Comments on "Lying with Conditionals" by Roy Sorensen

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1. Varieties of Lying

In a series of papers, Roy Sorensen has identified several overlooked categories of lying: bald-faced lying (Sorensen 2007), knowledge-lying (Sorensen 2010), and now lying with conditionals. In each case, he has argued that such lies spell trouble for the traditional philosophical definition of lying. According to that definition (see Mahon 2008, section 1), you are lying if:

- you believe that what you say is false (or at least you do not believe it to be true).
- you intend to mislead your audience into believing what you say.

I think that Sorensen is right with respect to bald-faced lies (see Fallis 2009, 39-43). But I think that he is wrong with respect to knowledge-lies (see Fallis 2011) and, as I will argue here, with respect to lying with conditionals.

Note: Other philosophers (e.g., Carson 2010) have investigated several categories of phenomena closely related to lying, such as bullshit, half-truths, and keeping someone in the dark. But Sorensen has certainly done the most to tease out the various types of lies.

As Sorensen points out, philosophers of lying have focused exclusively on lies that are declarative utterances, such as when the shepherd boy cries, “There is a wolf chasing my sheep!” Thus, expanding out “diet of examples” to include lying with conditionals is philosophically beneficial. In particular, it forces us to clarify the traditional definition. But contra Sorensen, it does not require us to abandon it.

2. Lying with Conditionals

In an episode of Bonanza, the old man Caine says to the boy Michael:

1. “If you carry the cup to Joe without spilling a drop, your father will be alright.”

Now, even if we assume (as Sorensen does) that #1 is a material conditional, it is not clear that Caine’s statement in the original episode is a counter-example to the traditional
philosophical definition of lying. For all Caine knows, Michael might not spill a drop and his father might not be alright. So, for all Caine knows, this material conditional could be false. So, he probably does not believe that what he says is true. So, since he clearly intends Michael to believe what he says, he is lying on the traditional definition.

But #1 might be turned into a counter-example if we make some additional assumptions that Sorensen seems to be suggesting:

a. Caine knows that “the boy’s father would be alright and furthermore intends to spread this knowledge to the boy.”

b. Caine knows that “there is no connection between the antecedent and the consequent” (i.e., between Michael not spilling a drop and his father being alright).

Note: This violation of Grice’s maxim of relevance is pretty clearly what appalls Little Joe about Caine making the statement.

c. Caine does not think that the conditional probability that the father will be alright given that Michael does not spill a drop is high.

Note: According to Sorensen, “when we lie with conditionals, conditional probability is the key to sincerity, not truth-value.” So, if Caine is lying with #1, it seems that he must be conveying that the conditional probability is high when he does not believe this.

From (a) and the fact that #1 is a material conditional, it follows that Caine says something true and something that he believes to be true. In addition, since Caine intends Michael to believe it, he does not intend to mislead the boy with regard to what he says. Even so, Caine seems to be lying. For one thing, his statement falsely suggests that there is a connection between the two events. Furthermore, #1 falsely suggests that the conditional probability is high. Thus, we seem to have a counter-example to the traditional definition. This sort of case seems to establish “the possibility of lying with informative truths.”

Note: Sorensen supposes that Caine’s ultimate goal is for Michael believe that his father will be alright. But getting the boy to believe the conditional is a means to that end.

However, these three assumptions are inconsistent given the standard definition of conditional probability (viz., P(A|B) = P(A&B)/P(B)). If (b) is the case, then Caine thinks that the two events are independent. So, he must think that the conditional probability that the father will be alright given that Michael does not spill a drop is the same as the unconditional probability that the father will be alright. But if (a) is the case, then presumably Caine thinks that the unconditional probability that the father will be alright is high. So, contrary to (c), Caine must think that the conditional probability that the father will be alright given that Michael does not spill a drop is high.
But even though this is not a counter-example to the traditional definition, there are potential counter-examples in the vicinity. First, we could give up (c). Even if he believes that the conditional probability is high, Caine could still be lying because #1 falsely suggests that there is a connection between the two events. Second, we could give up (a). Instead of knowing that #1 is true because he knows that the consequent is true, Caine might know that it is true because he knows that the antecedent is false. In that case, he could believe that the unconditional probability is low. So, even though he believes that the two events are independent, he could still believe that the conditional probability is low, but be trying to convince Michael that it is high.

**Note:** The second version is essentially the same as Sorensen’s example of the father trying to get his daughter not to eat the apple. We could also give up just (b). In that case, in order to think that the conditional probability is low, Caine would have to think that the two events are negatively correlated.

As Sorensen suggests, one way to save the traditional definition from these potential counter-examples would be to say that #1 is not a material conditional. I will argue that there is another way to save the traditional definition in the face of these purported counter-examples. But I will begin by discussing at another case that Sorensen discusses.

### 3. Lying with Conventional Implicature

According to Sorensen, lying with conditionals is a special case of lying with conventional implicature. Another example from this larger category is when Sorensen imagines Caine saying to Michael:

2. “I have not cured your father yet.”

Let us suppose that Caine has not cured Michael’s father and he wants the boy to know this. In that case, Caine says something that he believes to be true, and he does not intend to mislead the boy with regard to what he says. Even so, Caine seems to be lying. His statement falsely suggests that he plans to cure Michael’s father when he has no such plans. Thus, we seem to have another counter-example to the traditional definition. But I argue that it is not.

As competent speakers of the language, we draw a distinction between whether someone has lied to us and whether he has merely misled us with what he says. For instance, suppose that we ask François if he knows how to cook and that he replies, “I am French!” This response conveys that François does indeed know how to cook. But if he does not know how to cook, he has not lied to us. He has merely misled us because what he said is something that he believes to be true.

The traditional definition captures this distinction by requiring that a liar actually say the thing about which she intends to mislead her audience. In the case of #2, Caine does intend to mislead Michael. In particular, he intends for the boy to believe that he plans to
cure his father (even though he has not done it yet). The question is whether this false proposition is part of what Caine says.

Note: Caine also intends to convey something true to Michael (viz., that he has not cured his father). But you can intend to convey something true and still be lying on the traditional definition. For instance, when Clark Kent rushes into Perry White’s office at the Daily Planet and says, “I did not see it, but Superman told me that Lex Luthor has built a devastating new weapon.” Clark intends to convey something true to Perry (viz., that Lex has a new weapon). But Clark conveys this truth by misleading Perry into believing what he says, which Clark believes to be false. (Clark really is Superman and saw the weapon himself. He lies in order to protect his secret identity.)

According to Paul Grice, the answer is no. Pretty much everyone agrees that conversational implicature (e.g., that François knows how to cook) is not part of what is said. But Grice (1989, 25-26) thought that, in addition, conventional implicature is not part of what is said. So, for instance, as Wayne Davis (2010, section 1) notes, “the use of [He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave] while disbelieving [His being an Englishman implies that he is brave] would be misleading, but not a lie.” However, other philosophers (e.g., Bach 1999) argue that conventional implicature is part of what is said. In that case, that he plans to cure Michael’s father is part of what Caine says in #2. And Caine does intend to mislead the boy into believing that he plans to cure his father. So, he is lying on the traditional definition.

Note: Conventional implicatures “derive from the meanings of particular expressions rather than from conversational circumstances” (Bach 1999, 327) as conversational implicatures do.

Note: Kent Bach (1999, 333) refers to words like “yet” and “still” as “alleged conventional implicature devices” or “ACIDs.” Bach (1999, 329) claims that the idea that ACIDs are not part of what is said is based “almost entirely on intuition” and he goes about explaining away such intuitions. For example, he points out that utterances often express multiple propositions and that ACIDs may only affect the truth-value of one of those propositions. Thus, words like “yet” and “still” may seem not to affect the truth-value of the utterance because they do not affect the truth-value of most salient proposition that it expresses. In addition, Bach points out that ACIDs can appear in indirect quotation and that it can be inaccurate to leave them out. For instance, it would be false to report that Caine only said in #2 that he has not cured Michael’s father.

We can argue that #1 counts as a lie on the traditional definition for the same reason that #2 does. Sorensen suggests that stating a conditional conventionally implicates (a) that there is a connection between the antecedent and the consequent and (b) that the conditional probability of the antecedent given the consequent is high. (According to Sorensen, “the content of the implicature is that the conditional is robust with respect to the antecedent.”) For both versions of #1 suggested above, Caine does not believe at least one of these two things. So, if conventional implicature is part of what is said,
Caine says something that he does not believe and he intends to mislead Michael into believing it.

Saving the traditional definition in this way does require broadening Grice’s account of what is said. However, there are independent reasons to think that Grice’s account might need to be broadened even further. According to Grice, what is said is limited to the literal content of the utterance. However, it seems possible to lie using figurative language. For instance, if I say, “My dog Mopsy is a better philosopher than Roy!” in order to mislead someone into believing that Roy is a lousy philosopher, I seem to be lying. My utterance is only a lie on the traditional definition if the figurative content (viz., that Roy is a lousy philosophy) is part of what is said. But several philosophers (e.g., Bezuidenhout 2001) have argued, contra Grice, that figurative content can be part of what is said.

Note: The literal content of this utterance is false. But I do not intend to mislead my audience into believing that my dog is literally a better philosopher than Roy. So, the literal falsity of the utterance is not enough to make it a lie on the traditional definition.

4. A Brief Note about Role-based Assertions

I think that considering what is said can also help to explain why role-based assertions are not lies. As Sorensen suggests, the second appraiser does not seem to be lying when he says that the house is worth X dollars, even though he knows that a much higher amount has been offered for the house. But did he actually say that the house is worth X dollars on the market?

According Grice (1989, 41-42), you do not always say what you literally utter. You only do that if you are “committed” to the literal content of your utterance. If you are speaking ironically or figuratively or euphemistically, you are not committed to the literal content and, thus, do not actually say it. So, for instance, I only “make as if to say” that Mopsy is literally a better philosopher than Roy. Similarly, the second appraiser is arguably not committed to X dollars being the amount that Roy could expect to actually get for the house. (He is only committed to the claim that X dollars is amount that Roy could expect to get based only on the evidence of “houses that had recently been sold in my small town.”)

5. Degree-of-Belief Lies

Sorensen’s examples of lying with conditionals actually suggest another possible counter-example to the traditional philosophical definition of lying. Imagine that (as in the original episode) Caine does not believe that the material conditional is true. In that case, #1 clearly satisfies the first condition of the traditional definition.

However, imagine further that Michael is much less credulous than he is in the original episode. As a result, Caine does not intend for the boy to believe that there is a connection between the two events, that the conditional probability is high, or that the
conditional is true. In fact, there is nothing that he intends for Michael to believe outright. Caine just does not want to be bothered with taking the drink to Joe himself. So, he wants the conditional probability that Michael assigns to the consequent given the antecedent to increase just enough so that he will be motivated to carry the cup to Joe on the off chance that it might help his father. In that case, it is not clear that #1 satisfies the second condition of the traditional definition. Even if conventional implicature is part of what is said, Caine does not intend to mislead Michael into believing what he says. Even so, Caine seems to be lying.

This case of lying with a conditional is an example of degree-of-belief lying. Degree-of-belief lies, which can be declaratives as well as conditionals, target degrees of belief rather than categorical beliefs (see Fallis 2011, 354-56). For instance, especially given his reputation, the shepherd boy might not intend the villagers to believe outright that there is a wolf chasing his sheep. He might just intend them to increase their degree of belief in there being a wolf.

But degree-of-belief lies do not count as lies on the traditional definition if intending to mislead requires intending to be believed outright. In order to count degree-of-belief lies as lies on the traditional definition, we need to broaden our account of intending to mislead. But exactly what sort of change to a person’s degrees of belief do we need to intend in order to intend to mislead him? In other words, what does it mean, in the context of degrees of belief, for someone to be misled?

6. What is Misleading?

The standard story, in the context of categorical belief, is that you are misled if you get some evidence that leads you to believe a false proposition. According to Tom Kelly (2008, 937), “misleading evidence is evidence which suggests that something which is in fact false is true.” Similarly, according to Michael Veber (2004, 557), “if I know that we are having pigs’ feet tonight, I know that any evidence which seems to confirm that we are not is evidence that seems to confirm something false, i.e., it is misleading.”

It seems pretty uncontroversial how to extend this story to the context of degrees of belief. Namely, you are misled if you get some evidence that leads you to increase your degree of belief in a false proposition (see Fallis 2011, 355).

This proposal works fine when there are just two possible hypotheses (e.g., either there is a wolf chasing the sheep or there is not). In that case, it is essentially a zero-sum game when it comes to believing the truth and believing the false. Assuming that you have a coherent probability assignment, a piece of evidence increases your degree of belief in the false hypothesis if and only if it decreases your degree of belief in the true hypothesis. Thus, a piece of evidence is clearly misleading if and only if increases your degree of belief in the false hypothesis.

However, there is a difficulty when there are three or more hypotheses. A piece of evidence might increase someone’s degree of belief in a false hypothesis and also
increase his degree of belief in the true hypothesis. For instance, suppose that there are initially three suspects in a murder case. The crime lab then performs a blood test that definitely eliminates one of the three suspects. As a result of conditionalizing on this evidence, the detective raises her degree of belief in the guilt of each of the two remaining suspects. But even though the evidence leads the detective to increase her degree of belief in the guilt of an innocent suspect, we probably do not want to say that she is misled. This is just what happens when you perform an experiment that definitively eliminates one of the possible hypotheses. The probability of the true hypothesis goes up, but so do the probabilities of the false hypotheses that have not been eliminated. So, we actually need to say that you are misled if you get some evidence that leads you to decrease your degree of belief in a true proposition.

**Note:** Simply increasing your degree of belief in some false hypothesis relative to your degree of belief in the true hypothesis may be sufficient for your being misled. But even if it not necessary, decreasing your degree of belief in the true hypothesis also seems to be sufficient for your being misled. Thus, either condition can be used to show that an utterance counts as a lie on the traditional philosophical definition of lying.

7. **What is Intending to Mislead?**

With this account of what it is to be misled, we can give an account of what it is to intend to mislead that will count degree-of-belief lies as lies on the traditional definition. Namely, you intend to mislead if you intend to decrease your audience’s degree of belief in the hypothesis that you think is most likely to be true.

There are a couple of potential worries about this account. First, it does not guarantee that your audience’s degree of belief in the true hypothesis will decrease even if he updates his degrees of belief in precisely the way that you intend. If your audience’s degree of belief in the hypothesis that you think is most likely to be true decreases, then his degree of belief in at least one of the other hypotheses must increase. Thus, unless you are absolutely sure that that other hypothesis is false, you will think that it is possible for your audience’s degree of belief in the true hypothesis to increase even if he updates his degrees of belief exactly as you intend.

However, the same issue arises with standard (categorical belief) lies. In the case of such lies, you intend your audience to believe something that you believe to be false. But since you recognize that you might be wrong, you know that it is possible that he will end up believing the truth even if he believes exactly what you intend him to believe. For instance, even though he thinks that it is highly unlikely, there might actually be a wolf chasing the shepherd boy’s sheep. Thus, the villagers might end up believing the truth even if they believe what the shepherd boy says.

**Note:** Basically, a liar has to recognize that she might end up like the protagonist of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* who laments, “it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.”
Second, this account does not guarantee that your audience’s degree of belief in the true hypothesis is expected to decrease even if he updates his degrees of belief in precisely the way that you intend. Even if you intend to decrease your audience’s degree of belief in the hypothesis that you think is most likely to be true, the intended decrease might be very small. And it might be swamped by a much greater intended increase to his degree of belief in another hypothesis even though you think that that hypothesis is less likely to be true. But we can easily tighten up this account in order to eliminate this worry. We can say that you intend to mislead if the shift in your audience’s probability assignment that you intend leads to an expected decrease in the probability that he assigns to the true hypothesis (from the perspective of your current probability assignment).

**Note:** You might not have a specific shift in your victim’s probability assignment in mind. But we can say that you intend to mislead if this condition holds for all shifts that you would be happy with.

**References**


