“Deciding that a moral purpose justifies immoral acts can prove self-defeating.”

POLITICS, ADVERTISING, AND EXCUSES: Why Do We Lie?

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LIES OFTEN WORK by offering what seem attractively simple explanations of complicated situations or by satisfying our prejudices or hopes or fears, as in saying that some person or group causes all our problems. We may then jump to the conclusion that if we get rid of him or them, we will have solved everything; the lie becomes an implied directive.

Hitler’s minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels described such lies as really very easy to make convincing: keep them simple, keep repeating them, and keep your audience from hearing anything else. Of course everything we say proves approximate, and incomplete, but with lies, we deliberately misrepresent, to make someone’s mental maps less accurate — a recipe for mistakes, confusion and distrust, and not just in politics.

Mark Twain has Huck say in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn that most of us tell at least a few lies. Huck knows that because he lies to save his friend Jim from slavery. But deciding that a moral purpose justifies immoral acts can prove self-defeating. If we lie, even to survive or to succeed in an immoral and threatening situation, we may help make that situation more dangerous. In such confusions, lies lead to mistakes which lead to more lies, as in what got called ‘escalation’ during the war in Vietnam.

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Consider these vicious circles as variations of the IFD disease (1): inaccurate Ideas lead to confusing Frustrations leading to Demoralization through even less accurate mental maps, more mistakes, and so on, until we escape by learning what not to think or do, or some mistake stops us or changes the situation. As George Orwell said in “Politics and the English Language,” we need to escape or avoid such circles; we can by using language in more easily understood and accurate ways. To do that, compare what we say with what actually happens.

We may lie to protect ourselves or someone else or to harm someone; the more threatening a situation seems, the more we may want to lie. The lies may harm the person who tells them; he may come to believe them, misunderstand his situation, and make mistakes as a result. He may also alienate his audience, until few want to believe or help him even when he doesn’t lie. In the old story about the shepherd boy who falsely cried “Wolf” too often, the boy eventually did see a wolf, but by then no one believed him, no one came, and the wolf ate him.

We do make distinctions between lies. If we think the speaker honestly believes his misinformation or wants to protect someone else, we may judge him less harshly than we do someone we think deliberately lies to benefit himself. But if a mistake or a lie hurts someone we like, we may not care what the person responsible thinks or feels; we want to keep that mistake or lie from hurting us or other people, and especially if it seems apt to happen again: both the causes and the results matter.

Who Tells Who What, About What, and Why?

We tell lies in social situations, so we need to understand them in terms of those situations:

1) Why does the speaker (or writer) say what he does (what causes the lie)?
2) How does what the speaker says compare with the facts?
3) How might the lie affect the speaker, the speaker’s audience, and the subject?

We tell ‘little white lies’ when we tell people what they expect or want to hear, to protect their feelings or save time. We may lie to make our audiences happier, so that, liking us, they will do what we want. If we refuse to talk, our audience may feel insulted or threatened, because they understand such refusals as rejection in a social situation on which their lives depend. But the ‘small talk’ which signals ‘I’m-willing-to-talk-and-hope-you-are’ need not include lies.
We can start with questions which indicate an interest in the audience, and the situation we share with them, and so give them a reason to want to keep that channel open. To do that, we need to ignore our own feelings long enough to encourage someone else to talk by asking questions and by listening; if we go to a dentist or doctor, we don’t want them telling us how they feel instead of discovering what they can do to help us.

We need to present ourselves in particular ways to particular audiences. But tell them lies, and our audiences may think us cowardly, dishonest, a waste of time, and possibly as trying to mislead and harm them. By the time we realize that lies trap us, we may have made our own and other lives more confusing, and left ourselves few choices.

**Lies, Omissions, and Remedies for Them**

Advertising often tries to manipulate its audiences by flattering them, by telling them they deserve or need or want something special, and should get it now, as in:

Haven’t You Promised Yourself a *Lumplump* Long Enough?

Maybe you’ve told yourself that sooner or later you’re going to own a new *Lumplump*.

And maybe you’ve wondered why so many people — including many long-time *Lumplump* owners — have chosen to own one of this new breed of *Lumplump*. A car that combines *Lumplump* luxury and comfort with responsiveness and agility...

Here’s a *Lumplump* that’s right for the times — leading the way for others to follow. Designed and engineered for the changing world you live in.

There are many reasons to make your *Lumplump* decision soon. *Lumplump* craftsmanship. The *Lumplump* name. *Lumplump* resale value. The confidence in knowing that *Lumplump* is America’s most sought-after luxury car...

As you turn to steal a second look, you know the time has come... time to keep that promise to yourself and see your *Lumplump* dealer.

**LUMPLUMP**

Before you let this attempt at seduction mislead you, notice that it tells you nothing specific about the product. Instead, it tells you that you want to buy it, now, and “know the time has come” to go to a dealer (the next step in buying one). Because they try to change what we do by telling us what we feel or need,
advertisements often say you, you, you, as this one does, ten times, as if trying to hypnotize its audience.

Instead of describing the car, the advertisement seems intent on exploiting our intensional reactions to the car’s name and to such words as “comfort” and “luxury” as presumably good, without any extensional explanations of what those words might mean. The advertisement repeats the product’s name thirteen times, as if trying to establish an unthinking habit that would distract us from looking at the car itself, as if trying to sell us the car despite what the car actually does and whether anyone needs it.

By giving the product another name, as the above version of the advertisement has done, we can avoid whatever intensional prejudices we might have about the product’s name; the advertisement tries to use such a prejudice while giving us nothing specific enough to test, nothing to believe except that we want to get such a car. Some advertisements for aircraft say what load the airplanes will carry, at what speed, using how much fuel, figures rarely mentioned for cars. Would advertising and actually producing a car which carries four adults 65 miles in an hour while using one gallon of fuel help sell that car rather than a car costing more and using more fuel? Often the more prestige a car has, the more it costs for what it actually does, as if prestige depends on displaying the owner’s willingness to waste his money and everyone’s resources. The intensional fantasies on which much advertising depends may influence what we do, including the design of products; our mental maps help shape our lives and what we do to the environment on which our lives depend.

When accurate, advertising can help us consider more of the possibilities of life; when not accurate, and when it encourages foolish decisions, advertising may have us buying inefficient, unreliable, unneeded or even dangerous products, wasting our time and money, while making us less intelligent and less happy by encouraging the IFD cycle. Advertising and other propaganda often name products and policies in ways meant to manipulate our reactions while avoiding questions, as with “The world’s best car.” But ‘best’ for what, and measured how? If cars costing one fifth as much prove quieter, more comfortable, and more reliable, while carrying the same load at the same speeds, using half as much fuel, how much longer will ‘the world’s best car’ get sold, and why?

The slogan “the final solution of the Jewish problem” dishonestly suggests the Jews have caused some problem, and implies that finally solving it, once and forever, seems a good and natural thing to do. The slogan does not say who would do what, as if those proposing the solution — murdering millions and stealing their property, even the gold in their teeth — knew they could not justify it. As propaganda often does, this slogan suggests we should blame the
victims as causing the problem; the slogan renames the situation, misrepresenting it to hide and excuse inexcusable actions, and so protect the guilty. Such renamings invite us to make dubious inferences and judgments to benefit someone else, sometimes at our expense.

These inferences often include a misunderstanding of some sequence of causes and results or of some classification. This also happens in jokes. Consider the one about the man who found a dead ant inside his watch and said “No wonder it stopped; the engineer’s dead.” This reclassifies the ant not as the intruder who made the watch stop by getting caught in the machinery, but as the tiny engineer who made it run but died on the job. We may laugh at the mistake, but whenever a situation seems puzzling or important, consider at least two or three possible causes, results, classifications, and solutions, and test them extensionally to find out what actually happens.

For instance, some claim that “Only by intuition can we know the truth.” But what do ‘truth’ and ‘intuition’ mean? These claims apparently reassure some audiences or those who make them, but ask whether they have any extensional evidence:

1) Does the speaker provide any recipes for finding or recognizing truth, or for making intuitions? What happens when we try using those recipes?

2) Why do so many ‘truths’ which people claim they have intuited contradict each other? Why do some prove wrong in fact or so vague that we have trouble telling what they mean or finding ways to test their accuracy? Should we believe a message because it says it ‘is true’? We can say that about anything, which might only prove something about us.

Some say intuitions give us absolute truths, but every fact and sign has its meaning in connection with something else, relative to and affected by other factors — a way of recognizing the world’s complexity and the limitations of what we say which might make us more skeptical and more cautious.

Goebbels’ recipe for propaganda (keep it simple, keep saying it, keep the audience from hearing anything else) suggests some remedies:

1) Instead of simply accepting a name or claim, test it. To show how propaganda misleads, add back what it leaves out, and redefine the subject by explaining it with one or more of the six types of meanings. (2) For instance, show examples which make the person attacked seem attractive, or show what good she does, or why she acts as she does. We may discover we might do worse or that she does no harm or that she helps us in some unexpected way. You might then want to counterattack by comparing her to those who misrepresent her.
2) Interrupt the repetition by asking questions, such as asking who may benefit from the propaganda, why the propaganda keeps repeating and ignoring so much and misrepresenting its subject so often.

3) Let your audience hear much more. Repetition makes some responses easy, as automatic unthinking habits, and by appealing to our snobbery, self-pity, sentimentality, patriotism, sexual desire, or sense of humor; try redefining the subject, the situation, and the propaganda by offering other and obviously better choices or by making the choice the propaganda offers obviously foolish or disgusting or not needed.

When in doubt, look again, and test what anyone says.

Applications

Some propaganda tells outright lies, and some tries to keep us ignorant, as in this example on page 17 of the September 30, 1991 Newsweek:

“If we let people see that kind of thing, there would never again be any war” (a senior Pentagon official, quoted in The New Republic, on why U.S. military censors refused to release video footage of Iraqi soldiers being sliced in half by helicopter cannon fire).

Who does such a refusal to release evidence protect? If we had no more wars, who would suffer? With such examples, show what gets misrepresented, what gets left out, and what gets renamed, apparently in an attempt to make us think and do what, instead of what else?

Sample analysis:

“You can’t call it a bombing,” A said of the raid near B, the tenth X air attack on C this year. “From time to time there are some defensive reactions against bases — .” (New York Times Service, September 24, 1986.)

Why might the politician claim that we cannot call it a bombing when we so obviously can? How might our reactions to him and this action change if we do? What do his words it and defensive reactions describe (what happens when bombs explode in towns)? Why might he use the word terrorist to describe the victims instead of those who dropped the bombs? How might their audiences react if politicians and military men said “We kill people to get what we want”?

To keep anyone’s judgments from affecting the analysis, the name of the politician, the place bombed, and those doing the bombing appear here only as initials. Does having the bombing done by a country you like excuse the bombing or make you change your reaction to that country? In this or any report, try
substituting various names for the initials A, B, C, and X to see how your reactions to the report and the excuse it uses change.

Now suggest questions and some answers for these examples and some you find in what you read:

I. An American news magazine claims that a Russian car will not go more than 60 miles an hour, or more than 12-18 miles per American gallon, when road tests in various countries outside Russia repeatedly show this car will go as fast as 92-96 miles an hour and 20-36 miles per American gallon. Why tell an American audience that, especially when the American government would not let anyone in the U.S. buy the car? How might we react to the magazine making this report?

II. In his book *I Can Sell You Anything* (the confessions of an advertising man about his methods), Carl P. Wrighter mentions “weasel words,” used to avoid making any specific reports or promises while selling products (so customers cannot sue). These words include:

- *works like* or *looks like* (to make the audience think of something better rather than to look at the product itself, as with ‘looks like leather’).

Advertisers also often mention *flavor, style, different, special, exclusive, new*; we may need to ask *which* flavor, different *how*, and to remember that *exclusive* may mean “needlessly expensive” and *new* may mean “not yet fully tested or reliable — we expect our customers to do that for us at their expense.”

Take two advertisements, circle their weasel words, and then say what those words really seem to mean.

III. Pages 120-121 of *A Random Walk in Science* compiled by R. L. Weber (London and Bristol, England: The Institute of Physics, 1973) list weasel phrases used in articles reporting scientific research, including:

- *It has long been known that...* (I haven’t bothered to look up the original reference).

- *Three of the samples were chosen...* (the results on the others didn’t make sense and were ignored (the writer has slanted his evidence)).
Take a newspaper editorial or news magazine article, circle several vague phrases and then suggest what each one may actually mean.

IV. “New Peak for Newspeak” — pages 104 and 107 of the May 6, 1968 Newsweek mention some of the deliberately confusing English used by military men and others, such as:

- effective ordnance delivery (bombs demolish a target)
- collateral damage (killing helpless civilians)

Some Doublespeak seems meant to make what it names seem more impressive, and some, to keep those who use or hear it from noticing what actually happens.

Find other examples of Doublespeak and rewrite them in more easily understood and specific English; leave out every word not needed.

V. As Michael Hudson’s book Advertising, The Uneasy Persuader (Basic Books, 1984) and others say, advertising depends on our believing its oversimplified, often fictional descriptions of our situations. Describe what emotional distractions each advertisement uses, and what possibly needed information it leaves out. Consider this advertisement for:

**The Breguet Watch.** One thing you can have in common with Napoleon, Josephine, George IV, Wellington, the Tsar Alexander I ...

We may realize that we do not want to resemble these famous people or want a watch of the make or model they had. If the model has not changed since before 1820, will having so old a design have any practical advantages? If the model has changed, we won’t have the watch these famous people did. And why buy an expensive watch for whatever glamour we might think they had rather than for what the watch actually does? The advertisement seems to try to distract us from the watch itself with an appeal to snobbery which might not work if we think these people behaved in disgusting or stupid ways.

Now say what questions we may need to ask about these examples and about some you find in what you read:

1) “You’ve never driven a Buick like this before.” (like what?)

2) “Nobody sweats the details like GM.”
3) “You’ve come a long way, baby.” (Said by a company selling cigarettes to women. What happens if they smoke the cigarettes?)

4) “Sunshine units” (for the radiation released by nuclear bomb testing).

What emotional responses do these seem meant to evoke?

NOTES

1. IFD Disease: Idealization leading to Frustration, leading to Demoralization (Depression); a result of an intensional orientation.

2. In other words, we can describe a subject by saying:
   (1) what it resembles,
   (2) what it may cause,
   (3) what it reminds us of,
   (4) what it contrasts with or changes,
   (5) what might it cause,
   (6) what it might exemplify or include.

Use of these six types of meanings may change how we understand and react to subjects, as in comparing ourselves with other people and considering the causes and results of our actions; we may discover that in much the same circumstances, we might behave in much the same way, or in worse ways, or that a person we thought we disliked does us no harm, or that the person helps us in some unexpected way (we can learn from other people’s mistakes).

FURTHER READING

See the works of Bok, Dobbs, Lakoff, Lutz, McClung and Lee, and Wrighter. See also Language and Public Policy and Language in America, as well as Richard J. Gula, Nonsense and How to Overcome It (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), and Garrett Hardin, Filters Against Folly (New York: Viking, 1985). For examples of misleading language, see the Quarterly Review of Doublespeak, published by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801; for how advertisers try to control magazines, and their audiences, see Gloria Steinem, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising,” Ms. Magazine, July/August 1990, pages 18-28.