

# Power, Bald-Faced Lies and Contempt for Truth

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## Introduction

Imagine you are standing in the rain at a bus stop. You turn to the man next to you and make a banal comment about the weather: “Sure is wet today, isn’t it?” (or some such).

Instead of agreeing, he turns and says, “It is not raining.” You chuckle and sputter that you are both soaked. He is adamant: “It is not raining. And even it was, I wouldn’t be getting wet”.

At this point, you will no doubt find yourself needing to answer an urgent text and wishing the bus a speedy arrival. In ordinary non-political life, serious utterances of such obvious falsehoods—what are often called “bald-faced lies”—are uncommon and unsettling. We are prone to interpret them as jokes, or as expressions of irony, or perhaps as unserious, petulant linguistic foot-stompings borne out of frustration. But earnest expressions of them—overt denials of obvious matters of fact—are rare amongst adults in democratic societies, both in personal and political life.

Or so it once seemed. For arguably, bald-faced lies are on the uptick by political leaders in democracies worldwide. In the United States, for example, we are becoming numb not only to outrageous falsehoods, but to the bizarre self-assurance with which they are pronounced. We were told crowds were bigger than they were, that the sun shined when it didn’t, that Trump won in a landslide—and that was just in the first few days after his election. What has shocked so many is the fearlessness in the face of the facts, the willingness to simply deny reality outright, and the apparent toleration, even joy with which Trump's followers greet the practice.

Bald-faced lying by political leaders is an important phenomenon, but it is easy to misunderstand in ways that undermine our ability to combat its strange effectiveness. In this paper, I aim to first analyze political bald-faced lies and then examine the threat they pose to the norms of democratic discourse. My goal is not to answer the *empirical* question of how frequently denials of obvious facts occur in politics; it is the normative

question of understanding what harms they cause—particularly when they are made by those—unlike our friend at the bus stop—in political power. Nonetheless, I think it is important to resist the temptation to think that what we are talking about here are a few isolated and extreme examples. As Hannah Arendt noted, there are times in political life when truth, “if it happens to oppose a given group’s profit or pleasure, is greeted...with greater hostility” (2006, 231). Arguably we are living in one of those times.

### Did He Really Just Say That?

The kind of *obvious falsehoods* I’m concerned with are overt, straight-faced, public utterances of a proposition that flies in the face of a recognized matter of fact. That is, they involve the utterance of a proposition that meets the following conditions:

- (i) It is false or straightforwardly entails a proposition that is false, and which is such that,
- (ii) there is direct overwhelming evidence for that proposition’s falsity;
- (iii) that evidence is available and obvious.<sup>1</sup>

I will take it here that the meaning of (i) is clear; (ii) and (iii) require a bit more explanation. As I intend the terms, “overwhelming evidence” is evidence that would normally mean that anyone who has such evidence would be in a position to know that the proposition is false.<sup>2</sup> The evidence in question is “direct” in the sense intended in that it does not require exceptional amounts of specialist knowledge. And evidence is “available and obvious” when, relative to a given context, most people hearing the utterance can access and understand that evidence with minimal cognitive and physical effort.

I’ll say that an obvious falsehood counts as a bald-faced *lie* just when,

- (iv) The speaker believes it to be false.<sup>3</sup>

Our initial bus-stop example is an obvious falsehood that also counts as a bald-faced lie in the sense just discussed if the speaker

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on “bald-faced lies” stems from Sorenson’s (2007) use of the term; see also Carson (2006); Fallis (2009), Saul (2012), Mahon (2008), Lackey (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Barring, of course, Gettier-style problems.

<sup>3</sup> Note that I am not *defining* bald-faced lies as lies made without the intention to deceive. As I note below, however, that intention will in fact be typically lacking.

believes it is raining; it doesn't if he lacks that belief, or is simply bullshitting, in the sense that he doesn't care whether it is true or false (Frankfurt, 2005). Likewise, the child with chocolate cake all over his face who tells his mother he didn't eat the chocolate is telling a bald-faced lie—if, that is, he believes he did.

This latter case also underlines that bald-face lying isn't totally unfamiliar, especially in contexts where speaking the obvious truth itself is seen as problematic. Thus, the child in our example might utter the obvious falsehood not because he wants to deceive his mother but because he equates an admission of guilt with punishment. Or, as Sorenson (2007) originally noted, oppressive, authoritarian societies can even make bald-faced lying practically rational. If a regime, for example, punishes anyone who says that the population is starving, even when it obviously is, then saying (to e.g. a visiting reporter) that it isn't will be necessary to avoid imprisonment or worse. In both these kinds of cases, the act of speaking the obvious truth is what is being avoided.

The examples that I will be concerned with here, however, are slightly different: I'll call them *political bald-faced lies*—that is, obvious falsehoods uttered in the course of public political discourse of the sort found on television, social media or political rallies, and typically uttered by a political figure or their representative.<sup>4</sup> Unlike our example of the stranger at the bus-stop, or even the coerced lies made by citizens in oppressive societies, political bald-faced lies are typically directed, as political discourse is generally, to groups in order to achieve a political goal (cf. Mathiesen and Fallis, 2016, 36).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the examples I'm interested in, as we'll see, are those where the political figure in question has some degree, and perhaps a great degree, of power. Examples of this include:

- The president asserting that a clearly-modified weather map displayed on national television had not been modified.
- A political leader denying that he ever said what many people heard him say on television, in political ads he paid for, and during speeches.
- A political spokesperson asserting that one crowd was larger than another in direct contradiction of highly trusted and publicly available photographic evidence.

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<sup>4</sup> Examples include party leaders, elected representatives, non-elected dictators, and political spokespersons; the complexities of political arrangements preclude a precise definition.

<sup>5</sup> I am not denying of course that some political bald-faced lies might also be coerced lies.

While these cases are reasonably clear, the obvious falsehoods involved in bald-faced political lying will come in degrees, since what is obvious, what is available, what is justified, and what is direct, are all matters of degree.

Note, moreover, that not every utterance by a political figure of a false proposition counts as a political bald-faced lie. Most falsehoods don't qualify as obvious falsehoods. And there will be grey areas, since what evidence counts as direct or obvious can sometimes be indeterminate even within a context. For example, the assertion that climate change is not being affected by carbon emissions, or is a hoax perpetuated by China, may not count as a political bald-faced lie in *certain contexts* (e.g. where people have little access to scientific information); they will "just" be false, unjustified and deceptive (which is bad enough, one might think). But at a climate change conference or uttered on television after recognizable and credentialed scientific experts have publicly testified to the contrary, they will likely count as bald-faced.

Similarly, conspiracy theories can, and often do, contain obvious falsehoods as elements. Consider for example, the claim that the earth is flat, as made by flat-earth conspiracy theorists who allege that there is a massive global cover-up concerning the real shape of the Earth. For most people, this will count as an obvious falsehood, given the availability of widely trusted and highly verified photographs of the earth. But not all the implausible claims made by conspiracy theories will be such in most contexts. The denial of Oswald's having been the lone gunman who shot Kennedy, for example, while implausible, doesn't seem to function as an obvious falsehood, simply because the evidence in support of the claim that Oswald alone shot Kennedy, while overwhelming, is not, for most people, particularly direct or obvious.

## Political Bald-Faced Lies and Deception

An initial puzzling feature about political bald-faced lies, and one associated with bald-faced lies generally in the literature, is their connection—or lack thereof—to deception. This puzzling feature brings into stark relief the question of what makes political bald-faced lying harmful.

The traditional definition of lying goes something like this: to lie is to intentionally state what one believes to be false with the intention to deceive the listener into thinking it is true. Lying, in other words, requires the intention to deceive in this traditional sense. If so, then political bald-faced lies probably aren't lies in this traditional sense.<sup>6</sup> And if one thinks that the traditional account is

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<sup>6</sup> Not all obvious falsehoods are lies in any sense, since one can utter an obvious falsehood without believing *or* disbelieving the proposition in question. One

correct, then political bald-faced lies aren't really lies at all, any more than a decoy duck is a duck.

One reason to favor the traditional account of lying is that it offers a simple explanation of the wrongness of lying. Lying is wrong because lies intend to deceive and deception is wrong. And that's the puzzling feature of political bald-faced lies. They are intuitively wrong, but arguably not because they are attempts to deceive anyone. And that fact remains whether or not one thinks that bald-faced lies are real lies—a dispute, thankfully, we don't have to adjudicate here.

On almost any account, traditional or otherwise, liars violate the norm that one should speak what one believes to be true. But an ordinary lie is typically done with the intention of *disguising that norm violation*. That's one of the points of ordinary lying. Liars want to deceive people both about what is true of the world, and about their own state of mind. That is, they don't want you to know they are lying. That's not the case with most denials of obvious fact. Denying that it is raining while standing in the rain will not convince anyone that it is sunny out, and you are typically going to know that. Nor will it typically make people think you believe it isn't raining—which is why we often treat obvious falsehoods uttered in non-political contexts as jokes or sarcasm.

Jennifer Lackey (2013) has pointed out that bald-faced lies, however, while not attempts to deceive listeners into believing the proposition uttered, can still count as deceptive in a wider sense. One can deceive in this wider sense by concealing the truth in some way; say by simply withholding the truth at the right moment, or by keeping silent. And importantly, sowing confusion can also deceive (See Lynch, 2009b).

In particular, politicians or their representatives who engage frequently in bald-faced lying and who repeat them loudly and confidently in the national media, at rallies and online, can deceive by making it difficult for people to know what to believe. This is analogous to the con artist who in a shell game, moves the cups around so quickly that they confuse people in the hope that they will fail to believe where the money actually is. Similarly, by bombarding the public with contradictory information, and importantly—denouncing the mainstream media that reports on it—a politician might hope to confuse them into not knowing what to believe, and therefore not believing what is true. This is the political shell-game at work.

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might lack any doxastic attitude towards it at all. The speaker might simply be bullshitting in Frankfurt's sense, or displaying what Cassam calls *epistemic insouciance* (Cassam 2019). That is, they may not care much about the truth at all—not even enough to try to hide it, as the liar attempts to do, from their listener.

But still, if the intended effect of bald-faced lying is deception, they remain a clumsy tool for the job in political speech.<sup>7</sup> After all, one can play the political shell-game, a game intended to obscure the truth from the public, without ever engaging in direct denials of obvious facts. The more common and effective method, as was done, for example, in the run-up to the Iraq War, is to simply feed false, misleading, incomplete and/or unjustified information to the media. And then of course there is the time-honored use of spin, or the employment of “lexical selection” to deceptively describe events in ways that benefit the political interests of the speaker (Manson, 2012, 204-205). These are bread and butter deceptions of politics. Asserting what is *obviously* untrue is crude by comparison. It may fool some of the people some of the time but it is unlikely to fool most of the people most of the time.

In sum: political bald-faced lies are generally not attempts to be deceptive (and so not even lies in the traditional sense); and when they are, they are not particularly effective. Which of course invites the question of what they *are* generally attempts to do, and why they are wrong.

### Political Bald-faced Lies and Expression

Before engaging that question directly, we can entertain another possible analysis of political bald-faced lies. So far, we’ve been implicitly assuming that bald-faced lies are what they appear to be: assertions. But perhaps they aren’t assertions at all—deceitful or otherwise. As such, they aren’t really true or false.

The plausibility of this suggestion is seemingly underlined by our initial example. There you are, standing in the pouring rain, and the man by your side says it is not raining. As I noted, it is likely that in such a case most people would initially interpret this as a kind of feeble joke, or perhaps as cry of frustration. In other words, not as a sincere assertion—at least not of the proposition that it is not raining.

The reason we are prone to look for another explanation for the illocutionary act of directly denying an obvious fact stems from simple facts about the nature of assertion itself. Assertions, like any speech act, are governed by norms. There is, of course, considerable debate in the philosophy of language over which norms govern assertion, and which, if any, are constitutive of it. But one dominant assumption is that the norms operative on assertion are connected to truth. An example of such a norm is that one should assert only what is true. Another is that one should only

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<sup>7</sup> See Mathiesen and Fallis 2018 for an insightful discussion of lies in politics.

assert what one knows. While these norms are importantly different, they both point to the fact that assertions typically function as attempts to communicate what is true to the audience. From this point of view, assertions are generally in “good standing” when they fulfill this function.<sup>8</sup>

It seems clear that bald-faced lies are in violation of one or more of these truth-related norms of assertion, since no one who makes such a claim is asserting either what they know or what is true. Thus, one might think, since the norm violation is so overt and public, it is best to treat them as something other than an assertion—or at least not a literal assertion.

Let’s briefly focus on this latter possibility: that the bald-faced lie *is* an assertion, but a non-literal one. The speaker uses a false sentence to speak elliptically—as one often does with sarcastic utterances, like telling your obviously hung-over friend that they look “really perky this morning”—when you mean the exact opposite. If so, then the norms of assertion aren’t (arguably) being violated, so much as manipulated.<sup>9</sup>

Such manipulations can happen in political speech as well of course. Elliptical assertions—that is, appearing to say one thing while actually conveying another—are one way to interpret the phenomenon often known as “dog-whistling”, or targeted speech. Verbal dogwhistles are a kind of coded speech; like the whistles they are named after, they can be “heard” (that is, decoded) by some people and not others (Saul, 2013).

It is possible, of course, that political bald-faced lies could function as dogwhistles, or function as pieces of sarcasm, as in the “you look really perky this morning” case. And no doubt some have. But that possibility doesn’t seem particularly compelling in most cases, including the sorts of cases I’ve given above. Claiming that one didn’t say something that you obviously did say would be an odd way of declaring you said it after all. Nor does it seem to be a bit of coded speech.

So then, perhaps what the apparent violations of the assertion norms are telling us is that the political bald-faced liar is not asserting anything at all. But then what are they doing?

One possibility is that they are merely uttering something outrageous only for humorous effect. Political bald-faced liars aren’t asserting anything, they are only being funny.

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<sup>8</sup> The qualifications here accommodate our agnosticism about whether the norms under discussion are constitutive of assertions as speech acts or instead just operative on them.

<sup>9</sup> As Sorenson argues (2007) if one takes a more Brandomian approach to assertion, which divorces its norms from truth, then bald-faced lies don’t violate the norms of assertion in the first place. As I argue below, political bald-faced lies are assertions; I remain neutral on whether bald-faced lies generally are.

Some political bald-faced lies may indeed be funny, intentionally or otherwise. But it isn't plausible that they typically function only to be so. One reason for thinking so is this simple political fact. In many cases, it just serves someone's interest to treat political bald-faced lies as non-literal or expressive—especially when the particular obvious falsehood in question is greeted by many as ridiculous, or offensive or both, as when defenders of President Trump's most outrageous tweets try to explain them away by interpreting them as attempts to be funny. And that should tell us something—jokes you have to insist are jokes were often not really meant to be jokes in the first place.

A far more plausible expressive hypothesis comes from Jason Stanley. According to Stanley, “Americans no longer expect or care about candidates making honest assertions in the public sphere...[so] the savvy political campaigner recognizes that there is no cost to making statements that contradict even their most well-known beliefs” (Stanley, 2012). Stanley's point is that the political climate has become so infused with skepticism and the expectation of dishonesty, that it is the default assumption that politicians are not really making assertions. Their utterances are not meant to be believed. Rather, they are expressions of political ideologies or tribally important emotions.

Stanley's hypothesis is deeply plausible for a range of political utterances. There is no doubt that many such utterances, including ones made online, are best understood as expressive rather than assertive. They aren't claims to truth but ways of representing the speaker as identifying with a particular group's “deep story”, as the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2018) puts it. But does the expressivist hypothesis make sense in the case of political bald-faced lies? It is telling, I think, that Stanley's own examples involve cases that don't involve what I've called obvious falsehoods, such as Mitt Romney's claim during the 2012 presidential campaign that Obama had “raided” \$716 billion from Medicare. This claim, as Stanley notes, was easily disproven and seen to be false. But to disprove it, one needed to do at least a little bit of work, such as a Google search. It didn't involve denying the reality right before your eyes, as political bald-faced lies do.

Here we arrive at the crux. It is characteristic of the political bald-faced lie, as I've described it, that it is made with a straight-face; it is a denial of an obvious fact, much like saying “it isn't raining” when standing in the rain. Importantly, it is made under *the banner of claiming what is true*, e.g. being an assertion in good standing even while it is *obviously* not in good standing. And it is this which makes them so distinctive. They are shocking precisely because they are *denials* of obvious facts. If they were not assertions it is unclear how they would achieve this effect. Moreover, a denial of a fact—on one ordinary interpretation—is the assertion of a



negation. It is the claim that something is not the case or the assertion of a proposition which entails that something is not the case. What we are calling political bald-faced lies are precisely such claims.

To clarify: The point I am resisting is the suggestion that political bald-faced lies are *only* or *merely* expressive. Such a view misses, I'm suggesting, what is distinctive about political bald-faced lies and the obvious falsehoods they express—the whiff of paradox they bring in their wake. The contrary hypothesis that I wish to explore starts from the thought that political bald-faced lies are neither jokes nor metaphors nor attempts to deceive. Instead, they are often exactly what they appear to be: assertions that overtly break a basic norm or rule of assertion for the purpose of expressing contempt for truth and, ultimately, demonstrating power.

### Obvious Falsehoods and Contempt

Imagine that during a football game, a player steps way out of bounds and sprints down the sidelines with the ball. The referee blows the whistle. But the player—still standing out of bounds—declares that he is in bounds and insists on continuing to play. He isn't fooling anyone, but as his actions suggest, he isn't joking either. What he *is* doing is pretty clear: he is expressing his contempt—his contempt for the referee, the other team, and perhaps for the very idea that the rules apply to him.

If the game is a normal one, he'll be thrown out. But if he—or his team—hold some power (perhaps he owns the field or brought the ball) then he may be able to compel the game to continue. Imagine his fans, all of whom know he stepped out of bounds, cheering him on anyway—let him play, they yell. Besides, they insist, even if he did step out, that's no big deal. And the video can't be trusted anyway. It is controlled by sinister forces out to get their team. And so on. Meanwhile the player continues to insist that he never stepped out of bounds in the first place.

If the game continues, the other team might start flouting the rules as well. The referees' calls will be increasingly moot. It may be unclear that they are even playing the same game—or any game at all. Perhaps everyone will take their balls and go home; or fights will break out and the game will end very badly indeed.

The suggestion I wish to make is that political bald-faced lies are like our imagined player's insistence that he was in bounds when he deliberately stepped out. And they serve the same purpose. They are not lies, they are not jokes nor mere expressions of raw emotion. *They are deliberate assertions of falsehoods that express contempt for the truth and thereby demonstrate political power.*

They express this contempt, I'll argue, in at least three ways. First, they express contempt for the social-epistemic rules or normative principles which help us to decide, in a social context, what is true or false—and the norms of journalism, science and the law that are designed to embody those rules. Second, they express contempt that those rules are meant to apply to everyone. And third, they express contempt for the very idea of truth itself—the idea that there is any power greater than power itself.

Let's develop each of these in turn.

To hold rules in contempt is to regard them as not worthy of abiding by. To *express* such contempt is to express this lack of regard by deliberately flouting the rule in an overt and publicly recognizable fashion.<sup>10</sup> Political bald-faced lies often serve to express contempt for what we can call social-epistemic rules and pleasure at having the power to do so.

An epistemic rule is a principle giving normative guidance on what is justifiably believed. These rules can come in more or less fine-grained form. Including such basic rules as:

- If you perceive that P, then other things being equal, you should believe that P.

As well as less basic rules such as:

- If you hear S saying that p in a language you understand, then other things being equal, believe that S said that p.
- Other things being equal, believe experts over novices on technical, medical or scientific issues.
- If your personal interests are at stake when deciding whether to believe that p, beware of that bias affecting your belief.

Rules like this obviously play an epistemic role in our life, helping to determine what we should believe. But they also play a social role by helping to determine what one should do in light of our beliefs. That's partly because various institutional and professional norms are themselves justified in terms of even more basic epistemic rules. But some rules have a decidedly social character—in that they govern belief-forming practices involving interactions between agents. These latter sorts of rules we can call

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<sup>10</sup> Note that expressions of contempt for rules, like expressions of contempt by racists, might or might not be connected to overt cognitive beliefs, theoretical or otherwise about the object of the contempt. Contempt for rules, like contempt generally, can be deliberate but not intellectual.

social-epistemic rules.<sup>11</sup> Arguably, the latter two examples are just such rules.

In fact, however, the realm of the social-epistemic, and the rules and norms that govern it, stretches deep into the life of basic democratic institutions.<sup>12</sup> Social-epistemic rules, for example, also include the rule that journalists should use more than one source; that teachers should use accurate textbooks, that detectives need to collect evidence against the accused, or that judges should recuse themselves when their personal interests are at stake. All of these rules are examples of professional norms aimed at helping the profession consume and transmit justified information in line with their professional goals. This is why we say that such institutions, and the norms that govern them are “evidence-based”. These social-epistemic norms provide both citizens and institutions the means by which to pursue truth. Thus political bald-faced lies, in expressing contempt for social-epistemic rules, also express contempt towards the means by which we pursue truth in normal democratic societies.

Such contempt has some clearly harmful effects on democracy. The impact of those effects, however, hinges on the power of the contemptuous. Indeed, political power (or the lack of it) is what makes the bald-faced lie of the man at the bus-stop merely ridiculous; and it is what makes the lies of a president toxic.

In particular, and as in our imagined example, the impact of a bald-faced lie depends on the rule-breaker’s power in at least two respects. First, it depends on the politician’s own institutional power—that is, whether he holds a position of real authority, his ability to access and control aspects of the media, and the extent to which he exerts power over his political allies. Second, it will depend on his social power—whether and to what extent his followers not only will tolerate contempt for rules, epistemic and otherwise, from him. It depends, in short, on the extent to which he can rely on his followers to cheer him on. Yet and again like our example, contempt for a rule is corrosive precisely because it is catching. Those cheering on Trump end up expressing the same contempt, even if—and especially if—they insist they are playing by the very rules they are mocking.

Given sufficient institutional and social power, expressions of contempt for social-epistemic rules has the deleterious effect of laying the groundwork for questioning the epistemic and social-epistemic rules themselves. This is particularly so if, as in our football example, the rule-breaker gets away with it—where the “it” is both the rule-violation and the assertion that no such violation

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<sup>11</sup> Here I follow Goldman (1999).

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion, see Lynch 2019; for applications in internet epistemology see Gunn and Lynch 2019.

occurred. And that in turn encourages both the players on the other team, and the fans in the stands, to think less of the rule in question. It wilts in importance.

This brings us to the second way that political bald-faced lies express contempt. They express contempt for the idea that epistemic rules are universal, or intended to apply to everyone. In telling a bald-faced lie, a political figure flouts an epistemic rule; but that doesn't mean he thinks the rule should not apply to others. Typically he does believe that the other party, or his political opponents should be held accountable to the norms of scientific reasoning, for example. Rather his statement of an obvious falsehood can serve as a dramatic signal, to both supporters and opponents, of his contempt for the idea that such norms or rules apply to him. In this he resembles a kind of epistemic Thrasymachus. Like Thrasymachus, who believed that it was best if others acted justly when he did not, so our political figure may believe that it is best for others to abide by the social-epistemic rules even when he does not, for this is what is best from the standpoint of his own political self-interest.

Finally, political bald-faced lies can serve to express contempt for truth itself. Truth, as I've argued elsewhere, can be helpfully understood as a functional property of beliefs (Lynch 2009). The role that property plays in our cognitive economy is demarcated, like other functional roles, by certain principles or "truisms". These include, for example, the idea that believing doesn't make is so (or, the belief that p doesn't entail that p); that there are truths that aren't believed, and that true beliefs are a goal of inquiry. Thus, as I understand it, to express contempt for the truth itself, as opposed to the means by which we pursue it, or the rules that govern that pursuit, is to express contempt for one or more of these principles – to hold they are unworthy of our commitment or interest.

The football analogy helps to illustrate how this might happen. The rule-breaker who also owns the field can force the game to go on under the assumption that he didn't step out of bounds. Likewise, given sufficient power, the political bald-face liar can bring into being not the truth of what he says, *but it's passing for truth*.<sup>13</sup> In short, he can make people *treat what he says as true*—to treat it, in other words, as a goal of inquiry, an answer to a question.

It is for these reasons that the contempt for truth also serves to demonstrate power. That is what our rule-breaker, ultimately, is aiming at: showing that he has the power to break or flaunt rules

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<sup>13</sup> I have been helped on this point by conversation with, and the work of, Don Fallis and Lee McIntyre; for their respective views on this point see (Fallis, 2015 p. 81-96) and McIntyre (2018, 168ff).

AND to make others go along with, or at least ignore that fact. In the case of the powerful football player, the rules that are flaunted are basic rules of the game; in the case of the political bald-face liar the rules are rules of assertion and the rules that govern our social-epistemic life. In both cases the aim is similar: to demonstrate or affirm power that is greater than any rule. And such demonstrations, as just noted, can have dangerous downstream effects. With sufficient power, people can be compelled to continue to play the game even while those in power break the rules—because they can.

When political bald-faced lies express contempt for truth itself, we see the attitude that engenders such contempt—intellectual or epistemic arrogance—coming to the surface. This is the attitude of thinking you have nothing to learn, and that your worldview can't be improved by the evidence and testimony of others, that your truth is the only truth (see Tanesini, 2016, Lynch 2019). The repeated telling of bald-faced lies by a politician, particularly an authoritarian mass leader is, at heart, the linguistic embodiment of not just his arrogance, but a tribal version of it which he is both reflecting and encouraging in his followers.

At its limit, epistemic arrogance involves a conflation of ego and truth. Hannah Arendt was chillingly clear on this point: “The chief qualification of a mass leader has become unending infallibility; he can never admit an error.” That's because to admit an error is to admit that there is something more powerful than you, that your triumph—and hence the tribe's—may not be inevitable. As a consequence, Arendt writes, speaking across the decades, “before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion, fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it” (1966, 350).

This was also the lesson that Orwell famously tried to impart in the most famous literary discussion of the obvious falsehood. In one of the most horrific scenes of *1984*, the sinister O'Brien tortures Winston into saying that 2 and 2 make five. O'Brien's point is that the truth is what the party says is the truth. And that is the point that political use of obvious falsehoods, at the end, inevitably makes. The point is to arrogantly celebrate the corrupt and incoherent idea that truth is in the eyes of the powerful. The point is to express contempt for truth.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to audiences in Connecticut, London and Princeton and to D. Fallis, P. Bloomfield, A. Wikforss, C. Crezar, Q. Cassam and B. Smith for helpful discussion.

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