

Se non è vero, è ben trovato

ChatGPT 5.1 Thinking

with prompting and small edits by András Kornai*

This paper brings three strands into a single framework: Don Fallis's recent work on lying and deception (Fallis, 2010), rabbinic discussions of *sheker* (falsehood) and *geneivat da'at* (stealing another's mind), and Kornai's account of "deception by default" as a general mechanism for lying by omission (Kornai, 2021). Rather than offering yet another exhaustive taxonomy of lie-types, the focus is on a single narrative—the Binding of Isaac ('Aqedat Yitzhak)—as a crucible in which distinctions between white lies, bald-faced lies, and self-deception are tested and partly break down. The aim is to extract modest diagnostic criteria that can illuminate rabbinic permissions for "white" deviations from truth, while squarely confronting the unsettling deception in the 'Aqedah itself.

Fallis shows that the standard analysis of lying in terms of asserting what one believes to be false with an intention to deceive leaves out "bald-faced lies", serious assertions made in full awareness that the audience does not, and is not meant to, be deceived. These are typically institutional (courtroom oaths, official denials) and depend on a background of common knowledge of falsity (Fallis, 2010). Kornai, from a quite different direction, argues that the central mechanism of successful deception—for humans and artificial agents alike—is the abuse of default inferences: instead of asserting some outright lie L , a deceiver produces some content K from which, relative to the hearer's knowledge base and default rules, L is normally inferred. Lies of omission are thus not a special corner, but instances of a general pattern: exploit what the hearer will supply by default (Kornai, 2021). White lies, bald-faced lies, and more troubling deceptions can all be realized either by direct assertion or by carefully chosen omissions that trigger such defaults.

Rabbinic sources, for their part, frame falsehood through strong prohibitions and sharply delimited exceptions. On the prohibitive side stand "You shall not lie one to another" (Vayikra 19:11), "From a matter of falsehood distance yourself" (Shemot 23:7), the condemnation of those who are "one thing in their mouth and another in their heart" (Pesachim 113b), and the broad notion of *geneivat da'at* in Chullin 94a, which explicitly targets technically true yet systematically misleading behavior. On the permissive side stand the classic passages that license *leshanot* (altering one's words) for peace and modesty: "It is permitted to alter for the sake of peace" (*mutar leshanot mipnei ha-shalom*; Yevamot 65b), and the statement that the sages alter their words only in three matters: tractate, bed, and hospitality (Bava Metzia 23b–24a). These do not celebrate casual dishonesty; they carve out a small space for what contemporary discourse might call white lies, provided the deception is narrowly tailored, non-exploitative, and not routinized in institutional settings.

Against this backdrop, the 'Aqedah is not a marginal curiosity but the hardest problem. When Isaac asks "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Bereshit 22:7), Abraham answers "God will see/provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). Given the default background of sacrificial practice, this utterance K strongly supports the default inference L : there will be a conventional animal victim, distinct from Isaac. Yet Abraham already believes that Isaac has been designated as the offering. On a straightforward reading, he thereby orchestrates a deception by default in Kornai's sense: he does not assert L , but he creates a context in which Isaac is almost bound to infer it. The stakes are maximal: this is neither a low-risk white lie nor an institutional bald-faced lie. Rabbinic elevation of Abraham as a paradigm of faith, especially in Sanhedrin 89b and midrashic expansions, thus sits in deep tension with the later halakhic demands of *midvar sheker tirchak* and *geneivat da'at*.

The paper suggests that this tension cannot be defused by relegating the 'Aqedah to a "singular" category outside ethics; instead it must be faced by asking about Abraham's mind-state on the way to Moriah. Here

Kierkegaard's reading in *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard, 1985) and Fingarette's account of self-deception (Fingarette, 1969) provide two contrasting models. For Kierkegaard, Abraham is the "knight of faith" who lives in what he calls the "teleological suspension of the ethical": he does not abandon the universal prohibition on murder, but stands in an immediate relation to God that cannot be mediated or explained to others. Abraham's "God will provide" can then be read not as a cynical cover, but as a paradoxical attempt to speak the truth he believes "by virtue of the absurd": that Isaac will both be sacrificed and yet returned, perhaps through resurrection. On this reading, the deceptive structure of $K \Rightarrow_{\text{def}} L$ is present at the level of what Isaac must infer, but internally Abraham may not take himself to be lying at all, because he genuinely trusts that God will, in some inscrutable way, make the utterance true.

Fingarette's analysis of self-deception, by contrast, turns on patterns of disavowal rather than on holding straightforwardly contradictory beliefs. The self-deceiver is not simply someone who believes p and $\neg p$, but someone who refuses to acknowledge, or "own", what at some level they already know. Applied to Abraham, this suggests a different picture of the journey: Abraham may oscillate between clear awareness that he is on his way to kill his son and a sustained refusal to dwell on, or fully articulate, that fact—to himself no less than to Isaac. "God will provide" then functions as a self-addressed formula that licenses postponement of avowal: by speaking in open, pious terms, he allows both himself and Isaac to proceed without fully confronting the concrete content of the command. In terms of deception by default, Abraham becomes in part his own victim: he constructs K not only to mislead Isaac, but to maintain a mental state in which the full horror of L is held at arm's length.

In conclusion, the paper uses the 'Aqedah to argue that rabbinic permissions for *leshanot*—for the sake of peace, modesty, or hospitality—can be understood as tightly guarded allowances for default-based softening of truth that avoid grave harm and exploitation, whereas institutionalized bald-faced lies and ordinary high-stakes deceptions by default stand in sharp tension with the aspiration to *emet*. Drawing on Kornai's treatment of elevated contexts in formal semantics (Kornai, 2019), we suggest that the 'Aqedah should not be treated as a counterexample to the general norms, but as an exemplary case that partly *fixes* their scope: the narrative signals an elevated register in which the ordinary pragmatic and ethical defaults are parameterized by covenantal faith rather than simply overridden or violated. At the everyday level, the proposed framework still supports a very narrow allowance for white lies in the spirit of Yevamot 65b and Bava Metzia 23b–24a and a strong rabbinic suspicion of institutionalized bald-faced lies. At the elevated level of 'Aqedat Yitzhak, however, the deception by default is read as part of a paradigmatic act of faith that a satisfactory normative theory must accommodate by refining the domain of its rules, rather than by condemning Abraham's speech under a pre-existing prohibition.

References

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(*) The whole prompt sequence is available at <https://chatgpt.com/share/6919fa83-de9c-8000-8414-a2c2429c5afc>