

A Case of Insincerity: What Does it Mean to Deceive Someone?

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Whether disguising himself as an Italian priest in *The Final Problem* or leaving false evidence of his own death in *The Adventure of the Empty House*, Sherlock Holmes always seems to be one step ahead of friends and adversaries alike. Holmes's ultimately goal of course is to thwart the maneuvers of criminals throughout London. As we watch him do so time and again, we notice that he often relies on trickery of some sort. He hides his true intentions when speaking to suspects, he misdirects them as to his whereabouts, he lulls them into a false sense of security. In short, Holmes regularly relies on deception to get the better of others.

One way of exploring Holmes's use of deception would be to investigate when deception is and isn't morally acceptable. Clearly, deception is sometimes deplorable, as when James Windibank cruelly impersonates a suitor to his daughter-in-law in *A Case of Identity*, or when Moriarty in *The Final Problem* draws Watson away from Holmes with a fake note about a patient as part of a plan to isolate and kill Holmes. At other times, though, deception seems entirely appropriate, as when we note that Holmes's reason for masquerading as a priest in the previously mentioned story is to escape Moriarty's murderous pursuit. Admittedly, there have been a few philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) who have argued that deceptive lying is *always* wrong. But most philosophers hold the view, which is surely correct, that deception is sometimes morally permissible and sometimes not.

While the line between appropriate and inappropriate deception is an interesting question, I want to explore the prior question of what deception *is*. That is, I want to look at the nature of deception itself and what conditions would need to be met for us rightly to conclude that an act of deception has taken place. In what follows we'll explore various definitions of 'deceive', identifying the shortcomings of these definitions until we finally arrive at a satisfactory explanation of the concept. Once we arrive at this final definition, we will see that it implies something rather surprising about Holmes's relationship with his nemesis, Professor Moriarty.

Going Beyond the Dictionary

One of the jobs of a philosopher is to bring clarity and precision to the terms we use in everyday language. Often times, dictionary definitions lack the nuance needed to distinguish one concept from similar—though importantly different—other concepts. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *deceive* as:

“to cause to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid.”

This definition, though, is far from adequate. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, Holmes takes elaborate steps to discover that Irene Adler has hidden a certain photograph behind a sliding panel in her sitting room. Holmes informs Watson during an evening conversation at Baker Street that they will call on ‘the woman’ the next day and recover the photograph while they are waiting for her to receive them. Holmes tells Watson that they will go “At eight in the morning. She will not be up, so that we shall have a clear field.” In point of fact, however, when they arrive the next morning they are told by the maid: “My mistress told me that you were likely to call. She left this morning with her husband by the 5:15 train from Charing Cross for the Continent.” In one of the few times in which Holmes is outfoxed, ‘the woman’ has been a step ahead of him.

Holmes had announced to Watson that Irene Adler would not be up at eight in the morning and that they would have an opportunity to recover the photograph. But Holmes was mistaken. All the same, Holmes did cause Watson to accept as true something that was actually false. And so his action meets the dictionary definition of ‘deceive’ from the previous paragraph. Surely, though, it isn’t right to say that Holmes *deceived* Watson. Holmes made an honest mistake. Perhaps we’d want to say that he *unintentionally misled* Watson. But genuine *deception* seems to be a different concept than an honest mistake, even if both can cause someone else to end up with a false belief. So we must amend our initial definition of ‘deceive’ so as to exclude those times when we honestly offer other people information that happens to be false.

Double Bluffing about an Empty House

An easy way to exclude honest mistakes from qualifying as deception is to propose the following definition for ‘deceive’:

“To communicate something I believe to be false, with the intention that another person comes to believe it.”

In our example from *A Scandal in Bohemia* Holmes intended to convey a true statement to Watson. It’s just that the statement, unbeknownst to Holmes, was false. This new definition of ‘deceive’ gets to the important point that deception involves an intention to get someone else to believe what we ourselves don’t believe. Is our latest definition, then, an acceptable one? Not yet.

To see why, consider the plot line from *The Adventure from the Empty House*. Holmes is on the run from adversaries who are plotting to kill him. He places a wax bust bearing his likeness in a chair in his room at Baker Street. Holmes then pulls the shades, and he lights the room so that at evening time a silhouette of the bust becomes clearly visible to those on the street below. He subsequently has the following exchange with Watson, in which he explains his plan to catch an enemy in the act of attempted assassination.

“[M]y dear Watson, I had the strongest possible reason for wishing certain people to think that I was there when I was really elsewhere.”

“And you thought the rooms were watched?”

“I *knew* that they were watched.”

“By whom?”

“By my old enemies, Watson... Sooner or later they believed that I should come back to my rooms. They watched them continuously, and this morning they saw me arrive.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I recognized their sentinel when I glanced out of my window. He is a harmless enough fellow,...I cared nothing for him. But I cared a great deal for the much more formidable person who was behind him,...the most cunning and dangerous criminal in London. That is the man who is after me to-night Watson, and that is the man who is quite unaware that we are after him.”

Holmes hides in an empty house across the street, having alerted the police also to be on watch. Holmes and the police eventually capture the man in question, Colonel Sebastian Moran, after Moran shoots a sniper bullet through the wax bust.

In the storyline, we are told that Moran’s sentinel spotted Holmes back at Baker Street early in the day. For sake of discussion, we might imagine Holmes making several loud, public statements that day that he will *not* be returning home that evening. We imagine here that Holmes is actually engaged in an effort to make the sentinel *think* that Holmes really *is* going to be at home that evening. That is, we imagine Holmes as envisaging that the sentinel will take Holmes’s own public proclamations as an attempt to throw any would-be assassins off his trail. Holmes here would be engaged in ‘double bluffing’. He would be saying something that is actually *true*: namely, that he won’t be at home that evening. Yet, Holmes would foresee that a suspicious assassin would *interpret* his true statement as an attempt to say something false and misleading to any eavesdropping enemies.

If we now look back at our working definition of ‘deceive’, we can see why it is inadequate. In our case of double bluffing, Holmes would indeed be trying to deceive his would-be assassin. Yet, he wouldn’t actually be saying anything he believes to be false. So, on our current definition of ‘deceive’, his actions wouldn’t count as deception (even though clearly he *would* be trying to deceive). What this shows is that we need to revise our definition so as to account for cases of double bluffing. We can do this by removing the requirement that the *content of what the deceiver communicates* be something that he or she “believes to be false”. What remains important in the concept of deception is that the deceiver intends that the deceived person end up believing something that the deceiver believes to be false. And as the case of double bluffing shows, a deceiver could have this intention even while uttering a true statement.

Deceptions About That, Not This

Taking into account the conclusions of the previous section, we are now left with the following working definition of ‘deceive’:

“To communicate something with the intention that another person comes to hold a false belief about it.”

Yet, this definition still needs refining. In *A Case of Identity* the scoundrel James Windibank cruelly disguises himself and pretends to be a suitor of his step-daughter, Miss Sutherland. His invented character, Hosmer Angel, then abruptly disappears, leaving the stepdaughter distraught. Holmes investigates the case of Hosmer Angel's disappearance and comes to suspect strongly that James Windibank and the fictional Hosmer Angel are indeed one and the same. He then invites Windibank to his residence at Baker Street, and the following exchange takes place.

"Good-evening, Mr. James Windibank," said Holmes. "I think that this typewritten letter is from you, in which you made an appointment with me for six o'clock?"

"Yes, sir. I am afraid that I am a little late, but I am not quite my own master, you know. I am sorry that Miss Sutherland has troubled you about this little matterOf course, I did not mind you so much, as you are not connected with the official police, but it is not pleasant to have a family misfortune like this noised abroad. Besides, it is a useless expense, for how could you possibly find this Hosmer Angel?"

"On the contrary," said Holmes quietly; "I have every reason to believe that I will succeed in discovering Mr. Hosmer Angel."

Mr. Windibank gave a violent start and dropped his gloves. "I am delighted to hear it," he said.

When Holmes states that there is reason to believe that Hosmer Angel will be discovered, he does not intend that Windibank actually come to believe this to be true. That is, Holmes doesn't intend that Windibank come to think that there really *is* someone named Hosmer Angel whose whereabouts can be discovered. Rather, Holmes merely wants to plant the idea in Windibank's head that he, Holmes, *thinks* there is some actual person named Hosmer Angel. Holmes is temporarily throwing Windibank 'off the scent' so that he will be off-guard when Holmes finally levels the accusation that Windibank has been masquerading under the pseudonym Hosmer Angel.

For our larger discussion of deception, what is important from this example is that the statement Holmes communicates (namely, that there is reason to believe that Hosmer Angel will be discovered), is not actually the matter on which Holmes is attempting to mislead Windibank. Holmes intends to mislead Windibank about his (Holmes's) own *beliefs* about Hosmer Angel, even though his actual *statement* to Windibank is that actual reasons exist for thinking that Hosmer Angel might yet be discovered.

The definition of 'deceive' we've been considering is this:

"To communicate something I believe to be false, with the intention that another person comes to believe it."

But we have now seen that we can communicate *one* thing to someone, with the intention that they be deceived about *another* thing. So, we need to revise again our definition of 'deceive' so that Holmes's communication to Windibank counts as an act of deception (which it clearly is). We can do this by removing the stipulation that the content of a deceiver's statement must be the same as the content of the false belief the deceived person comes to hold. We might thus be led to the following definition of 'deceive':

“To communicate something with the intention that another person comes to hold some false belief.”

By stipulating only that the deceiver comes to hold *some* false belief, we remove the condition that this false belief must mirror exactly the content of what the deceiver communicates. This latest definition of ‘deceive’ allows us, rightly, to say that Holmes’s statement to Windibank is an act of deception.

Langurs and Pharmaceutical Manipulation

There is still some work to be done, though, if we are to arrive at an adequate meaning of ‘deceive’. What our latest definition lacks is a reference to *why* the deceived person comes to hold a false belief. Consider the case of Professor Presbury in *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*. Presbury becomes infatuated with a much younger woman and, to allay her concerns about their age difference, seeks a bizarre kind of help from a scientist named Lowenstein. Watson informs us that Lowenstein was “tabooed by the profession” and “was striving in some unknown way for the secret of rejuvenescence and the elixir of life.”

Lowenstein provided Professor Presbury with a serum to be taken every nine days. The serum did provide remarkable strength and vitality to Presbury, particularly the day the serum was taken. Unfortunately, there were serious side effects. The serum had somehow been extracted in part from a langur, an animal described as “the great black-faced monkey of the Himalayan slopes.” After each dose of serum Presbury would behave much like a monkey: climbing vines, harassing the family dog, and sometimes even walking on all fours. During the intense period following each dose, we’re told by the Professor’s daughter that “there are times when he has no recollection of what he does.”

As the inventor of the serum, Lowenstein is well aware of its general side effects. And while the actual story gives us no reason to think that he *intends* Presbury to lose his memory or believe he is a monkey, we might suppose for sake of an example that he does intend it. That is, we might imagine that Lowenstein has the sinister goal of making Presbury believe he is a monkey. After administering a dose of the serum to Presbury, Lowenstein might then whisper in his ear, “You are a monkey.” In this example, Lowenstein would be communicating something to Presbury with the intention that Presbury come to hold a false belief. And so this example would be an instance of deception according to our latest definition of “deceive.” But surely causing someone to hold a false belief by such manipulative means as drugs, hypnotism or brainwashing is not the same as *deceiving* someone. To distinguish deception from mere manipulation we will need to specify the *reason* that the deceived person comes to hold a false belief. And what seems key to the concept of deception is that the deceived person’s reasoning process includes an assumption about the *sincerity* of the person communicating information to him or her.

In our everyday conversations with others, we assume that—all things being equal—others are being forthright in what they tell us. That is, unless we have some reason to think that someone *isn’t* telling us the truth as best they understand it, we assume that they are in fact being truthful.

This universal assumption we make about others can be demonstrated in the fact that we all learn language. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) emphasized, language is never something we ourselves invent privately. It is a public construct and thus something we must learn, or be exposed to.

How does anyone learn a language? Perhaps as children we witness a parent pointing to objects and saying “chair” or “cat” or “dog”. If we did not accept at face value that these objects are indeed associated with the terms uttered by the adults in our lives, we would never learn a language. Even if we did suspect that our parents—or, if we are adults, our foreign language teachers—might be misleading us, how could we ever check their forthrightness? We would have to take some *other* person’s word for it that we were being misled. So, in the end there really is no way to learn a language but to take other people’s testimony to us at face value.

Once again, if we have no specific reason to think that a person isn’t being forthright, the fallback position is that he or she is indeed being forthright. Only the very hardened cynic, disillusioned about humanity on account of the lies told by those he trusted, fails to make this assumption about others’ sincerity in everyday life.

This assumption about others’ sincerity seems to be the key point in distinguishing deception from other forms of manipulation. In cases of deception the deceived person’s evidence or line of reasoning relies in some way on the (false) belief that others are being truthful. So, let us consider the following definition of ‘deceive’:

“To communicate something with the intention that another person comes to hold some false belief, where the reasons I manufacture rely on an incorrect assumption that I am sincere.”

Is this definition finally adequate to capture all cases of deception? Almost. We still have one slight (and final) amendment to make.

Double Agent Watson

Our last amendment focuses on the question of whether it must be *my own* insincerity on which the person I deceive mistakenly relies. An elaborate example from Glen Newey¹ (1961 –) demonstrates that my deception of another person can be accomplished by making use of someone *else’s* insincerity. The form of Newey’s example isn’t mirrored (to my knowledge) in any story within the *Sherlock Holmes* canon. So let me illustrate the kind of example Newey has in mind by referencing an imagined, collaborative plan devised by Holmes and Watson.

Let us suppose that one of Holmes’s adversaries, “Major Baddie,” visits Watson at his medical practice and tries to convince him to betray Holmes. Watson, of course, would never do such a thing. But let us suppose that Watson tells Holmes of the visit, and they devise a plan for Watson to be a double agent. Watson will pretend to be in cahoots with Major Baddie and will feed him misinformation.

¹ Glen Newey, “Political Lying: A Defense”, *Public Affairs Quarterly* 11 (1997): 93-116.

We suppose that Watson then earns the trust of Major Baddie. Watson and Holmes decide to use their advantage to keep Major Baddie from moving some stolen jewels which he has hidden. The police, Holmes and Watson have learned, have received a tip and are closing in on the location of the jewels. Holmes and Watson want to allay Major Baddie's fears about the police investigation by convincing him that the police really *aren't* making any progress. Toward this end, Watson tells Major Baddie something that is false: namely, that the police are pursuing false leads and aren't actually making any headway in the case. Watson also tells him that Holmes misguidedly believes that the police *are* making progress.

As a final ploy to convince Major Baddie that he is safe from the police and has no reason to move the jewels, Holmes himself visits Major Baddie and announces, "You know, the police really don't have a clue in the case; so I suppose the jewels must really be safe." This statement is of course false; and Holmes knows it to be false. However, Major Baddie *thinks that Holmes thinks* it's true. Since Major Baddie mistrusts Holmes's intentions, he interprets Holmes's statement as an attempt to pull off a double bluff. That is, here's what Major Baddie thinks: "Holmes mistakenly believes that the police are closing in. The reason he's telling me that they're *not* closing in is that he knows I'll naturally believe the opposite of what he says. He's trying to bluff his way into making me move the jewels and thereby reveal their whereabouts." This is what Major Baddie is thinking, and the reality is that Holmes *knows* this is what he's thinking.

In this elaborate example Holmes is indeed trying to deceive Major Baddie. However, what he actually tells Major Baddie is, in reality, both true and believed to be true by Holmes. So, in deceiving Major Baddie, Holmes has said nothing other than the straightforward truth. His deception does not rely any mistaken assumption on Major Baddie's part that he, Holmes, is sincere. Indeed, he's relying on the idea that Major Baddie will assume he's *not* sincere! The deception is pulled off by *Watson's* insincerity in Watson's earlier statement to Major Baddie that Holmes wrongly believes that the police are making progress.

So, instead of requiring that my deception of another person hinge on an assumption about *my* sincerity, our definition of 'deceive' should merely reference *someone's* believed sincerity. Admittedly, the insincerity through which deception is pulled off will typically involve the deceiver's own insincerity. But as our last elaborate example showed, this is not always the case.

We arrive now at our final definition of 'deceive':

"To communicate something with the intention that another person comes to hold some false belief, where the reasons I manufacture rely on an incorrect assumption of someone's insincerity."

This, I think, gets to the heart of what deception is. It also leads us to a conclusion about Holmes's interactions with Moriarty that may come as quite a surprise.

The Games People Play

The big surprise is that Holmes never actually deceives Moriarty. Aside from elaborate examples like the one involving Major Baddie, deception relies on an assumption by the deceived person about the deceiver's own sincerity. But Moriarty doesn't make this assumption about Holmes.

Moriarty is of course the criminal mastermind whom Holmes regards as uniquely his intellectual equal. In *The Final Problem* he says of Moriarty: "He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. He is a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker." Holmes then relays to Watson the nature of his ongoing efforts to ensnare Moriarty. "He saw every step which I took to draw my toils round him. Again and again he strove to break away, but I as often headed him off. I tell you, my friend, that if a detailed account of that silent contest could be written, it would take its place as the most brilliant bit of thrust-and-parry work in the history of detection. Never have I risen to such a height, and never have I been so hard pressed by an opponent. He cut deep, and yet I just undercut him."

Having gained the upper hand over Moriarty such that Moriarty's criminal network was days away from being exposed, Holmes is confronted by Moriarty at his Baker Street residence. Moriarty acknowledges that, owing to Holmes's continued 'persecution', "I am in positive danger of losing my liberty." Moriarty demands that Holmes withdraw from his pursuit, warning of an "extreme measure" (the implication being future physical harm) if he does not. Holmes refuses, leading to Moriarty's final summation of their relationship: "It seems a pity, but I have done what I could. I know every move of your game....It has been a duel between you and me, Mr. Holmes. You hope to place me in the dock. I tell you that I will never stand in the dock. You hope to beat me. I tell you that you will never beat me. If you are clever enough to bring destruction upon me, rest assured that I shall do as much to you."

Moriarty's reference to a "game" between himself and Holmes is instructive. There is a mutual understanding of the stakes of their engagement and of the mutual goal of trying to outwit the other. It will be a contest of intellect and cunning. Each move from the other person will be analyzed in an attempt to understand the strategy behind it and to counter it. Clearly, there is no assumption that the other person will be well-meaning or sincere in anything that is said or done.

The cat and mouse game between Holmes and Moriarty continues throughout the European countryside until they meet, dramatically, at Reichenbach Fall in Switzerland—ending in Moriarty plunging to his death. In attempting to outfox the other person at every turn in their journey, their contest is akin to a game of cards. When playing poker or some other card game, players do not try to *deceive* others. Their bluffing could only count as genuine deception if others assumed they were sincere in their communication. And clearly this is not the case in a game of cards. Instead, a card player seeks to manipulate the thinking of others at the table even while others know full well that this is what the player is trying to do. The contest among players is one of trying to pick up the right kind of information, even though only some of the information coming from each player, it is mutually recognized, will be true. This kind of contest is similar to one in which magicians might engage as they perform tricks for one another

in a game of one-upmanship, with each magician trying to uncover how each magic trick on display is really done. And this kind of contest is the one in which Holmes and Moriarty engage.

Because they have a mutual understanding of the nature of their contest, Holmes and Moriarty can gain no advantage over the other by relying on the general assumptions people make in everyday contexts about others' sincerity. So Holmes never actually deceives Moriarty (just as Moriarty never deceives Holmes). With his elaborate disguises and strategic misdirection, Holmes indeed deserves to be ranked as a master deceiver. Watson, perhaps the person most commonly fooled by Holmes's disguises, could attest to that! Our discussion has clarified what it truly means to deceive someone. But our conclusion, showing the link between deception and sincerity, also means that, strictly speaking, deception is not one of the tools available to Holmes as he engages with Moriarty. Perhaps if Holmes gave Moriarty a serum made from a langur so that Moriarty forgot he was engaged in a contest.... Well, that would be one elaborate example too many.