and disinformation, such as providing more accurate and explanatory labelling, pointing a reader to verified information sources, or the in-line presentation of alternate viewpoints, counterarguments, and rebuttals. For an example of a significant and coordinated program to tackle online disinformation, see recent efforts by the European Commission (2020).

The ethical considerations outlined in this chapter could help clarify and strengthen international organizational regulation, state regulation, self-regulation, and other codes of practice for industries that enable, facilitate, or support misinformation and disinformation via online, broadcast, and print media. As discussed throughout this chapter, the use of deception is not, *per se*, unethical. However, the ethical criteria identified in this chapter could assist in determining more rigorously what is and is not acceptable within the ethical bounds of media-enabled deception. Further, the frameworks could underpin how states respond to breaches of international regulations — for example, by imposing sanctions against countries that deploy deceptive capabilities against dissidents and journalists.

Let us now draw together some of the key points raised in this chapter.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided a rigorous definition of deception, founded on the notion of induced erroneous sensemaking. It has explained why lying constitutes only a partial and impoverished slice of the more extensive field of deception and has described a broader set

of psychological manipulations that occur across all cases of deception. Critically, the chapter has explained why deception is value-neutral and the mere presence of deception is not necessarily unethical. Indeed, deception is sometimes legitimate, desirable, and even necessary.

The chapter has outlined criteria against which cases of deception should be assessed to determine their ethics and morality. It has also identified that moral and ethical considerations permeate pre-existing societal and organizational contexts for the planning, execution, and experiential learning from deceptive action. Finally, the chapter has identified a range of potential settings for exploiting an enhanced understanding of deception, including its moral and ethical dimensions.

Ultimately, deception can serve both malevolent and benevolent ends. Reginald Scott summed up well the dual potential inherent in deception in the title of Book 13, Chapter 12 of his 1584 work, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*:

“Of illusions, confederacies, and legierdemaine, and how they maybe well or ill used.” (Original Elizabethan grammar and spelling).

Scott (1584, p. 307)

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