



# An inferentialist account of lying

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## Abstract

The inferentialism due to Robert Brandom presents a compelling normative-deontic picture of language and discursive practices, and as such it is well positioned to address phenomena like lying. This short work outlines a simple account of how lying can be conceptualized within that framework. To that end, the basic Brandomian position is extended to include a novel type of status—namely, pseudo-commitments, which are unique in their being non-binding. The traditional definition of lying is then given a status-oriented form, such that lying consists in presenting a pseudo-commitment with the intention for it to be attributed as a standard commitment. Importantly, this can be articulated in our scorekeeping practices, which is demonstrated with three example exchanges— one featuring an undetected lie, one featuring a detected lie, and one featuring a bald-faced lie. Though simple, the account works and invites extension to other similar phenomena, like sarcasm, acting, bullshit, etc. The notion of pseudo-commitment may also find application outside of the inferentialist context.

**Keywords** Lying · Commitment · Inferentialism · Normative · Brandom · Pseudo-commitment

## 1 Introduction

This work sets out to articulate an account of lying from within the inferentialist framework developed by Brandom (1994, 2001, 2008). The inferentialism he laid down is complex but well-disposed to being adapted and shaped to addressing various phenomena arising in communication. One such phenomenon is lying, which is of particular interest from the inferentialist perspective for a number of reasons, not

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least because of the natural connection between the normative significance of lying and the fact that Brandom built his system around normative and pragmatic considerations. The perspectival structure it operates with, its use of deontic scorekeeping, and our discursive practices are all relevant in drawing that connection. Despite that, there is still work to be done in establishing what lying might actually look like within the inferentialist framework.

The approach taken here is to introduce a novel type of status: pseudo-commitment. Unlike standard commitments, pseudo-commitments are insensitive to incompatible commitments and non-binding in terms of our behavior. Lying is articulated in the inferentialist mode through deontic attitudes, such that lying is producing a pseudo-commitment with the intention of it being attributed as a standard commitment. This is analogous to the traditional definition of lying as making a statement we believe to be false with the intention to deceive (see, e.g., Carson, 2012; Fallis, 2009; Sorensen, 2007). The details of this formulation are illustrated with three example exchanges, modeling what lying looks like in the case of an undetected lie, a detected lie, and a bald-faced lie. The result is a simple but effective extension of the inferentialist program. The aim here is precisely to establish this sort of simple account, setting aside the matter of how it might engage with the broader current literature on lying, or how it might interface with the wider inferentialist system surrounding the account.

The remainder of the article is split into four sections. The second section introduces the relevant theoretical features of Brandom's inferentialism. The third section outlines an initial account of lying following Jary's (2018), addressing its limitations. The fourth section presents pseudo-commitments and the three aforementioned example cases illustrating various lies. The final section briefly concludes with a recapitulation.

## 2 Commitment and deontic attitudes

In order to approach the issue of lying in the inferentialist framework, we will need to first outline some of the core concepts of the position. Inferentialism depends upon a complex network of norms and discursive practices. These practices afford *deontic statuses*, which serve a central role in the framework. Where Brandom's inferentialism breaks with a number of well-established traditions in favor of pragmatism, eschewing representations and a simple view of content, deontic statuses allow us to account for familiar semantic categories like truth, among other things. The paradigmatic deontic status within his framework is commitment (1994, p. 159).<sup>1</sup> Commitment roughly corresponds to the everyday notion of obligation. We are responsible for our commitments. If I make a promise to you, I am committing myself to keeping it. Having made that commitment, I ought to keep that promise. Should I fail to do whatever it is that I promised, I will be held accountable— whether through a few

<sup>1</sup> The other major status is that of entitlement (see Brandom, 1994, p. 142). It will be returned to in a later section, though without development as a distinct status for the sake of economy. For the purposes of this account, focusing on commitments is largely sufficient.

harsh words or simply not being trusted to keep my promises in the future. This is a basic illustration of the normative system that inferentialism places at its center, with an individual making a commitment involving others and being held to account by those others.<sup>2</sup>

Assertions express and structure our commitments, such that our asserting a simple observation is to commit to defending that observation. If someone were to question it, we are expected to explain ourselves, which will often take the shape of further assertions, creating networks of inferences between assertions. To understand how this is intended to work, we need to better introduce the social framework within which these deontic statuses are meant to operate. To that end, we need to pair our deontic statuses with *deontic attitudes*, which convey the way these statuses are perceived by the individuals in a given community. There are two relevant attitudes here: acknowledgment and attribution (1994, p. 626; cf. Rosen, 1997). Each conveys a particular perspective, with acknowledgment corresponding to the commitments we take ourselves to have, and attribution corresponding to the commitments we take others to have. Brandom describes statuses and the place of attitudes as follows:

Deontic statuses of the sort to be considered here are creatures of practical attitudes. There were no commitments before people started treating each other as committed; they are not part of the natural furniture of the world. Rather they are social statuses, instituted by individuals attributing such statuses to each other, recognizing or acknowledging those statuses. Considered purely as a natural occurrence, the signing of a contract is just the motion of a hand and the deposition of ink on paper. It is the undertaking of a commitment only because of the significance that performance is taken to have by those who attribute or acknowledge such a commitment, by those who take or treat that performance as committing the signatories to further performances of various kinds. (Brandom, 1994, p. 161)

Statuses are instituted and sustained through the attitudes of the individuals of the community, with the interplay of these attitudes effectively forming the basis of our discursive practices and thus of our values, the inferential contents of our expressions, and so on. The statuses that we acknowledge ourselves and attribute to others determine, at least to some extent, how we engage with one another. Put somewhat differently, Brandom's inferentialism affords a perspectival system in which my view of myself and my view of you affects how I understand you, and the same is true from your perspective, both as affected by and affecting that perspective.

This complex network of statuses and attitudes is regimented under two guiding metaphors that give this entire system a more intuitive shape. The first is to think of language as a kind of game, with the paradigmatic game being that of *giving and asking for reasons*, which Brandom borrows from Sellars (1956). The above discussion of commitments naturally fits into this view of language, with our commitments being claims that we are prepared to defend by giving reasons, explanations, etc. The second guiding metaphor is that of scorekeeping, which Brandom takes from Lewis

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, it is worth keeping in mind that commitment here comes in many forms, being treated as a primitive when understood as a status— with there also being a number of variations on that more general concept, like practical commitments, doxastic commitments, committive inferences, considerations of action, discourse, etc. (see, e.g., Brandom, 1994, pp. 160, 168, 2001, p. 83).

(1970; Brandom, 1994, p. 180). The idea is that we keep scorecards for the language-games we are part of, where the commitments players make are the moves that we keep track of. All of us keep these scorecards, with one being kept for ourselves and a set of scorecards for others, with one corresponding to each individual we interact with. When I make an assertion, I make a move in a game. I have that move recorded on my scorecard for myself, and if you were to hear me, you would mark it down on the scorecard you are keeping for me. Statures correspond to the moves themselves, and our attitudes correspond to our scorekeeping practices. When I acknowledge a commitment, I am writing a commitment into my scorecard. When I attribute a commitment, I am writing a commitment into a scorecard I am keeping for someone else.

Our language-games are vital to the inferentialist position, and our scorekeeping represents the state of these games, of our position on the board of each game, as it were. Less metaphorically, they inform and represent our individual discursive perspectives. The sets of these scorecards kept by the individuals of a given community account for the practices and deontic statures in play in that community, representing the connections that obtain between them through their acknowledged and attributed commitments, all ultimately in terms of the attitudes of the members of the community.

This system of statures and perspectival scorekeeping is rich and interesting. That being said, there is a conspicuous absence of traditional categories like belief, which play an important role in our everyday understanding of lying and the literature on it the philosophy of language. Brandom is averse to the notion of belief due to its ambiguity and the order of explanation it is associated with, often opting to account for it indirectly or to discard it altogether in favor of talk of different sorts of commitment (see Brandom, 1994, p. 196, 2001, Ch. 1; Frápolli & Wischin, 2019, p. 15). However, there are points of contact between his system and belief that can be leveraged here in order to draw a clearer connection between his inferentialism and lying.

To that end, we can appeal to Brandom's discussion of assertion and knowledge claims (see, e.g., 1994, Ch. 4, 2001, pp. 117–119, 2009, pp. 157–158). In that context, the simple view is that an acknowledged commitment is something that we ourselves believe, and an attributed commitment is one that we take someone else to believe (see, e.g., Brandom, 1994, pp. 201–202; Jary, 2018). Further, we can assume that the things that we believe are things that we take to be true, in that “the attitude of taking-true is just that of acknowledging an assertional commitment” (Brandom, 1994, p. 202; see also Frápolli, 2019). That is, our attitudes may be construed as communicating not just what we believe, but also what we take to be true. Using the above example, if I assert that “the swatch is green,” I am publicly acknowledging that commitment, giving others reason to think that I believe it (and take it to be true). If you heard what I said, you now have good reason to attribute that commitment to me— that is, to take me to believe that the swatch is green. And if you consider me to be generally reliable about these things, you might acknowledge the commitment yourself, which would mean that you now also believe that the swatch is green (and take that to be true).

Both the initial reconstruction and the above extension to belief are simplifications of the inferentialist position. They are, however, simplifications that need to be made for the purposes of economy, given the complexity and nuances of Brandom's view

(see, e.g., Weiss & Wanderer, 2010; Brandom, 2001). We will proceed with this loose characterization of belief (and truth) as represented in the finer, perspectival categories of acknowledged and attributed deontic attitudes as covering the relevant points.

### 3 Addressing lying

We can now turn to the matter of lying, which is the subject of a considerable and growing body of literature in the philosophy of language. Rather than wading into the subtleties of the current discussion, we will follow the traditional idea that lying consists in making a statement that one does not believe and doing so with the intention to deceive (see, e.g., Carson, 2012; Frankfurt, 2005; Lackey, 2013). The aim here is to articulate this kind of definition of lying in the inferentialist idiom, presenting a working account together with a series of case study examples with all of the moving parts in place. Though our account may ultimately bear upon the broader literature on lying and adjacent phenomena like misleading (see, e.g., Stokke, 2016; García-Carpintero, 2023), it should be kept in mind that our task here is simply to outline a working inferentialist account of lying.

Though there has been very little sustained engagement with lying in the inferentialist literature to this point, it does contain a recent account of lying from the Brandomian perspective. It is a brief but compelling treatment due to Jary (2018, pp. 116–117).<sup>3</sup> His account appears in an analysis of lying from the perspective of assertion-first positions, set alongside a similar treatment of Dummett. We can use it as a foil for the proposal made here. Jary outlines some of the basics of Brandom's position from the perspective of assertions, before presenting a reconstruction of belief and truth, much as we have done above:

On [Brandom's] account, to say of someone that she believes that P is to say that P is on her scorecard, which itself entails that she is committed to the inferential and practical commitments that follow from P (in combination with the other commitments on her scorecard). To say that P is true, according to Brandom's model, is to thereby acknowledge commitment to P in one's own case, i.e., to write it on one's own scorecard. Accordingly, to say that P is false is to reject commitment to it in one's own case. (Jary, 2018, p. 115)

He builds upon this by suggesting that a liar may be thought of as maintaining two separate scorecards for themselves. One is kept private and corresponds to how the liar actually sees things. The other scorecard is illicit and public-facing, with the idea being that they use this illicit scorecard to misrepresent themselves to others. They make assertions and write them into the illicit scorecard without writing them into their genuine, personal scorecard. In doing so, the liar wants these commitments

<sup>3</sup> Note, Brandom does touch upon lying in discussing sanctions, but it receives no development and cannot be taken to articulate how lying is meant to work in his framework (Brandom, 1994, p. 180). In discussing deontic attitudes and assertion, he states in an endnote that “considerations having to do with the possibility of coercion, insincerity, shyness, and so on are systematically suppressed in presenting the model of assertional practice, on the grounds that they are intelligible only against a background of propositional contents conferred by the sorts of interactions considered here” (Brandom, 1994, p. 675), which helps explain the gap being addressed here.

attributed to them, which is to say that they want to be treated in accordance with these assertions. When a liar says “I didn’t kill John,” they write it into their illicit scorecard in the hopes of it being attributed to them, and so treated like someone that did not kill John. At the same time, they do not write that commitment into their own card, presumably because they cannot, as they are already committed to something incompatible, like that they did in fact kill John.

This description of lying from the perspective of the liar is paired with an analogous description from the perspective of a listener, engaging with the perspectival nature of the inferentialist position. The naïve listener may simply accept the lie and attribute it. Nothing interesting happens in this case. The illicit scorecard goes unnoticed, and the liar benefits accordingly. The suspicious listener, in contrast, will accuse the speaker of lying, lodging “a special challenge to her assertion: the challenge is not simply a request for justification, but an accusation that the speaker cannot provide acceptable reasons for the assertion she makes” (Jary, 2018, p. 116). As Jary sees it, the suspicious listener goes on to try to trap the speaker and thereby demonstrate that something is not right, implying that there are two scorecards in play where there should only be one.

This all sounds intuitive enough. Jary effectively takes a lie to be a commitment on the part of a speaker that is recorded on an illicit scorecard and for which they lack entitlement or justification. That being said, there appear to be a few issues with this approach. We can characterize one set of issues as having to do with the notion of lies as commitments for which speakers lack entitlement or justification, and the other as having to do with the more fundamental question of how that commitment is meant to be understood in terms of our deontic attitudes and scorekeeping.

The first set is a matter of emphasis, with Jary limiting his reconstruction to an accusation of lying, and so to a challenge structure predicated on the suspicion that the speaker has no entitlement to their assertion. Entitlement here is understood as something analogous to our justification for holding a given commitment. To give an example, suppose that I see something green and then tell you that I saw something green. That experience and my ability to make reliable color reports is my entitlement to that claim (see Brandom, 1994 Chap. 4). The issue is simply that if I were to be lying about what I saw, there would be little recourse to the kind of challenge Jary describes. My entitlement begins and ends with my claim that I saw it, unless you have definitive evidence to the contrary, which is rather uncommon outside of courthouses and formal investigations. Perhaps more importantly, it also glosses the possibility of judging someone to be lying, even in the absence of some such challenge. Case in point, people often determine that a given assertion is a lie without making any challenge for entitlement whatsoever, picking up on subtle social cues or past experiences. Though the challenge structure Jary develops is interesting and very much in the spirit of the inferentialist project, it does not reflect the breadth of how our assessments of lying seem to work in practice— a limitation likely due to the simple fact that Jary was more interested in exploring the connection between lying and assertion than building an inferentialist account of lying (Jary, 2018, p. 110).

The second set of issues is more pressing and ultimately motivates the development of an altogether distinct account, far more so than the above. The problem here has to do with commitment as such in view of how our deontic attitudes operate. The

idea is that a liar makes a statement and enters a corresponding commitment on their public scorecard while not doing so on their personal card. That is to say that the liar does not actually acknowledge the commitment, in that they do not attribute it to themselves. They pretend to do so, but they do not actually acknowledge it, in that they do not actually believe it. Now consider our position as listeners again. If we think that someone is lying, do we attribute the commitment at issue to them? Recall that attributing a commitment to someone is to say that we take them to believe it. If we think that someone is lying, we certainly do not attribute that commitment to them, as this suspicion precisely consists in not taking them to believe it.

This leaves us in a predicament as scorekeepers: the liar asserts something, expressing a commitment, but we cannot attribute it to them. Insofar as we do not think they believe it, we cannot write the commitment into the scorecard we are keeping for them. And we have nowhere else to write it in, as while the liar may be working with an illicit scorecard, we are not. We only have one scorecard for ourselves and one for the liar. Suggesting the introduction of additional scorecards for others to keep track of lies strikes me as an implausible extension of the metaphor. It would mean going from the introduction of a single additional (illicit) scorecard to the potential for hundreds of secondary cards, in that we move from doubling the scorecard we keep for ourselves, of which there should only ever be one, to the doubling of the scorecards we keep for others, of which there are very many. Nor does it seem plausible to suggest that we should convert the assertion of the liar to something we can acknowledge ourselves, like a commitment to the effect that someone lied to us about something, as it would put the burden of the lie on ourselves while still leaving the scorecard of the liar unmarked. And that is precisely the problem. Having determined that someone is lying, we seem to have no way of tracking that behavior in our scorekeeping. We have no way of recording the commitment, let alone of reflecting that it was somehow inappropriate. In effect, no move is made in the game we are playing, which runs contrary to the clear sense in which the liar does seem to make a move, and one warranting sanctions at that.

It should be noted that this problem is not obvious, in that it only comes into view when considered from our perspective as listeners and when we have determined that someone is lying. Insofar as we believe a lie, there is no such problem. We then just attribute the commitment at issue. If we are suspicious, we might tentatively attribute a commitment and then pursue entitlement as a means for discovering whether it is in fact a lie, which also works here. It stops working in that crucial moment when we come to believe that we are dealing with a lie— that is, it stops working when we should presumably retract our attribution of the commitment. The state of play is left confused following that retraction. There is, as far as I can see, no way to move from taking someone to believe something to taking someone to be lying. And that limitation does not appear to be unique to Jary's approach but rather inherent to Brandom's inferentialism as it currently stands. In other words, while we can represent a good deal with different arrangements of deontic statuses and attitudes, there does not seem to be an arrangement that intuitively represents this kind of scenario. For whatever concerns there might be relating to challenges and entitlements, it is this more fundamental problem with scorekeeping a lie that motivates what follows.

## 4 Pseudo-commitment

My proposal for addressing this structural issue is to introduce a novel commitment-like status rather than an illicit scorecard. Standard commitments engage with our broader scorekeeping context, rendering entitlements and incompatibilities, and so projecting proprieties for both our doxastic and practical commitments, with the former roughly corresponding to our beliefs and the latter to our actions (Brandom, 2001, p. 83). Modulating standard commitment, we can posit a distinct derivative status. What we need is something that mirrors the mechanics of commitment, like serving as the object of deontic attitudes and the various ways in which commitments may arise, while deviating from the normative consequences associated with the content of a given standard commitment.

We can refer to this novel status as a “pseudo-commitment,” and we can define it as a commitment that derogates the normative import one ought to associate with its apparent content, suspending just what we ought to acknowledge and attribute in relation to it.<sup>4</sup> Pseudo-commitments are accordingly insensitive to entitlements and incompatible commitments, with their consequences for our doxastic and practical commitments remaining variable, open to local contextual and pragmatic effects. They are in that sense largely empty, in that they do not require you to act in accordance with them, to believe them, or to be entitled to them. While the notion of a status that does not really bind us to anything might seem counterintuitive, there are some clear cases in which this sort of hollow commitment could find application.

In imaginative play, for instance with children, we make all sorts of “commitments” that we feel no obligation to satisfy in any standard sense. Similarly, jokes often involve making statements and thus expressing commitments that we do not actually observe, and where the humor consists in precisely not observing them. Acting could very well be construed along similar lines, as could phenomena like irony or sarcasm (see, e.g., Camp, 2012; Haiman, 1998). The application at issue here, however, is the more negative, sanctionable practice of saying things we do not mean in standard contexts. The problematic character of making non-binding, empty commitments in everyday communicative contexts is motivated easily enough by appeal to any number of implicit discursive norms. And given the outward similarity between a given pseudo-commitment and a corresponding standard commitment, that problematic character may be ramified by the potential for mistaking a pseudo-commitment for a standard commitment. Though saying things we do not mean presents a patently inappropriate application of pseudo-commitments when contrasted with the above more socially supported practices, they are no less relevant to the potential place of pseudo-commitments in a technical sense, complementing discussion of play, joking, and acting with discussion of bullshit, misleading, and lying.

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<sup>4</sup> The choice of the term “pseudo-commitment” should not be interpreted as suggesting that it is not a commitment; it is a type of commitment, a derivative status. The significant deviation that they present relative to commitments in the deontic-normative framework at issue motivates the terminological choice. It is congruent with expressions like “pseudonym” or “pseudo-event,” neither of which negates the sense in which they are names or events, respectively. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.



Aside from finding intuitive applications, this extension of Brandom's original account comes at a reasonably low theoretical cost. Recall that deontic statuses are instituted by the attitudes of the individuals of our community and our practices— they are not part of the natural furniture of the world (1994, p. 161). Introducing a derivative status that appears to fit our practices is not to add anything to that furniture, while at the same time allowing us to better account for important and fairly common phenomena.

Applied to our specific context of lying, we can use pseudo-commitments to articulate an inferentialist version of the traditional definition: *lying consists in asserting and thereby acknowledging a pseudo-commitment with the intention of it being attributed as a standard commitment*. The acknowledgment of a pseudo-commitment corresponds to making a false statement, and intending for it to be attributed as a standard commitment replaces the intention to deceive. Depending upon how that intention is interpreted, this particular formulation may also allow the definition to extend to special cases of lying that potentially escape the traditional definition, like bald-faced lies, which are distinguished by their purportedly not involving an intention to deceive (Sorensen, 2007; Keiser, 2016; cf. Lackey, 2013).

The positing of pseudo-commitments removes the need for an illicit scorecard.<sup>5</sup> Rather than relying on a different scorecard for lies, under this approach, a genuine commitment can appear alongside a potentially incompatible pseudo-commitment on the personal scorecard of a speaker, in that the two are structurally consistent. If a speaker can keep track of their standard commitments, then they can also keep track of their pseudo-commitments. And any difficulties they might face in keeping track of their pseudo-commitments is just a reflection of it being hard to keep track of things that we have said but do not actually believe. This sense of tracking pseudo-commitments also translates to the issue of discerning lies from the perspective of a listener, in that it provides us a clear throughline from attributing a commitment to attributing a pseudo-commitment. That is, it allows us to track lies in a way that we could not without it. A liar can trick us into taking a pseudo-commitment to be a standard commitment, and we can come to realize this mistake: we can take what we thought was a standard commitment and recategorize it as a pseudo-commitment. In doing so, we keep the “commitment” on our scorecard for the liar, keeping record of it, facilitating sanctions, and so on.

To see how this account might work in detail, we can turn to our three cases— an undetected lie, a detected lie, and a bald-faced lie, considered from both the perspective of the speaker and the hearer. Imagine that we are interviewers for a position at a company. We have a number of candidates coming in— with three of these candidates presenting a different pseudo-commitment, each varying in how they present it and how we receive it.

<sup>5</sup> Note, that is not to discard the idea of using a second scorecard altogether, as we might find application for that approach in dealing with acting, where setting off the standard commitments of the actor might be appropriate, setting up a new scorecard for their character.

#### 4.1 Uma and the undetected lie

Our first candidate is Uma. We look over her CV and ask her a few questions. At one point, we ask her about some of her previous work experience, noting that there is a six-month gap between jobs at one point. We ask her why. The real reason is that Uma just could not find a new job in that time, despite scouring the market and applying for dozens of positions. However, Uma decides to present us with a pseudo-commitment that she thinks would make a better impression. She tells us that she was observing a non-compete clause that she had in her previous contract. She acknowledges this as a pseudo-commitment, which is to say that she does not actually believe it.

We hear her assertion and initially attribute that to her as a standard commitment, taking her to be telling us something she believes. For the sake of simplicity, assume that non-competes are common in the field we are imagining, and so nothing seems amiss to us. We simply take her word for it. Uma has successfully lied to us. She has presented a pseudo-commitment with the intention of it being attributed as a standard commitment, analogous to asserting something she does not believe with the intention to deceive. We have in turn attributed a standard commitment to her, hence the lie goes undetected, with the pseudo-commitment being recorded as a standard commitment on our cards for Uma, treating her accordingly. She will need to remember it, and if she wants to keep up the pretense of this attributed commitment, she will need to act accordingly around us, as we might expect on any account of lying more broadly construed. The pseudo-commitment takes on the features of a standard commitment in that sense, but it is not genuinely binding from her own perspective, in much the same way a partner may say they are faithful and act accordingly around their significant other.

#### 4.2 Donald and the detected lie

The next candidate is Donald. After looking over his CV, we see that he lists himself as being fluent in Chinese. We ask whether he means that he is fluent in Mandarin or some other specific dialect. Donald raises his eyebrows and responds with unsettling confidence that he is, of course, fluent in Mandarin. Suppose that I happen to be proficient in Mandarin. Something about Donald seems disingenuous, and so I switch to Mandarin and ask him a few questions. We can imagine that in response Donald simply stares back at us blankly, before sheepishly admitting he does not actually know any Mandarin.

Donald's assertion that he is fluent in Mandarin is the presentation of a pseudo-commitment with the intention of it being attributed to him as a standard commitment. We might initially attribute it as a standard commitment to him, but we fairly quickly realize that he does not actually speak Mandarin and accordingly that he does not actually believe what he has told us. This exchange would be an example of engaging in an indirect form of challenge in the game of giving and asking for reasons. Donald telling us that he speaks Mandarin entitles me to start talking to him in Mandarin, and in doing so I am effectively putting him to the test. We might just as well say that we doubt what he is claiming and ask him to give us reasons to think that

he does in fact speak Mandarin (with the obvious route being to simply start speaking Mandarin). While Donald's pseudo-commitment does not invite this sort of treatment in itself, Donald presenting it in this context as if it were a standard commitment warrants our approach. In any case, we go from attributing a standard commitment to attributing a pseudo-commitment. Moreover, we recognize it as an inappropriate use of a pseudo-commitment, marking it down on our scorecards and damaging our view of him accordingly.

### 4.3 Baldwin and the bald-faced lie

Our final candidate is Baldwin. We go over his CV and ask him a few questions. Everything is going well. At one point, we ask Baldwin what he considers to be his greatest weakness. He responds that his greatest weakness is that he works too hard and cares about his employer too much. It is safe to assume that we do not believe that Baldwin really takes that to be his greatest weakness. Rather, we attribute that to him as a pseudo-commitment. At the same time, it is not clear whether Baldwin is trying to deceive us in making that assertion. He has simply given us an expected and well-worn answer to a common interview question, albeit one that he knows we will likely not believe.

While whether he intends to deceive us remains unclear, our inferential analog seems to be satisfied. That is, it seems plausible to take Baldwin as intending for us to take it as a standard commitment and to be treated accordingly. Whatever the case on the count of deception, he wants it attributed to him as if it were binding. It does not matter whether we recognize it as a standard commitment— what matters is that he has gone on record as having asserted it and presented it in all seriousness. It was not sarcasm or a joke. The social context of it being a job interview is what makes this work, in much the same way that authoritarian regimes serve as a social context making more familiar examples of bald-faced lies work (Sorensen, 2007), together with their possible moral entanglements.

Putting it schematically, Baldwin asserts something in the same way that Uma and Donald did. He presents a pseudo-commitment with the intention of it being attributed to him as a standard commitment. We recognize that he does not actually believe that, and so we attribute it as a pseudo-commitment. The difference here is not in the structuring of statuses or even attitudes, but in how these commitments are received. Insofar as this is not an instance of acting, a joke, or imaginative play, Baldwin is indeed lying in presenting a pseudo-commitment here, but it is an instance of lying that simply goes unsanctioned (and is even rewarded). No reasonable interviewer would go after an interviewee on this point, and even if they did the interviewee would likely simply reiterate the pseudo-commitment, balking at the alternative. This is an example of the sort of normative plasticity that Brandom's inferentialism and pseudo-commitments may support, adjusting to a given discursive context and shaping propriety accordingly, distinguishing Donald and Baldwin from our perspective as scorekeepers.

Now that is not to say that this is an ideal account of bald-faced lies more generally, as one might, for instance, wonder whether we can coherently make an assertion with the intention of having it attributed to us as a standard commitment in

egregiously transparent cases. However, the account is flexible, such that we can simply withdraw the interpretation of there being some such intention in such cases and settle for the mere acknowledgment and attribution of a pseudo-commitment, refraining from qualifying them as lies. We might just as well double down and insist on the possibility of there being some such intention regardless of the irrationality of it, defending it being a lie. Whatever the case, there are worthwhile extensions here, with bald-faced lies being an interesting and well-developed area of the literature on lies (see, e.g., Harris, 2020; Marques, 2020). That being said, as has already been noted, the task of this proposal is not to engage with that extraneous literature but to outline a working inferentialist account of lies, which the above appears to do. And it is an account that is amenable to extension and adjustment, given the complex set of tools Brandom's inferentialism provides us, ranging from practices to attitudes and statuses. As such, varying intuitions or perspectives in this area will likely be able to be incorporated into the account, potentially allowing for various perspectives in the literature to find some articulation in the inferentialist idiom.

These three reconstructions illustrate the core idea. Our deontic statuses are supplemented with pseudo-commitments, which are unique in that they are not binding in the way that standard commitments are. Lying is characterized as presenting a pseudo-commitment as a standard commitment, with the intention to deceive being replaced with an intention to have a pseudo-commitment attributed to the liar. Lies are accordingly tracked in our scorekeeping as inappropriate pseudo-commitments, which opens us to sanctions and other more complex normative consequences.

## 5 Conclusion

This short work set out to present an account of lying from within Brandom's normative-deontic inferentialism. Building on a traditional definition of lying and the idea of an illicit scorecard, it diagnoses the need for a simple extension of the basic account, positing pseudo-commitments to bring lying into the fold. The resulting account and the cases sketched above are very simple, involving what is a relatively small part of the larger inferentialist system, making it both accessible and open to further modification. In addition to framing the phenomena at issue, it is also a forward-looking account, in that it creates space for discussing related phenomena like sarcasm, joking, acting, bullshit, and the like, inviting modifications and extensions of the account outlined here.

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