

Ho, Ho, Hoax: The Case against Santa Claus

1. The Question Refined

Is it wrong for parents and other adults to lie to children by telling them Santa Claus exists? The frequency with which it is raised by itself shows this is an important question. Although most parents in the United States continue to tell children about St. Nick, no Christmas passes without public questions about doing so. Indeed, the intuitive case against telling children about Santa is strong. Lying is generally wrong.¹ Telling children there is a Santa Claus is lying. Therefore, telling children there is a Santa Claus is wrong.

The question would have an easy answer if lying is always wrong. Although Immanuel Kant famously embraced this extreme position (1978), few other philosophers have been able to stomach it. Children, in fact, are among the prime candidates to be victims of permissible lying. A young child may be lied to about the exact extent of her severe illness; she may be lied to about the severity of her parents' financial troubles; and for many other reasons. If lying to children about Santa Claus is wrong it is not because lying is always wrong. There must be some further argument that telling children about Santa falls in the category of the impermissible rather than the permissible lie.

The question, to be clear, is not what parents and other adults should do *vis a vis* the child's prospective belief in Santa Claus. Should parents specifically discourage belief? Should they attempt to persuade the child one way or another? I do not propose to examine all of the various alternatives and determine which is morally best. Our

¹ In section 3.2, I explain what I mean by this.

question is only whether leading² children to believe in Santa is morally appropriate. And to do so one need only determine whether there is some alternative that is superior to deceit. Accordingly, alternatives to telling children about Santa will be important insofar as, in general, one can only reasonably determine whether a certain course of action is justified when compared with other available courses of action. In considering whether it is permissible to tell children about Santa Claus, I will be weighing the advantages and disadvantages of that choice as compared with the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives. Alternatives are also important since, if it is wrong to tell children about Santa it is natural to ask what children should be told, in light of the fact that most young children in the United States do believe in him. What, for example, are non-believing children to say to their believing peers? If the moral consequences of not telling one's children are pernicious enough as they relate to other children, then of course one's children should be told.

Since there is evidently a great deal of variety in the circumstances in which parents and children find themselves, differences among which are often morally significant, it is not to be expected that telling children about Santa Claus would be *always* morally wrong or *always* permissible. Our question is whether telling children about Santa Claus in the typical American circumstances is morally permissible.

The question may be further refined by considering who it is telling the child about Santa Claus. My main concern will be with parents. The reason for this is that parents are the ones who typically tell children about Santa Claus in the first instance. It must be noted that by focusing on parents the moral bar is altered somewhat. On the one hand, parents are felt to have a special obligation to provide for their children's

² Most parents do not in so many words tell their children Santa is real, but they do and say many other things—e.g., giving gifts “from Santa”—that are intended to lead the child to belief.

welfare. This might suggest a particularly strong presumption against lying to them. On the other hand, parents appear to have special authority to determine their children's behavior and belief system. This might suggest a weaker presumption against lying to their children. Still, the domain of a parent's authority is restricted by the aim of raising children who are, among other things, intelligent, wise, and disposed to do the right thing. The question is whether suggesting belief in Santa Claus is a way to promote virtue, wisdom, and happiness in children.

2. Deception and Make Believe

Isn't it a bit harsh, if not outright question begging, to characterize the Santa Claus story as a "hoax" or lie? The word "lie" has at least a negative moral connotation. But it is neither false nor question-begging to call it a lie. It is worth explaining first why it is not question-begging. It would be question-begging to describe the Santa story as a lie if it were an analytic truth that lying is wrong.³ Then to say that the Santa Claus story is a lie would analytically imply that it is wrong. And I would be implicitly claiming that telling children there is a Santa is wrong in describing doing so as lying. But even though lying is generally wrong, it is not a conceptual truth that lying is wrong. To see this, note that the concept of a white lie is perfectly intelligible. In fact, since lying is not always wrong, there are such things as white lies. This is in contrast to the concept of murder. Part of the concept of a murderous act is that it is wrong. It would be incoherent to suppose something was a permissible murder. (Although obviously it not incoherent to suppose something is a permissible *killing*. Murder is *morally objectionable* killing.) Indeed, since lying is not analytically wrong, our question may be understood as asking whether the Santa Claus story is a white lie.

³ That is, roughly, the meaning of "is a lie" would include "is wrong."

But is telling children about Santa a lie? Tales from fiction, admittedly, are not lies. Adults (typically) do not lie in telling children about Red Riding Hood or Huckleberry Finn. But the descriptions of Santa Claus are not fiction, in the sense that typical descriptions of Red Riding Hood are. The difference between a fictional story and a lie is in the intention of the speaker. A fictional story involves pretending that something is the case: imagining that Red Riding Hood is walking through the forest, or making believe that Huckleberry Finn is riding down the Mississippi. If the intention is successfully recognized, the audience does not believe that Red Riding Hood is walking through some forest. The audience merely imagines this. The intention of a person who lies is not to get the hearer's imagination to work, but to get her beliefs to work. The assertion of P is a lie when the person who asserts P intends for her audience to believe what is being said, even though the speaker does not believe P herself. The parent who tells the child about Red Riding Hood does not believe Red Riding Hood is walking through the forest. But the parent does not lie since she has no intention that the child will come to believe this either. The parent who tells a child about Santa Claus also does not believe in Santa Claus. But in the case of Santa, unlike the case of Red Riding Hood, the parent does intend that the child will believe there is a jolly, fat, bearded man who will be coming with presents. Since the parent does not believe what she says yet intends for the child to believe, the parent lies.

There are some adults who purport to believe ("in a sense") that there is a Santa Claus (Clark 1995). This attitude, most romantically expressed in the famous editorial by Francis Church,⁴ calls into question whether telling children about Santa Claus constitutes lying in all cases. Those adults who believe there is a Santa Claus would

⁴ Popularly known by its most famous line: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

seem not to lie to their children when telling them about his existence and activities. But the vast majority of the adults who believe in Santa Claus certainly do not think of him as having the typical properties often associated with him by children. These adults do not think of him as being fat, jolly, bearded, and so forth. They think of him as some more ethereal being, perhaps the “spirit of generosity.” Parents who believe Santa is the “spirit of generosity” and still lead their children to believe Santa has such properties as being fat, jolly, etc., do lie about these things, even if they do not lie to their children in affirming Santa’s existence.

Returning to the typical parent who denies the existence of Santa Claus, the difference between her intentions in describing Santa and creatures of fiction is borne out by the beliefs of children. Although young children generally have a difficult time distinguishing real things from make believe, research suggests that their attitudes toward Santa Claus are significantly different from their attitudes toward storybook entities (Wooley and Sharon 2004). Young children discover the truth about the unreality of Superman more quickly than they do the truth about Santa Claus. This suggests that children pick up on the difference between adults’ attitudes toward Santa Claus and other storybook entities. Children apparently notice that their parents do not leave cookies and milk out for Red Riding Hood or the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

At a very young age – certainly before they are one – children are capable of believing but not pretending. Pretending is a sophisticated cognitive attitude only very rarely found among even intelligent animals. To that child, Santa Claus and Red Riding Hood must have the same doxastic status. Because of this, I will not consider the question whether it is permissible to tell such credulous children about Santa Claus. I restrict myself to those children who can distinguish reality and make believe, which

includes most children in any case. Children are certainly capable of discerning real and make-believe beings by five or six years of age.

3. The Moral Status of Lying to Children

In this section, I first consider and reject an argument that lying to children is always permissible. Then I outline the theoretical framework I will use in determining the permissibility of lying to children about Santa Claus.

3.1 Autonomy

Some things that are generally wrong to do to adults are not generally wrong to do to children. It would be generally wrong to require of an adult—a guest to one's home, say—that she eat her broccoli. It would not in general be wrong for a parent to require her young children to eat their broccoli. It would be generally wrong to require an adult to go to school, while it would not in general be wrong to require the same of a young child. The common thread among these actions is that it is thought to be more typically appropriate to act paternalistically toward children than toward adults. That is, it is thought to be more typically morally justified to act in a way that is thought to be good for the child or adult, whether the child or adult consents or not. Paternalism is indeed a likely justification for the Santa Claus lie. It might be argued that it is appropriate to tell the child about Santa because it is good for the child to believe. One might infer that even if lying to adults is generally wrong, lying to children may not be. And it does seem it would be more clearly wrong to perpetrate the Santa Claus lie on adults than children. Even if the deceivers had their victims' best interests in mind, it would be difficult to justify such a lie. But what are the differences between adults and

children that justify the different moral requirements of our relationship toward the members of each group?

One popular suggestion is that adults (generally) have while children (generally) lack autonomy.⁵ Autonomy has even been fingered as the feature that makes lying to people morally problematic. “Autonomy” is a term of art that has come to be used in a large variety of different ways. Very broadly speaking, autonomy is the capacity in virtue of which someone is a moral agent. Among the qualities that seem to be required to engage in moral (or immoral) action are the capacity to propose ends to oneself more or less independently, the capacity to choose rationally among available options, and the capacity to act and choose freely. It seems clear that those who have these capacities to a lesser degree—animals, the insane, and, significantly, children—are understood not to require of others the same moral treatment as those who have these capacities to a greater degree. And it seems that it is generally more permissible to act paternalistically toward those who have lesser degrees of autonomy than those who have greater degrees.

Even if the degree of autonomy makes a difference to the degree of moral consideration deserved, it would be a mistake to suppose the lack of autonomy is a moral blank check. Robert Noggle argues that children generally lack the capacities that are supposedly necessary for full membership in the “moral community,” the community of individuals acting in accordance with moral principles (2002). Still, he insists that children are not entirely beyond the scope of morality. They are “special agents” who are “provisional and probationary” members and applicants for full membership in the moral community. So far from being an excuse for otherwise

⁵ My comments here are influenced by Beauchamp and Childress (1989: 68).

immoral behavior, according to Noggle, the difference between the moral status of adults and children implies a duty on the part of caretakers to help children acquire those deliberative and other characteristics that are necessary for belonging to the moral community. In a similar vein, Tamar Shapiro has argued that it is *prima facie* more appropriate to behave paternalistically toward children because they lack the capacities associated with autonomy (1998). Since they cannot determine on their own a principle to govern their actions, children do not warrant the same deference as adults. But, again, rather than a blank check for paternalistic behavior of any sort, Shapiro emphasizes that the moral purpose of our behavior toward children should be to create beings who have the rational capacities involved in moral agency.

Because children will in the natural course of things acquire autonomy, the question of what paternalism allows for them is somewhat easier than the same question concerning the insane or infirm. The very point of paternalistic action is to do things that are in the interests of the object of the action. In the case of children, their interests involve present food and children, a satisfying and comfortable life, and love. But their interests certainly also include the future possession of such capacities as rational deliberation on alternatives, the ability to propose an end to oneself, and free choice, among many others. Thus part of the purpose of paternalistic interference of children is to make them into beings who are not fit subjects of paternalistic interference.

But, the mention of food and shelter makes clear, autonomy is not likely to be the only purpose of treating children paternalistically. Although a good parent ought to aim to raise children who are capable of the sophisticated capacities involved in moral agency, they also want to raise children who eat, have children, and just plain enjoy themselves. Therefore, determining whether lying to children about Santa Claus is

morally appropriate requires more than just ascertaining whether the child is autonomous. And it requires more than just ascertaining whether lying to the child is conducive to her future autonomy. It requires a consideration of all the factors that are relevant to appropriate interaction with a child.

The moral frameworks I describe for determining the moral status of lying to children about Santa Claus have the benefit of being congenial to the idea that autonomy has some moral value. It should not come as a surprise that the question of the permissibility of lying to children about Santa Claus cannot be settled on the basis of the single question whether children are autonomous. Whether the Santa Claus ritual is permissible surely depends to some extent on the consequences for those involved. I turn accordingly to two ethical theories that take such considerations into account.

3.2 Prima Facie Duties and Act Consequentialism

In this sub-section, I clarify what I mean in saying that lying is generally wrong. According to consequentialists, the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined entirely by its consequences. According to non-consequentialists, the rightness or wrongness of an action is not determined entirely by its consequences. Lying is a kind of action of which all lies are instances. An act consequentialist holds that rightness and wrongness apply in the first instance to particular, concrete actions. This or that lie is right or wrong. But there is a sense in which lying – a kind of action--in general is wrong. To capture this sense, act consequentialists often follow J. S. Mill in describing the wrongness of lying in general as a “rule of thumb.” A rule of thumb is a prescription or proscription that applies in most but not all circumstances. One view about the wrongness of lying is that it is wrong as a rule of thumb.

Consequentialists hold that whether an action is morally appropriate is determined by the value of the consequences of the action. To determine whether lying is wrong in a certain circumstance, the consequentialist weighs the positive and negative value of the consequences of the action. On consequentialism, the way to determine whether lying to children about Santa Claus is permissible is to compare the overall value of the consequences of the Santa story as opposed to that of plausible alternatives. Consequentialists also differ significantly among themselves on what kinds of states are valuable. Some include only pleasure as intrinsically good and only pain as intrinsically bad. Others include beauty and knowledge as intrinsically valuable features. For the most part, the choice of intrinsically valuable states will not matter for the consideration of our question. For example, the value of knowledge on the view that it is intrinsically valuable is likely to be similar to that on which it is only instrumentally so, since it seems clear that in the typical situation knowledge is likely to be conducive to other valuable states. I will note those contexts where the choice of intrinsically valuable properties makes a difference.

Another way to understand the general wrongness of lying is with the concept of a *prima facie* duty. One has a *prima facie* duty to do X when, other things being equal, one has a duty to do X. Something is a *prima facie* duty, in other words, when it tends to make your action a duty. According to W. D. Ross, the originator of this conception, each person has a *prima facie* duty not to lie.⁶ The *prima facie* duty not to lie must be weighed against all the other *prima facie* duties that characterize any specific action. The *prima facie* duty of beneficence requires that we do things that promote the overall

⁶ *The Right and the Good*, 21. Ross believes the duty not to lie falls under the more general category of the duty not to break promises. This is because, as Ross sees it, entering a conversation involves an implicit promise not to lie.

welfare. The *prima facie* duty of non-maleficence requires that we avoid harming others. The moral presumption against lying can be—and sometimes is—outweighed by the moral significance of these other *prima facie* duties. According to this conception, lying is generally wrong insofar as there is a negative weight associated with each lie, albeit a weight that can be trumped by other moral considerations.

This is one difference between the consequentialist and non-consequentialist conceptions of the wrongness of lying. For the (typical) consequentialist, lying as such has no negative moral value, even if many lies are all things considered morally wrong. For the non-consequentialist in question, even if a certain lie is morally acceptable or obligatory, there is still some negative moral weight attached to the act simply in virtue of being a lie.

The kinds of considerations that are relevant to determining whether a particular lie is permissible from a Rossian or consequentialist perspective are largely the same. From the consequentialist perspective, a lie is wrong when it leads to distrust, suffering, or disappointment. From the Rossian perspective, a lie is wrong when the presumption against it is not outweighed by the *prima facie* duties of beneficence and non-maleficence. A lie may be permissible from the Rossian perspective because it tends to promote the overall welfare or prevents some harm. So the factors I consider with regard to the Santa Claus story are congenial to either a Rossian or a consequentialist way of thinking about the wrongness of lying.

Before investigating these factors, one more theoretical issue must be addressed. Although I have referenced research on the consequences of Santa beliefs above, and continue to do so below, such studies are rather limited. There is no research, for example, on such crucial questions as how Santa-believing children compare with non-

Santa-believing children (of various sorts) with respect to a number of interesting characteristics: trust; deceitfulness; critical reasoning. Nor is there any empirical research on the amount of happiness experienced by believing children as compared with the amount of happiness experienced by children who do not believe but pretend Santa exists. This would seem to be a significant handicap to our argument, since it is mainly concerned with the likely consequences of belief in Santa Claus.

What is to be done in circumstances where the likely consequences of some course of action have not been the subject of scientific research? This is a question not only about what course of action if any a theorist ought to recommend, but also about what action if any an agent ought to choose. It cannot be plausibly maintained that there is something illegitimate about acting on the basis of the best available evidence, even if that evidence does not include scientifically respectable data. Let us stipulate, charitably, that scientifically respectable research has been available since the 18th century. Is it to be claimed that no action before that time was morally acceptable, since no action was based on information arising from scientifically respectable research? Is it to be claimed that even since then all actions not based on such information have been morally suspect? The rightness of an action has something to do with the quality of one's evidence concerning the circumstances and the consequences. But the evidential bar is set far too high if it is required that morally permissible action or illuminating moral advice be based only on scientific research.

It cannot be demanded that the parent do nothing. Even in the absence of scientific research, the parent must either encourage or not encourage her child to believe. Where there are empirical factors that have not been adequately scientifically tested, the agent must base her decision on the best information available. This

information will involve ordinary observation, the common sense principles of human psychology, and plausible inferences from these. This is of course a fallible method since our beliefs about these principles are corrigible and the inferences are underdetermined by the evidence. But there is no plausible alternative to acting and recommending moral action in light of the best information available in the absence of rigorous empirical research. One must simply adopt a healthy modesty about one's conclusions, in the knowledge that the inferences from observed patterns may not hold in the cases to be discussed. And evidently those who advocate the permissibility of telling children about Santa are no better off than those who advocate its impermissibility, since the former group is as lacking in systematic scientific research concerning the effects of their recommendation as the latter is about its recommendation.

4. The Options

As I mentioned, whether the Santa Claus tale is permissible depends on the value of the plausible alternatives. There are a number of (compatible) alternatives open to a parent who decides not to encourage belief in Santa:

Disbelief: The parent tells the child Santa Claus is not real

Neutrality: The parent does not inform the child one way or the other
and

Pretense: The parent invites the child to pretend there is a Santa Claus.

Any parent who adopts a non-traditional stance toward Santa Claus must grapple with the inevitable prospect that her children will interact with others who believe Santa is real. In the face of such a likely scenario, the parent may choose Disbelief. In choosing Disbelief, there are further questions to consider. It must be

determined just how much further information to divulge. One may, for example, tell a child that other parents encourage their children to believe and that these children enjoy the ritual. One may thereby discourage children from spoiling the fun for other children. By Neutrality I mean a policy whereby, pending a child's inquiries, the parent neither affirms nor denies the existence of Santa Claus. This is a hazardous option because of the likelihood that the child will be exposed to belief among other children. It is awkward to combine Neutrality with the important information that other children believe. The child will inevitably want to know whether the other children believe accurately or not. Neutrality is likely to leave the child at a loss in the face of other children's belief.

The option I consider in most detail is Pretense. The thought is that the parent invites the child to pretend that there is a Santa Claus. For children who have a clear grasp of the distinction, one may compare Santa to other examples of fictional beings in the child's experience. The pretend Santa may be held to include whatever characteristics of the traditional Santa one feels to be attractive. As the child is invited to pretend there is a Santa Claus, she may also be told that many other families encourage their children to believe Santa is real. It seems one can minimize the likelihood of the child's spoiling the fun for others by encouraging the child to respect the differing beliefs of other families and therefore not challenge their beliefs. I maintain that inviting to pretend there is a Santa Claus is morally superior to encouraging to believe.

5. Short-Term Pleasure and Pain

Let's begin our investigation of the costs and benefits of the Santa Claus lie by considering the short-term pain and pleasure involved in the experience for the relevant parties. The short-term includes the time during which children believe until just after

they cease believing. Deceptive though it may be, the parties to the Santa Claus tale do enjoy it. Parents enjoy their roles in the Santa Claus ritual and knowing that their children are going through such a pleasant experience (Anderson and Prentice 1994). But the benefit of their enjoyment must be balanced against the disappointment they also report when their children discover the truth. And, more importantly, whatever she gets out of it, it seems clear that no good parent would endorse Santa Claus if she was convinced the experience was not in the interests of the child. The child cannot be a mere instrument for her parents' happiness.

Both scientific research (Anderson and Prentice 1994) and common sense show that children also enjoy the Santa Claus experience. This advantage must also be weighed against their suffering upon discovering the truth. Only a small number of children report being disappointed on discovering the truth (Anderson and Prentice 1994). But this fact cuts both ways. It supports the permissibility of the story because it suggests the story does not threaten suffering for the child. But it also undermines the case for its permissibility, since it at least suggests that children are not very attached to the story in the first place.

The extent to which the pleasure of children and adults justifies the Santa Claus lie depends on the amount of pleasure available from non-deceitful alternatives. The alternative that most closely replicates telling children there is a Santa Claus involves inviting children to pretend there is one. Although pretending something is real is fundamentally different from believing it is, as I have argued, many of the emotions evoked by an object believed to be real are also evoked by objects supposed to be fictional. Children and adults derive great pleasure from creatures of their imaginations, as witnessed by the large crowds at movie theaters. Children who are old enough to

know she is fictional still derive great enjoyment from the pretense that Cinderella is a real person with real hopes. And, it is easy to replicate the gift-giving aspect of the Santa experience, which is surely a significant factor in the child's enjoyment.

We know that pretending can bring about pleasure. Is it likely to bring about happiness for children and parents in the case of Santa Claus? And is it likely that whatever happiness is brought about will equal the enjoyment associated with believing in him? In the absence of empirical research, it may seem that the reasonable choice between pretense and deceit is the safe choice. It is known that encouraging children to believe there is a Santa Claus leads to a significant amount of satisfaction for children and parents. It is not known whether encouraging children to pretend there is a Santa Claus leads to significant satisfaction for children and parents. Therefore, other things being equal, the right thing to do is to continue with the deceitful tradition.⁷

But it seems that it is known that pretending there is a Santa Claus leads to significant satisfaction for children and parents. Since far fewer families have attempted the experiment of pretending, there is much less actual experience of the consequences, although there is some testimonial evidence. Nonetheless, there is ample experience of the pleasures of pretending. And there is ample reason to believe that these pleasures are likely to be associated with Santa Claus. Still, I concede that there is no similarly compelling argument for the conclusion that pretending is likely to lead to the same or a larger amount of pleasure for children and parents. In the short term, as concerns only pain and pleasure, it would seem that telling children there is a Santa Claus is morally superior to the strongest alternative, inviting children to pretend there is one.

⁷ This does not follow from the Rossian perspective. Even if it leads to more happiness than the best competing alternative, and thus satisfies the *prima facie* duty of beneficence, lying about Santa Claus may yet be wrong. This is because there is still the presumption against lying.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the permissibility of the Santa Claus lie cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the enjoyment children and parents experience while children believe. It is fairly easy to get children enjoyment; candy, cartoons, and hide-and-seek please them easily enough. The amount of pleasure a child gets from believing in Santa Claus could likely be replicated by using the time presently devoted to Santa to playing innocent games the child enjoys. One reason the justification of the lie cannot be a matter of the short term pleasure is that the purpose of parenting is not only or even primarily to maximize children's happiness and minimize their suffering. A major purpose of proper parenting is to foster the child's moral and cognitive development. Much more important than whether Santa belief is conducive to happiness in the short term is the question whether it is conducive to a child's moral and cognitive development.

6. Magic and Imagination

One supposed cognitive benefit can be dismissed quickly. It is often claimed that the Santa Claus story is beneficial for children because it enhances their imagination and their ability to engage in fantasy (for example, Breen 2004). There is no doubt some benefit in improving a child's capacity to imagine, but it is questionable whether parents encourage it through the Santa Claus experience. As I have argued, there is a fundamental distinction between believing something is the case and imagining it is. When parents tell their children about Santa Claus they encourage belief, not imagination. The features children suppose to characterize Santa Claus are not imagined to be true of him, they are believed to be. Children do go on to fill in further characteristics of Santa Claus not contained in the original story, but this is no more an

exercise of their imagination than their efforts at filling in characteristics of China that are unknown to them. Evidently, insofar as increased imagination is supposed to be what is gained through the Santa Claus experience, this can be much more effectively pursued by having the child pretend that Santa is real, rather than believe he is.

Perhaps belief in Santa Claus is beneficial in that it fosters a “sense of magic” and “magical . . . thought” (Breen 2004). A magical occurrence, in the sense in question, would seem to be one which violates the laws of ordinary reality. Santa Claus is a being quite unlike any other the child encounters in her life. Santa may seem to the child all-powerful, all-knowing, and enormously benevolent. Flying around the planet on Christmas night delivering gifts to each and every child easily qualifies as violating the laws of ordinary reality.

To see whether belief in magical happenings is as such beneficial, one must separate it from the belief in a benevolent being responsible for these happenings. Evidently, Santa’s magical activities are carried out in the service of an end that is perceived to be worthwhile. It is doubtful whether the belief in a magical occurrence is beneficial when severed from the connection with some benevolent purpose. Why should it be beneficial for a child to believe that there are things that work in unheard of ways? That believing in magic as such has no benefit for the child may be seen by imagining the child is told about some value-neutral remarkable entity. One might tell a child for example of the completely non-benevolent photons, two of which can be in exactly the same place at the same time. Or one might tell a child about the remarkable but value-neutral fact that whether two events are simultaneous depends on one’s frame of reference. These tales are magical from the child’s perspective, since they violate what

the child takes to be the laws that govern reality. Yet belief in the unusual character of protons or time is not likely to be held to have cognitive benefits for children.

Even if belief in magical beings or occurrences is not as such beneficial, it may be that some magical beliefs are. Still setting aside the benevolence of the central magical entity, it may be that belief in living beings that do not age and reindeer who fly is beneficial. But it is clear that if Santa Claus and the reindeer were not supposed to have some impact on the lives of human beings – and especially on the child himself – the belief would not be held to have any beneficial impact. What could be the cognitive benefit of believing that reindeer fly?

One might complain that I have been focusing on the wrong aspect of magical belief. An occurrence is magical when it does not fit ordinary experience. Perhaps it is precisely this lack of fit with ordinary experience that makes belief in Santa cognitively worthwhile. This is of a piece with the suggestion that belief in Santa is beneficial because it is belief in the absence of evidence. I turn next to these suggestions.

7. Epistemic Character

One of the primary goals of proper parenting is to somehow induce children to be epistemically virtuous adults. Some people—the morally virtuous ones—are more likely to perform morally appropriate actions than others. Similarly, some people—call them epistemically virtuous—are more likely to form epistemically justified beliefs than others. Does encouraging belief in Santa assist in the raising of epistemically virtuous

children? In the same way as there is doubt about just what dispositions count as virtues, so there is disagreement about what tendencies count as epistemic virtues. Fortunately, these disputes can be avoided because I believe the tendencies I discuss are universally accepted to either encourage or undermine epistemic virtue.

One purported epistemic advantage of belief in Santa involves the thought that it is belief in the absence of evidence, a conception of the belief championed even by scientists. Anthropologist Cindy Dell Clark writes that “Like belief in God, belief in Santa Claus amounts to an act of faith requiring a suspension of disbelief on the part of the believing subject” (1995: 53). Even if belief in the absence of evidence were cognitively beneficial, which is doubtful, the child’s attitude toward Santa Claus does not count anyway. The child has ample testimonial evidence for the existence of Santa Claus from her parents, neighbors, teachers, weathermen, and practically everyone else. If anything is justified, surely it is a belief that has such universal support from the adult world.

The similarity between the child’s belief in Santa and adult religious belief has been widely acknowledged. Children often think of Santa as having many of the same characteristics as God, to the extent that upon discovering the truth about Santa, some children question the existence of God as well. Clark emphasizes this aspect and connects it with the supposed lack of evidence for belief in Santa. She says “Faith, not reasoned skepticism, is the relevant mental experience” in a child’s belief in Santa (*ibid.*: 57). Belief in Santa Claus, like all religious belief, requires a “capacity to cognitively suspend disbelief” (*ibid.*: 102).

The resemblance between the child’s attitude toward Santa and religious belief is only an advantage of belief if encouraging this sort of religious belief is beneficial. But

again the resemblance between the epistemic character of faith and the child's attitude toward Santa is limited. If religious conviction is essentially belief in the absence of evidence, then the child's attitude toward Santa is not religious conviction. Again, the child has ample testimonial and other evidence for the existence of Santa. (Recall the cookies and glasses of milk Santa apparently consumes during the night.)

Francis Church, the author of "Yes, Virginia," emphasizes these religious aspects of Santa belief. Part of the benefit of belief in Santa is supposed to involve the fact that he is "unseen and unseeable." In this he does resemble the typical supernatural entity, who is not held to be observable in everyday life. Santa differs from the typical supernatural entity in being apparently flesh and blood like other ordinary things. The fact that people do not see Santa seems a matter of cosmic accident, rather than an inevitable consequence of his nature. The reason God is not typically seen, on the other hand, seems to follow from the fact that he is not conceived to have ordinary physical properties.

The final verdict on the cognitive merit of belief in Santa Claus must include both the time during which children believe and the time when they discover the truth. If belief in things unseen is epistemically beneficial, belief in Santa would be to that extent worthwhile. But the tendency of belief in Santa to encourage belief in things unseen in general is counteracted by children's discovery that this particular unseen thing is unreal. A plausible inference for the child to draw from the entire experience is a certain skepticism about claims of the existence of unseen things: once bitten, twice shy. And insofar as encouraging belief in Santa encourages belief in the absence of and contrary to perceptual evidence, the supposed advantage must be weighed against the tendency of

the child who discovers the truth to infer that believing in things in the absence of evidence is a hazardous affair.

8. Santa Claus and Moral Character

Among the primary goals of proper parenting is to induce a child to become a virtuous adult. Our question in this section is whether the Santa Claus ritual increases the likelihood that the child will be virtuous.

What virtuous tendencies is the Santa experience supposed to induce in the child? What morally significant lessons is the child meant to learn? Let me begin by setting aside an aspect of the tradition that likely once had a significant moral impact but which is quite rare today. Although Santa is still supposed to observe whether children are naughty or nice, this activity is rarely emphasized. And, importantly, it is extremely rare for parents to follow through on the traditional threat that Santa will not give presents to naughty children. Hardly any American child in the last twenty years has found a lump of coal in his stocking from Santa Claus. This is, interestingly, one of the few aspects of the tradition that has earned the condemnation of childhood psychologists. Since it plays so little role in the contemporary tradition, I will not consider the practice further.

One thing children are supposed to learn through the Santa experience is the importance of generosity. Santa Claus is single-mindedly committed to fulfilling the child's wishes; Santa Claus is admired; therefore, the child herself will become more concerned with improving the welfare of others.

Let's grant for the moment that children do gain an increased tendency to generosity through the ritual. How much this justifies the Santa lie depends on the

extent to which one is likely to achieve the same increase through non-deceitful means. One non-deceitful thing that might be done to encourage the child to be generous is to tell the child about the importance of generosity. One might encourage the child to give things to others. One might reward the child for doing generous things. In the right circumstances, such encouragement is known to lead to greater degrees of the tendency encouraged. Indeed, such a direct method promises a much higher likelihood of success than the roundabout method of encouraging the child to adopt Santa as a role model.

Moreover, efforts to find a connection between belief in Santa Claus and generosity have proved fruitless. Why should one expect a child to become more generous as a result of the Santa Claus experience? Nothing in the experience encourages the child to give. The child's primary role in the ritual is as recipient. Indeed, a child who might otherwise feel inclined to do a generous deed for other children is apt to think that Santa will take care of their needs. The tradition does include the cookies and milk for Santa. But this is a rather limited generosity, applying as it does only to someone who has done very nice things for the child. Nothing in the behavior points to the importance of being generous to people in general.

The fact that Santa Claus is a not-quite-natural being would seem to further undermine any tendency to encourage the child to be more generous. A child who sees generous acts performed by another child might well infer that such actions are possible for her as well. A child who sees an adult perform generous acts might well infer that such actions are possible for her as well. A child sees other children as very much like herself. A child sees adults as still very much like herself. The behavior of fellow children and adults is likely to be seen as a plausible model for a child's own actions. The behavior of a supernatural entity such as Santa is much more likely to be seen as

beyond the child's reach. Indeed, Santa performs his generous deeds in ways – flying to every corner of the earth in one night – that are entirely beyond the child's reach. The association of such generosity with these completely fantastical performances might well have the pernicious effect of making a universal generosity seem completely unrealistic, even before the child discovers the truth about Santa Claus.

Another virtue the child might be thought to acquire is discretion. Once the child discovers there is no Santa Claus, she is typically encouraged to go along with the deception. The child must then exhibit some concern for the welfare of others by not telling believing children the truth, and even by deceiving those children. Again how much this counts toward the permissibility of the Santa Claus lie depends on the extent to which this supposed benefit can be replicated without deceiving the child in the first place. Any parent who decides not to encourage belief in Santa faces the question of how the child ought to discuss the issue with children who believe. If it is possible to teach formerly believing children the importance of discretion concerning Santa belief, then it is similarly possible to teach children who never believe the importance of discretion concerning believers. Children who are not told there is a Santa can easily be told that other children are told and that it is important not to ruin their fun by denying his existence.

Let's say that while they are under Santa's spell children do make significant progress toward becoming more generous. What happens when they find out that there is no Santa Claus? How does that impact their progress? It certainly cannot help. If believing that there is an admirable generous being is supposed to encourage the child to be generous herself, discovering—abruptly and without any explanation—that there is no such being after all, must undermine the child's motivation to be generous.

9. The Case against Santa

So far I have questioned a number of reasons often offered in support of the permissibility of lying to children about Santa Claus. It may seem that I have only undercut the case for lying to children, rather than arguing against it. What reason is there to think telling children there is a Santa is wrong? In fact I have done more than just respond to pro-Santa arguments. In responding to those arguments, I have shown that insofar as it is plausible to suppose that the Santa deceit is beneficial, the benefit can in almost every case be achieved to the same or greater degree through non-deceitful alternatives. If lying is *prima facie* wrong, then in showing that a non-deceitful alternative is just as beneficent as the deceitful alternative, I have *ipso facto* shown that the non-deceitful alternative is superior. The one dimension where I conceded deceit had the advantage was with respect to pleasure, where it seemed unreasonable to believe that pretending Santa is real would lead to the same degree of pleasure for parents and children as believing.

The main problem with lying to children about Santa Claus is that it encourages children to lie. The encouragement happens because children inevitably discover that there is no Santa Claus. And although apparently some children at first believe that parents are similarly under the misimpression that there is a Santa Claus, eventually children discover that they have been deceived. As lately noted, when they discover the truth children are encouraged not to divulge the truth to other children and also to lie to them. Also when children discover that they have been lied to, they reasonably infer that such lying is held to be permissible by their parents and other adults whose opinion they hold in high regard.

It might be complained that encouraging post-belief children to lie to other children is no part of deceiving children about Santa Claus. The parent could tell the child who discovers the truth to be honest with other children, or to exercise her own judgment, or any number of other things. But it's easy to see why it would be awkward for the deceiving parent to recommend any course of action other than lying. The parent herself, after all, has just concluded some years of lying to the child about the very same issue in the very same situation. What justification could such a parent give for recommending the child take some different course of action from the parent's own? It would be scandalously hypocritical for the parent to discourage the child from lying about Santa while continuing to do so herself.

The mere discovery by the child that she has been deceived by her parents and the rest of the adult world by itself encourages a child to lie. The first step involves the child's discovery that the parent has lied. It cannot be seriously maintained that children do not discover that deceit has taken place. Children of seven or eight understand what is involved in lying. And eventually children understand that although their parents told them otherwise, the parents do not believe there is a Santa Claus. Children therefore become aware of two facts, both of which tend to encourage the child to lie. First, their parents (and many other adults) lie. Whether children imitate Santa Claus is questionable, but they undoubtedly imitate their parents. Since they observe and are aware of their parents lying, they are more likely to lie themselves. Second, their parents (and many other adults) believe that it is morally appropriate to lie. Children notice that their parents feel no moral qualm about having deceived the children about Santa Claus. It is evident to the child that the parent believes so deceiving the child was morally appropriate.

It might be objected that the child's increased tendency to lie extends only to the existence of Santa Claus himself. The child might be thought to infer only that her parents believe lying *about Santa Claus* is permissible, and therefore come to believe herself that lying *about Santa Claus* is permissible. And similarly the child becomes aware of the fact that her parents lie *about Santa Claus*, and therefore comes to have a greater tendency to lie *about Santa Claus*. It would be question-begging to claim that an increased tendency on the part of the child to lie about Santa Claus is what makes lying about Santa Claus wrong. This would be to argue that lying about Santa Claus is wrong because it has tendency to make children lie about Santa Claus.

Our question then is whether lying to children about Santa promotes lying by children in other areas. Notice first that in the usual practice no effort is made to ensure that the child draws only the narrower inference about lying about Santa Claus rather than the more general one about lying. Second, notice that the deceit about Santa Claus is part of a larger pattern: the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, being the two main other culprits. Together with these other incidents, the child is likely to draw the inference that lying is thought to be permissible in many cases beyond the Santa Claus situation.

Finally, the costs of lying about Santa Claus must be compared to the costs of the alternatives. Earlier I conceded that the safe option with respect to producing pleasure is to lie about Santa Claus, since that is the option with the successful track record. Here I would argue that the safe option is to not lie about Santa Claus. Not lying to the child about something has no tendency to encourage the child to lie in areas beyond the mere Santa Claus case. Inviting the child to pretend there is a Santa Claus involves no element of deceit whatsoever. It therefore has no danger of leading the child to lie more

frequently in other areas. Since lying in general is wrong, it would be wrong to take the chance of increasing the tendency of a child to lie when another option is available without this tendency and with many of the same advantages.

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