

# Truthfulness without Truth

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## 1 Introduction

What is the relationship between the value of sincerity and the value of truth? You might assume that the value of sincerity and the value of truth (more exactly: true belief) are part of an evaluative package, such that they stand or fall together. In this spirit, Bernard Williams (2002) offers an account of the “virtues of truth,” which include sincerity and accuracy. My goal in this paper is to undermine the assumption that the value of sincerity is tied to the value of truth. To this end, I’ll criticize the view that the badness of lying is explained by the badness of false belief (§2), and articulate and defend an alternative account, which appeals to the badness of false promising (§3). On my view, the value of truth is orthogonal to the badness of lying.

**Sincerity**, I assume, is a character trait consisting (roughly) of a disposition to tell the truth and nothing but the truth.<sup>1</sup> The question of the value of sincerity, therefore, is the question of the value of such a character trait.<sup>2</sup> But what is it to be disposed to “tell the truth and nothing but the truth”? This is the question of the nature of sincerity, to which we’ll return, below (§4). I shall aim to remain as neutral as possible on this question until then.

I’ll proceed by investigating the badness of lying. Three assumptions support this inquiry. First, I assume that the value of sincerity is tied to the badness of insincerity, i.e. a character trait consisting of a disposition to not tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Second, I assume that the badness of insincerity is explained by the badness of not telling the truth and nothing but the truth.<sup>3</sup> Finally, I assume that lying is a paradigm species of not telling the truth and nothing but the truth, i.e. a paradigm species of insincerity.<sup>4</sup> Putting this all together, the value of sincerity is tied to the badness of lying.

In a paradigm case of **lying**, someone asserts something false, intending that her interlocutors believe something false as a result. For example, Lisa, who is on her way to the pub, tells her boss that she is on her way to the library, intending that her boss believe that she is on her way to the library. Although this is a paradigm case, you might want to include sorts of cases as cases

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<sup>1</sup> Or, if you like, a disposition to tell what you take to be the truth and nothing but what you take to be the truth. Compare benevolence, a character trait consisting (roughly) of a disposition to promote (what you take to be) the wellbeing of others, courage, a character trait consisting (roughly) of a disposition to expose oneself to (what you take to be) dangers and risks, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Suppose we were satisfied that such a character trait is valuable. To understand sincerity is a *virtue* you might think that we would need to add more to our characterization, e.g. that said character trait is acquired by habituation rather than being innate, that manifestations of said character trait are under intelligent guidance of *phronesis*, that said character trait is a mean between two vicious extremes, and so on.

<sup>3</sup> This assumption isn’t obvious; consider Linda Zagzebski’s (1997, pp. 202-11) idea that the value of curiosity – a desire for knowledge – explains the value of knowledge, rather than the value of knowledge explaining the value of curiosity.

<sup>4</sup> Note that “insincerity” here has a different sense than when it names a character trait. Here it means something like “the sort of action that would manifest the character trait of insincerity.”

of lying, but we shall focus on the paradigm case here.<sup>5,6</sup> I shall assume, however, that lying is a species of asserting.

We shall focus on the badness of lying, not the wrongness of lying. Lying is something morally permissible, but always pro tanto bad.<sup>7</sup> When you permissibly lie to the murderer at the door the pro tanto badness of lying is trumped by the pro tanto value of the life of the murderer's would-be victim. In such situations, one makes a sacrifice: the pro tanto badness of lying is exchanged for something the pro tanto value of which trumps the pro tanto badness of lying.

In defense of the claim that lying is always pro tanto bad, we might appeal to the idea that you always ought to regret lying, even when your lie was morally permissible. We often do feel bad about lying, even when we think lying was the right thing to do; in such cases we often say that we regret *having had* to lie. However, Williams (2002, pp. 110-22) suggests that lying is not pro tanto bad when your interlocutor does not "deserve the truth":

[In the case] of the murderer at the door ... it is no sign of a good disposition to feel bad about it, and anyone who has a sleepless minute over having told a lie to a murderer has ... his Sincerity out of shape. (pp. 114-5)

The case of the murderer at the door contrasts, Williams argues, with cases in which we regret having had to lie: in those cases we feel "a kind of guilt: not fully guilt or remorse, since we continue to think that we did the right thing, but an ethical regret, that we had to bring about something, in this case a kind of violation, which we wish we had not had to bring about." (p. 115) However, that you ought to regret something does not entail that you ought to lose sleep

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<sup>5</sup> Consider cases of **bald-faced lying**, in which someone asserts something false without any plausible expectation, and thus without any intention, that her interlocutors believe something false as a result, have been left off the list. "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," Clinton insists, but everyone knows that he did, and Clinton knows that he will not deceive anyone. It seems to me that bald-faced lies are not lies, but mock or pretend lies. Bald-faced lying is a special case of a species of insulting behavior that we can call **mock wrongdoing**. It would be wrong, let's assume, to assault David Cameron, by striking him with a wooden baseball bat, intending to do him bodily injury. Suppose, instead, that you pretend to assault Cameron, by striking him with a foam toy, shaped like a baseball bat. Your action does not *harm* Cameron, at least not in the way that a genuine violent assault would, but it does *insult* him. You make as if you were intending to do him bodily harm, but your means is comically ill-suited to your pretend purpose. Cameron is insulted by your mock assault not because it threatens the harms intended in a real assault (namely, bodily injury), but because of the insinuation of his vulnerability to such harms. On my view, bald-faced lying is insulting in the same way. Bald-faced lies are a kind of pretend lie. We are insulted by them not because they threaten the harms intended in real lying (cf. §3), but because of the insinuation of our vulnerability to such harms.

<sup>6</sup> Consider **attempted deception that fails due to ignorance**, e.g. you assert something that you mistakenly think is false, intending that your interlocutor(s) believe something false as a result, and **foreseen but unintended deception**, e.g. you assert something false, knowing that it may very well be the case that your interlocutor(s) believe something false as a result, but without intending that your interlocutor(s) so believe.

<sup>7</sup> For a defense of the view that lying is always wrong, see Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropic Motives"; for doubts about the absolute prohibition on lying, see Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, III.vii, III.xi.6, IV.iii.5.

over it. There are degrees of regret, and regret need not involve any strong emotional response, nor must it be prolonged. As Williams suggests, the relevant species of regret amounts to wishing that you did not have to perform a certain action. Given this conception of regret, you ought to regret having had to lie to the murderer at the door. You ought to wish she had never shown up in the first place, but, more importantly, you ought to wish that you could have gotten rid of her without deception. This is consistent with the idea that she did not deserve the truth. Compare a case in which I must strike the murderer to prevent her doing harm to her victim. She did not deserve not to be struck; in fact, it seems like she deserved to be struck. But I still ought to regret having had to strike her. The person who does regret this, who looks back on her striking of the murderer with relish, is a minor case of the torturer who “enjoys her job.”

Williams discusses a case from Adam Smith, who argued, of “a man from whom a promise is extracted by a highwayman,” that “breaking the promise entailed some degree of dishonour to the man who made it.” (p. 115) Williams disagrees, and diagnoses Smith’s mistaken intuition as a “hangover of an age before the modern world.” (p. 116) Perhaps. It seems to me that, at least in some versions of the case, the traveler did not actually *promise* the highwayman anything. Suppose the highwayman demands that his victim promise to pay £500 upon their arrival in Edinburgh. The traveler refuses; the highwayman draws his sword and holds it to the traveller’s throat. “Promise!” he insists. If the traveler then utter the words, “I promise to pay you £500 upon our arrival,” it seems to me that he has not *promised* the highwayman anything. This, then, would explain why he ought not regret not paying the £500, should the opportunity arise. This case differs, it seems to me, from one in which the traveler spontaneously offers the £500 as compensation in exchange for his speedy release. In that case, the traveler ought to regret not paying, upon his release. What makes a difference is whether we think the traveler was forced or coerced into making his would-be promise. Because it will be impossible to draw a sharp or clear boundary between cases of coercion and cases of non-coercion, some cases may admit of no easy classification as cases of promising or not promising. My point is that our intuition, that the traveler ought not regret not paying the £500, is based on our sense that he did not really make a promise, and so did not really break a promise – and not on the supposed fact that some instances of promise-breaking aren’t worthy of regret. But the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to lying. If I am forced at sword-point to say that p, where I know that it is false that p, I have not asserted that p, and have therefore not lied (§1).<sup>8</sup> That I ought not regret this utterance is no evidence that there are lies that aren’t worthy of regret. We may think of the case of the murderer at the door as analogous to this case: the murderer forced or coerced me into saying something false, but because it was forced or coerced, it was no assertion. The intuition that we should not regret having to lie to the murderer at the door may reflect our sense that, in some way or another, our utterance was forced or coerced and, therefore, not really a lie. But in that case, we have no evidence that there are lies that aren’t worthy of regret.

The idea that you ought to wish you had not had to lie to the murderer at the door, and in particular that you ought to wish that you could have gotten rid of her without deception, suggests an alternative argument, which avoids the issue of regret. In the case of the murderer at the door, if there were an equally effective way of getting rid of the murderer that didn’t involve lying, then, other things being equal, you ought to use that alternative means to save the

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<sup>8</sup> Note the jargon: asserting that p is a species of saying that p.

murderer's would-be victim. You always ought to avoid lying, other things being equal. The best explanation of this is that lying is always pro tanto bad; that is why you ought, other things being equal, to avoid it. Therefore, lying is always pro tanto bad.

## 2 The alethic account of the badness of (successful) lying

As an aside to his discussion of the value of truth, Paul Horwich (2006) argues that

Insofar as true belief is good and false belief bad, then you will benefit someone by giving him a true belief and do some harm by giving him a false one. Therefore, trying to persuade a person to believe something that you regard as false is an attempt to harm – and for that reason it's morally objectionable. Thus, if we can understand why truth is valuable, we can thereby explain why lying is wrong. (p. 347-8)

Describing the same idea, Andreas Stokke (2013) notes that:

One traditional rationale for why lying is morally wrong is that lies deceive, i.e., in lying one willfully attempts to induce a false belief in the listener who thereby ends up with misinformation that may be potentially harmful. (p. 3)

And Bernard Williams (2002) suggests a similar idea when he writes that sincerity “gets its point ultimately from the human interest, individual and collective, in gaining and sharing true information.” (p. 126)<sup>9</sup> This suggests an:

**Alethic account of the badness of (successful) lying:** successful lying causes your interlocutors to have a false belief; false belief is bad; therefore successful lying is bad.

Note that this account is consistent with the view (§1) that (successful) lying is sometimes morally permissible, on the assumption that false belief is merely pro tanto bad. Let's set aside the issue of generalizing this account to cover cases of unsuccessful lying<sup>10</sup>, and consider its plausibility as an account of the badness of successful lying.

The alethic account appeals to the premise that false belief is bad. How should we understand this premise? How, or in what way, or in what sense, is false belief bad? It seems to me that the defender of the alethic account has two options here: either (i) false belief is bad for the believer, or (ii) false belief is intrinsically bad. Let's consider these two options in turn.

False belief is not always bad for the believer. This is revealed by cases of **beneficial false belief**.<sup>11</sup> Recall the idea behind the alethic account of the badness of (successful) lying:

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<sup>9</sup> For Williams, the connection between sincerity and true belief is indirect: the sincere person openly expresses her beliefs, but beliefs “aim at truth,” and thus a connection between sincerity and truth. I think this approach to the connection between sincerity and truth is basically right.

<sup>10</sup> Which seems straightforward: if successful lying is bad, than unsuccessful lying is bad, in virtue of its being an attempt to do something bad.

<sup>11</sup> For a more thorough discussion, see Hazlett 2013, Chapter 2.

misinformation can be potentially harmful. But sometimes misinformation isn't potentially harmful, and sometimes it is downright beneficial. Consider:

Karen is a tennis player who suffers from nerves, such that she will play embarrassingly badly in her upcoming match, unless she believes, falsely, that she is evenly matched with her opponent. Performing well on the tennis court is what matters most to Karen. You know all this, so when Karen asks you to evaluate her relative to her opponent, you lie, and tell her that she and her opponent are evenly matched.

False belief is good for Karen, in this case; indeed, it seems like it is best for Karen, all things considered. But lying to her is still *pro tanto* bad. This is predicted by the idea that lying is always *pro tanto* bad (§1), but it also seems right when we consider the case in isolation: although it is permissible to lie to Karen, you are still doing something bad. This is revealed by the fact that you would prefer to secure her confidence without lying. In any event, that false belief is bad for the believer cannot explain the badness of lying: false belief is not always bad for the believer, but lying is always *pro tanto* bad.<sup>12</sup>

You might object that lying is always *pro tanto* bad because it involves the violation of a rule – the prohibition on lying – the following of which tends to have consequences that are **generally** good for other people, viz. the avoidance of causing false belief in other people. This is compatible with cases of beneficial false belief (e.g. the case of Karen), so long as such cases are exceptions to the rule that false beliefs are generally bad for people. However, this **rule-consequentialist account** can't explain what needs explaining. Lying is always *pro tanto* bad, but the breaking of rules, the following of which tends to have consequences that are generally good, is not always *pro tanto* bad. The rule-consequentialist's rules admit of exceptions, and Mill uses the case of lying to a malefactor as his example of this phenomenon. Lying is always *pro tanto* bad, not merely generally *pro tanto* bad, as would be predicted on the rule-consequentialist account.

Thus the defender of the alethic account must appeal to the intrinsic badness of false belief. You might appeal to the “epistemic” badness of false belief, where this is understood as distinct from its badness for the believer.<sup>13</sup> Or you might appeal to the idea that truth is the constitutive (or “internal”) “aim of belief.”<sup>14</sup> And you might argue that the “**epistemic badness**” or “**constitutive badness**” (or “internal badness”) of false belief is always present. But this move is problematic, for any account of the badness of (successful) lying that appeals to the intrinsic badness of false belief will fail to capture the way in which lying, even when permissible, is an offense *against another person*. When you lie you do not merely do something that causes a bad

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<sup>12</sup> You might object that false belief about her abilities is constitutively bad for Karen, even if it has good causal consequences. (“Constitutive value” here means value in virtue of being a constituent of someone's quality of life.) But false belief is not always constitutively bad, as revealed by cases of worthless truths (Baril 2010, Hazlett 2013, Chapter 4). It would be bad to lie to someone about the number of grains of sand on the beach at Coney Island, even when false belief about this would not be constitutively bad for her.

<sup>13</sup> See Feldman.

<sup>14</sup> See Williams 1973, Wedgwood 2002, Shah 2003, Steglich-Petersen 2006, 2009, Sosa 2009.

state of affairs to occur. You do something *to someone*, and lying is bad in virtue of what is done *to that person*. (This is reflected, perhaps, in the fact that you cannot lie without lying *to somebody*.) Appealing to the intrinsic badness of false belief cannot explain the essentially *interpersonal* badness of lying.<sup>15</sup>

### 3 The promissory account of the badness of lying

I have argued against the alethic account of the badness of successful lying (§2). I shall now propose an alternative account, on which lying is a species of false promising. This, combined with the badness of false promising, explains the badness of lying. Call this the **promissory account of the badness of lying**.

A **false promise** is a promise you intend not to fulfill. On my view, lying is a special case of this. This way of thinking about the badness of lying contrasts with an alternative, on which promise-breaking is a species of lying, which explains the badness of promise-breaking. In *The Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick notes that “some moralists have classified or even identified ... the duty of Keeping Promises ... with Veracity.” (p. 303)<sup>16</sup> And, indeed, true testimony and kept promises both involve “a correspondence between words and facts.” (pp. 303-4)<sup>17</sup> For his part, Sidgwick concludes that the identification of promise-breaking with lying is a mistake. In any event, on my view, the badness of false promising explains the badness of lying.

I’ll defend the promissory account by defending the following argument:

1. Lying is a species of false promising.
2. False promising is always *pro tanto* bad.
3. Therefore, lying is always *pro tanto* bad.

The argument is valid, so I’ll first defend premise (1) (§3.1), and then premise (2) (§3.2).

#### 3.1 Defense of premise (1)

Lying, I assumed above (§1), is a species of assertion. To make sense of the idea that lying is a species of false promising, we must make sense of the idea of assertions that constitute promises. This is a variant on an idea that J.L. Austin articulated in “Other Minds” (1946, pp. 169-75): that claiming to know that *p* is similar to explicitly promising to  $\Phi$ . Here is the crucial passage:

[W]hen I say “I promise”, a new plunge is taken: I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula (performing this ritual), I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way. Similarly, saying “I know” is taking a new plunge. But it is not saying “I have performed a specially striking feat of cognition, superior, in the same scale as believing and

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<sup>15</sup> This point is related to the fact that “epistemic badness” and “constitutive badness” are attributive uses of “badness.” See Hazlett 2013, §9.2, forthcoming; cf. Fumerton 2001, Shah 2003, p. [discussion of “Jingle Bells”], Sosa 2007, Chapter 4, Ridge 2011.

<sup>16</sup> I provide page numbers from the Hackett edition (Sidgwick 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Does he mean Kant? Does Kant say this in the *Lectures on Ethics*?

being sure, even to being merely quite sure”: for there is nothing in that scale superior to being quite sure. Just as promising is not something superior, in the same scale as hoping and intending, even to merely fully intending: for there is nothing in that scale superior to fully intending. When I say “I know [that S is P]”, I give others my word: I give others my authority for saying that “S is P”. (p. 171)

Austin never says that to claim knowledge *is* to promise; he merely says that the two speech acts are similar. But the similarities he describes are sufficient to motivate the idea that if someone claims to know that p, then she promises her interlocutors that p.

To make sense of this, we need to draw a distinction between practical promising, or **promising to  $\Phi$**  (a promise to *do* something), and alethic promising, or **promising that p** (a promise that something *is true*). When you promise that p, you invite others to believe that p, just as when I promise to  $\Phi$ , I invite others to expect me to  $\Phi$ . (A corollary of this is that a promise is always a promise *to* someone.<sup>18</sup>) The intention to create reasonable belief or expectation – that I will perform some action, that some proposition is true – is what unites the two species of promising. As Sidgwick argues, “the essential element of the Duty of Good Faith seems to be not conformity to my own statement, but to expectations that I have intentionally raised in others.” (op. cit. p. 304; see also p. 354)

As Austin’s example illustrates, you do not need to say <I promise that p> to promise that p, just as you do not need to say <I promise to  $\Phi$ > to promise to  $\Phi$ . I might promise to attend your party by saying, “I’ll be there” And I might promise that the Lakers won the final last year by saying, in response to your urgent question, “The Lakers won the Finals last year.”<sup>19</sup>

Let’s consider two objections to the idea that we sometimes promise our interlocutors that p. First, you might argue that <I promise that p> is somehow linguistically improper. But this is wrong. We know this schema has grammatical instances, as when I promise to attend your party by saying, “I promise that I’ll be there.” And we know that instances of this schema can be used to guarantee the truth of some proposition, and not to promise to do something: you ask me whether I’m sure about the answer I gave earlier, and I say, “I promise that the Lakers won the Finals last year.”<sup>20</sup> There is therefore no linguistic reason not to posit another species of promising, distinct from promising to  $\Phi$ , which involves guaranteeing the truth of a proposition, and it is this species that I’m calling promising that p. Second, you might argue that you can only promise to do that which is under your control. But this is consistent with my proposal. You

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<sup>18</sup> Compare assertion. A false soliloquy may comprise false assertions, but cannot amount to lying. It also seems to me that you cannot lie to an unknown eavesdropper. On soliloquys and eavesdroppers, see Fricker 2006, pp. 597-8, Lackey 2008, pp. 18-19, pp. 224-5.

<sup>19</sup> Austin compares explicit promising to  $\Phi$  (saying <I promise to  $\Phi$ >) with claiming knowledge that p (saying <I know that p>). Saying <I promise that p> amounts to an explicit promise that p, but (as I have just argued) there are non-explicit promises that p. Explicit promising, with all its formality, is more serious than mere promising to  $\Phi$ , and intuitively creates a greater obligation to fulfill the relevant promise.

<sup>20</sup> Fair point: better ordinary language would be “I promise you, the Lakers won the finals that year.” But this is obviously *not* a promise to

can only promise *to do* that which is under your control. But you can promise that *p*, even if whether *p* is not under your control.

An example of Sidgwick's will allow me to clarify the promissory view.

If I merely assert my intention of abstaining from alcohol for a year, and then after a week take some, I am (at worst) ridiculed as inconsistent: but if I have pledged myself to abstain, I am blamed as untrustworthy. (op. cit. p. 304)

If I assert that I intend to not drink for a year, perhaps by saying, "I intend to not drink this year," and subsequently drink, then there is an inconsistency between my intention and actions. However, if I promise to not drink this year, perhaps by saying, "I will not drink this year," and subsequently drink, then there is something more: I have broken my promise, and revealed as untrustworthy. However, saying "I will not drink for a year" does not always amount to a promise to not drink. Imagine that you are leaving for a one-year fellowship in a country where, you are quite certain, alcohol is prohibited. For the purposes of demographic research, a census-taker needs to know whether you will drink any alcohol this year, and asks you with much gravity whether you will. You say, "I will not drink this year." When you subsequently drink regularly throughout the year, because the rumors of prohibition turned out to be false, you have not broken a promise *to* not drink for a year, for you made no such promise. But, so I want to suggest, your promise *that* you would not drink was broken.<sup>21</sup> We can thus distinguish a promise *that* I will not drink from a promise *to* not drink. (This is not to deny that there are contexts in which asserting that I will not drink would amount to a promise to not drink.) When the former species of promise is broken, there is a failure in your ability to say what is the case; when the latter species of promise is broken, there is a failure in your ability to do what you say.

Not all promises that *p*, where it is false that *p*, are false promises that *p*. A false promise, again, is a promise you intend not to fulfill. False promising that *p* requires that you intend to say something false: you must know, or at least believe, or at least suspect or hope, that it is false that *p*. Given the assumption that promising essentially involves the intention to create reasonable belief or expectation (above), this suggests the following account of false promising that *p*: to **falsely promise that *p*** is to say that *p*<sup>22</sup> with the intention of causing your interlocutors to form a reasonable false belief (that *p*) as a result. And given this account of promising that *p*, I propose that lying is a species of false promising that *p*. The reason for this conclusion is simply that our description of false promising that *p* looks like a good description of lying. When you lie, you at the same time promise that *p* (in virtue of intending to cause reasonable belief that *p*) and intend to break your promise that *p* (in virtue of intending to cause false belief that *p*).

I'll conclude this section with a digression on the nature of assertion. The promissory account of lying, proposed here, is neutral on the nature of assertion. Many philosophers have suggested connections between assertion and promising. For example, Elizabeth Fricker (2006) argues that

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, in many situations, although the distinction between a promise that *p* and a promise to  $\Phi$  can be made in principle, it will be meaningless in practice: when you invite me to your birthday party, and I say that I will be there, the distinction, between my promise *that* I will be there, and my promise *to* attend the party, is not worth making.

<sup>22</sup> In a broad sense that includes some cases of implication – see §4.1.



[A]ssertion shares with promising a performative aspect. In promising, the promiser by her act commits herself to bring about the state of affairs she by her choice of words specifies. In asserting, the asserter by her act vouches for the truth of the proposition she by her choice of words specifies. (p. 595)

Roderick M. Chisholm and Thomas D. Feehan (1977, p. 152) write that in the paradigm case of assertion, I attempt to create conditions that will justify my interlocutors in believing that p. As Fricker (2006) puts it, the person who asserts that p “[p]resents P as being so,” so as to “license” her interlocutors believing that p “on her say-so.” (p. 594) For these philosophers, just as other people’s expectations are (absent suspicion of bad faith) intentionally raised by a promise to perform some action, their expectations are (absent suspicions of insincerity) intentionally raised by an assertion that p. The assertion that p, absent suspicion of insincerity, intentionally raises the expectation that it is true that p. In that sense, assertion is a species of promising.

As I said, the promissory account of the badness of lying is neutral on the nature of assertion. I say that lying is a species of promising, and also that lying is a species of assertion, but perhaps there are assertions that are not promises. Consider predictions (cf. Weiner 2005, Lackey 2008, Chapter 4). In advance of a crucial engagement, Jack Aubrey decides, on inconclusive evidence, that the French will attack at noon, and says to his officers, who are aware of the evidence, “The French will attack at noon.” Aubrey, you might think, has asserted that the French will attack at noon. Now imagine a variant: Aubrey has defected to the side of the French, knows they will not attack at noon, and hopes to cause confusion on the English side, and so says to his officers, who think that there is inconclusive evidence, “The French will attack at noon.” Suppose now the French do not attack at noon. Has Aubrey lied? You might think that he did not lie, strictly speaking, because his mere prediction did not amount to a promise that the French would attack at noon. In any event, I leave open the possibility of assertions that are not promises. But if all assertions (that p) are promises (that p), so be it.

The promissory account of the badness of lying is neutral as to whether knowledge is the constitutive norm of assertion (Williamson 1996, DeRose 2002, Fricker 2006, §2).<sup>23</sup> Note well, however, that the supposed fact that knowledge is the constitutive norm of assertion does not explain the badness of lying, because this fact would not explain the essentially interpersonal badness of lying (§2). Consider the rules of games, often appealed to by defenders of the view the knowledge is the constitutive norm of assertion. It may, in some sense, be bad to break the rules of chess, but violations of the rules of chess are not offenses against anyone, at least not in virtue of being violations of the rules of chess.

The promissory account of the badness of lying is neutral as to whether, necessarily, if S assert that p, then S represents herself as knowing that p (Unger 1975; cf. Fricker 2006, p. 594).<sup>24</sup> And the supposed truth of this view also can’t explain the badness of lying. To lie, we might conclude, is to intentionally represent yourself as knowing that p, when you do not know that p (because you do not believe that p, or because you believe that it is false that p). To lie, then, is

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<sup>23</sup> See Hawley’s paper, which argues for the knowledge norm on the basis of the idea that you ought not promise to  $\Phi$  unless you know you will  $\Phi$ .

<sup>24</sup> Also Slote?

to intentionally represent something false. But why is it bad to intentionally represent something false? That, it seems to me, is no different from the question of why it is bad to lie.

### 3.2 Defense of premise (2)

Premise (2) says that false promising is always pro tanto bad. Why think so? Here I think we should simply follow Kant, in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, when he writes that:

[H]e who has it in his mind to make a false promise to others sees at once that he wants to make use of another human being *merely as a means*, without the other at the same time containing in himself the end. For, he whom I want to use for my purposes by such a promise cannot possibly agree to my way of behaving toward him. (AT 429-30)<sup>25</sup>

A false promise – a promise that I intend not to fulfill – essentially involves the attempted manipulation of another person, to which the other person cannot agree. It is always pro tanto bad to make such an attempt. To attempt to manipulate another person is to attempt to involve her in a transaction to which she cannot consent. It is bad to involve people in transactions to which they cannot consent, and it is bad to attempt to involve people in such transactions. This applies not only to false promises to  $\Phi$ , but to false promises that  $p$ , and so to lies. As Williams (2002) argues, successful deception entails a violation of trust (p. 118), the manipulation of people's beliefs (p. 119), and the exercise of power over the deceived party (p. 119).<sup>26</sup> The Kantian idea, to which I am appealing here, is that it is always pro tanto bad to try to manipulate other people, to violate their trust, or to exercise power over them without their consent. Therefore, false promising is always pro tanto bad – i.e. premise (2) is true.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.3 The value of true belief

The promissory account says that:

1. Lying is a species of false promising.
2. False promising is always pro tanto bad.
3. Therefore, lying is always pro tanto bad.

This account of the badness of lying, unlike the alethic account (§2), is silent on the value of true belief. My explanation of the badness of false promising (§3.2) makes no mention of the value of the thing promised. False promises are always pro tanto bad, even when the thing promised is worthless, or even disvaluable. The badness of false promising is independent of the value or disvalue of the thing promised. It is pro tanto bad to promise someone a saucer of mud when

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<sup>25</sup> From Mary J. Gregor's translation in Kant 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Note well, however, that this argument allows (but does not require) us to explain the badness of attempted manipulation by appeal to the badness of successful manipulation. So we might first recognize the badness of successful manipulation, and thus of successful false promising, and thus of successful lying, and then derive the badness of manipulation in general, and thus of false promising in general, and thus of lying in general. For if some outcome would be pro tanto bad, then it is pro tanto bad to attempt to bring about that outcome.

<sup>27</sup> Note that we need not conclude from this that false promising is always morally wrong (cf. §2).

you intend not to deliver, regardless of the value or disvalue of said saucer. In exactly the same way, it is pro tanto bad to assert that p when you know that it is false that p, regardless of the value or disvalue of true belief about whether p. The badness of lying about whether p is independent of the value or disvalue of true belief about whether p.

#### 4 Characterizing sincerity

Let's conclude by returning briefly to the nature of sincerity (§1). I said that lying is a paradigm species of insincerity. What are the other paradigm species of insincerity, to which we might appeal in characterizing sincerity? And does my account of the badness of lying (§3) shed any light on how the boundaries of sincerity ought to be drawn?

Consider cases of **deception**<sup>28</sup> **through false implication**: in the paradigm case, someone implies something false, intending that her interlocutors believe something false as a result. For example, imagine that Athanasius is rowing his boat downriver when he encounters his persecutors, travelling upriver. Not recognizing him, they ask: "Where is the traitor Athanasius?" Athanasius replies: "He is not far away." Is this a paradigm case of insincerity?

Consider cases of **deceptive withholding of information**: in the paradigm case, someone refrains from asserting something she knows, intending that her interlocutors believe something false as a result. For example, imagine that the chair of a committee asks: "Is there any reason to think the proposed project won't work?" Sally, a committee member who aims to sabotage the project, knows of a fatal flaw in the proposal, but says nothing, intending that the chair believe that the project is free of flaws. Is this a paradigm case of insincerity?

Consider cases of **non-communicative deception**: in the paradigm case, without engaging in conversation with anyone, someone acts with the intention that other people believe something false as a result. For example, imagine that Manny wants his neighbors to think that he's going on vacation, even though he isn't. So he makes a show of packing his luggage into his car, at a time when he knows that his neighbors will be watching.<sup>29</sup> Is this a paradigm case of insincerity?

Consider, finally, cases of **non-deceptive withholding of information**: in the paradigm case, someone refrains from asserting something she knows, but without intending that her interlocutors believe something false as a result. For example, imagine that Sally (above) does not aim to sabotage the project, and does not intend that the chair believe that the project is free of flaws, but simply refrains from answering for some other reason (e.g. shyness), which leads the chair to suspend judgment about the status of the project. Is this a paradigm case of insincerity?

It's beyond the scope of this paper to give these questions an adequate treatment, but our discussion of promising that p (§3) can provide some illumination here.

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<sup>28</sup> Here, and in what follows, "deception" is used to cover both successful and unsuccessful deception. Compare "lying," which covers both successful and unsuccessful lying.

<sup>29</sup> The case is from Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*.

## 4.2 Deception through false implication

In the *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant argues that lying is always morally wrong, but that misleading someone is sometimes permissible. In contemporary philosophy, a normative distinction between lying and misleading has defenders (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, Adler 1997, Fricker 2012) and critics (Williams 2002, pp. 100-110, Saul 2012).<sup>30</sup> If mere implication never amounts to promising, then the promissory account of the badness of lying (§3) implies that lying is distinctively bad, i.e. bad in a way that deception through false implication isn't.<sup>31</sup> However, it seems to me that merely implying that *p* sometimes amounts to promising that *p*. The essential feature of promising is the intention to create reasonable belief or expectation (§3.1) – and this feature is present in many cases of mere implication. “It’s important for me to know: are you going to that formal cocktail party?” – “I just bought a new tuxedo” The implication is that the speaker will attend the party, and this case seems no less to involve a promise than one in which the speaker says, “Yes, I will attend the party.” Does implying that *p* always involve promising that *p*? It seems not: “Does Smith have a girlfriend?” – “He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.” The implication is that Smith has a girlfriend in New York, but it would be a stretch to say that the speaker has promised her interlocutor that – for all she’s implied, it’s just a speculation based on circumstantial evidence, namely, that Smith has been visiting New York. So we can distinguish between **promissory implication** (in which the implication that *p* amounts to a promise that *p*) and **non-promissory implication** (in which the implication that *p* does not amount to a promise that *p*). Deception through false promissory implication is pro tanto bad, for exactly the same reason that lying is pro tanto bad (§3.2). The distinction with normative significance is the distinction between false promising that *p*, whether through

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<sup>30</sup> Compare also the medieval doctrine of “mental reservation.” This view was designed to vindicate false religious declarations under persecution. It seems morally permissible for me to say that I am a pious devotee of the Great Pumpkin, if you have threatened to torture me unless I worship said Pumpkin. According to the doctrine of mental reservation, I can avoid lying in such situations by mentally adding a qualification to, or retraction of, my utterance. I say, “I love the Great Pumpkin,” but I silently think the thought: *I do not love the Great Pumpkin*. In virtue of this, so the argument goes, I do not lie. As Williams (2002, p. 104) points out, this view is the equivalent of the view that one can avoid false promises by crossing one’s fingers. A story about Francis of Assisi has him effectively employing this method: a villain in pursuit of a victim asks Francis whether his quarry had gone in a certain direction; Francis replies, “He did not pass this way,” while pointing in the opposite direction under his cloak. The doctrine of mental reservation is false. The contents of our assertions are not determined (entirely) by our intentions, and we cannot in general modify the contents of our assertions by performing (mental or physical) actions of which our interlocutors are unaware. In the case of Francis, just described, it is much more plausible to say that Francis asserted something he knew to be false, and therefore lied, but that his lie was morally permissible. Similarly, it seems eminently plausible to say that it is morally permissible to lie to avoid torture. However, we might also appeal to the idea that assertions cannot be coerced (§2.1), and conclude that false utterances made to avoid torture are not assertions and therefore not lies. In that case, the doctrine of mental reservation is not needed to vindicate false religious declarations under persecution.

<sup>31</sup> Note also that on the alethic account of the badness of (successful) lying (§2), a normative distinction between lying and misleading would be completely obscure: all species of deception are all equally bad vis-à-vis the badness of false belief.

assertion or implication, and other forms of deception, not the distinction between lying and misleading.

So there does not seem to be any reason to treat lying, as opposed to deception through false implication, as uniquely paradigmatic of insincerity.

### 4.3 Owing someone the truth

False promising that *p* seems distinctively bad, i.e. bad in a way that these other would-be paradigm species of insincerity aren't. However, it seems to me that there is a broader species of badness which includes not only false promising that *p* but also some cases of deceptive withholding of information, non-communicative deception, and non-deceptive withholding of information. What I have in mind is the idea that there are situations in which you **owe someone the truth (about whether *p*)**, but fail to tell her the truth (or attempt to not tell her the truth) (about whether *p*). Deception about whether *p*, when you owe someone the truth about whether *p*, might be especially bad, but failure to tell someone the truth about whether *p*, when you owe her the truth about whether *p*, is always *pro tanto* bad.

When is it the case that you owe someone the truth about whether *p*? It seems like there are a plurality of ways this might come about. Promising someone that *p* is one way: if you testify under oath that you were with the defendant on Tuesday night, you owe the court members the truth about whether you were with the defendant on Tuesday night. But there are other ways to come to owe someone the truth. Your partner has yearned for years to own a first edition of Nabokov's *Ada*, but today you see one at the local shop. You owe her the truth about whether there is a first edition of *Ada* at the local shop, and it would be *pro tanto* bad to not tell her about the first edition that you saw. This species of badness seems to be present in a range of cases, including lying ("I didn't see any copies today, dear."), non-communicative deception (you hide the newspaper where the local shop runs ads listing its notable offerings), and withholding of information ("See any copies of Nabokov at the shop today?" – "Let's discuss something else"). The history of our interactions with other people, our social, moral, and political context, our institutional roles and responsibilities – all these will ground facts about whether we owe someone the truth about whether *p*. And a distinctive kind of *pro tanto* badness is instantiated when we owe someone the truth (about whether *p*) and fail to tell her the truth (about whether *p*).

Given the notion of owing someone the truth, and of the distinctive kind of *pro tanto* badness associated with failing to tell someone the truth when you owe her the truth, we might draw the boundary of sincerity broadly, and understand sincerity as a disposition to tell the truth to those whom you owe the truth. This would jibe with Williams' (2002) idea that "[s]incerity at its most basic level is simply openness, a lack of inhibition." (p. 75) Sincerity would require more than a negative disposition to avoid deception, it would require a positive disposition to tell the truth. Given this characterization, the value of sincerity could be understood by appeal to the badness of owing someone something and failing to deliver (or attempting not to deliver). This account, however, awaits a more rigorous articulation of the notion of owing someone the truth.

Note well that, just as the badness of false promising is independent of the value or disvalue of the thing promised (§3.3), the badness of not giving what you owe (or of attempting to not give what you owe) is independent of the value or disvalue of the thing owed. The badness of (attempting to) deceive someone about whether p, when you owe her the truth about whether p, for example, is independent of the value or disvalue of true belief about whether p.

## 5 Conclusion

Lying is a paradigm species of insincerity (§1). I've criticized an account of the badness of lying that appeals to the badness of false belief (§2), and defended an account of the badness of lying on which lying is a species of false promising (§3). On my view (§3.3), the badness of lying about whether p is independent of the value or disvalue of true belief about whether p; the value of true belief is orthogonal to the badness of lying. From this, along with some reflections on insincerity more broadly construed (§4), I tentatively conclude that the value of truth and the value of sincerity are independent.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Research on this paper was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (who paid for leave) and by the University of New Mexico (who provided an office). For valuable feedback, I owe thanks to audiences at the University of Adelaide and the University of California at Riverside, where I presented this paper. Thanks especially to Garret Cullity.

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