The Mendacity Bifurcation
Sheldon Cooper, Ph.D. on How to Lie
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Abstract

Sheldon Cooper is a lousy liar. As he admits to Penny in *The Bad Fish Paradigm*, “when I try to deceive, I myself have more nervous tics than a Lyme disease research facility.” His statement in *The Lizard-Spock Expansion* that “Leonard is going to the office” (complete with stilted delivery and an awkward hand gesture) is one of his notably unconvincing lies.

Many people are lousy liars because they believe that it is wrong to lie and feel guilty about doing it (see Ekman 2009). But this is not Sheldon’s problem. In fact, he has no compunction about lying or about asking other people to lie for him, as when he gets Leonard to tell Amy Farrah Fowler that he is not at home in *The Desperation Emanation*. He is a lousy liar simply because he does not know how to do it well. It is just one more social skill that Sheldon does not have.

Now, many philosophers (most notably, Immanuel Kant) argue that it is always (or at least almost always) wrong to lie. Given that, it might seem that it just as well that Sheldon is not good at it. His lack of skill deters him from doing what would be a bad thing. For instance, he is clearly reticent to lie about where Leonard is going because “how can I say it convincingly?”

However, many philosophers have argued that there are at least some circumstances where it is permissible to lie. In fact, we are probably morally required to lie if it will save a life or save the universe, as when “Kirk has to take over the ship, so he tells Spock all that stuff he knew wasn’t true.” (When Sheldon is upset about being deceived by his friends in *The Electric Can Opener Fluctuation*, Penny reminds him of Kirk’s lies because Sheldon would presumably think they were justified.) Also, it is probably ok to tell a lie to avoid hurting someone’s feelings, as when Leonard and Sheldon lie to Penny in *The Loobenfeld Decay*. In fact, a few philosophers (such as Plato and Friedrich Nietzsche) claim that lying is quite often a good thing. So, it can be important to be able to do it well.

Despite being a lousy liar, Sheldon has quite a lot to say on the topic of how to do it well. For instance, Sheldon insists on the importance of making your lie “plausible” and “weaving an un-unravelable web” of supporting evidence (*The Loobenfeld Decay*). (If Penny “googles Leopold Houston [the imaginary drug-addicted cousin that figures in Sheldon’s lie to her] she’ll find a Facebook page, an online blog depicting his descent into drug use, and a desperate yet hopeful listing on eHarmony.com.”) Also, he claims that “the key to a good lie lies in the details” (*The Desperation Emanation*).
The fact that he is a lousy liar does not mean that we shouldn’t listen to what Sheldon has to say on the topic. After all, he is a genius with an IQ of 187 (The Pancake Batter Anomaly). In other words, while he lacks what Aristotle would call practical wisdom (phronèsis), he does have theoretical wisdom (sophia). Or as Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle might express the distinction, he does not have much know how, but he has a lot of know that. Thus, in this essay, I will argue that, much like Leonard, we “have a lot to learn about lying” and how to do it well, that Sheldon can actually teach us.

In addition, the case of Sheldon can also tell us something interesting about exactly what lying is. According to the standard philosophical definition (see Mahon 2008, section 1), you lie if you say something false with the intent to deceive. But some philosophers (e.g., Sweetser 2008, Fallis 2009) argue that lying is also about intending to violate certain social conventions, such as those conversational maxims identified by Berkeley philosopher Paul Grice (e.g., “Do not make your contribution [to the conversation] more informative than is required,” “Avoid obscurity of expression,” and “Do not say what you believe to be false”). But Sheldon does not understand social conventions. As a result of this, while he frequently violates them, he cannot intend to violate them. Even so, Sheldon can still lie.

References:


1 For instance, in The Luminous Fish Effect, Sheldon tells the new department head that he is “a glorified high school science teacher whose last successful experiment was lighting his own farts.” When he gets home, Sheldon says to Leonard, “I can’t believe he fired me.” As he explains, “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.” Also, Sheldon famously does not understand sarcasm. When Leonard asks, “For God’s sake, Sheldon, do I have to hold up a sarcasm sign every time I open my mouth?,” he credulously replies, “You have a sarcasm sign?” (The Big Bran Hypothesis).

2 Since his is a lousy liar, he does not usually succeed in deceiving anyone. (Of course, he does deceive Penny in The Loobenfeld Decay.) But according to most philosophers (see Mahon 2008, section 1.4), while a liar has to intend to deceive, he does not have to succeed in deceiving. Thus, a lousy liar is still a liar.