Transcript for Interview on Lying and Deception.

26th September 2023, 4:15pm

[Jackson Paull] – The purpose of the interview is to gauge your thoughts on how deception has impacted your lives, and I think you guys have a really unique position because you have both taught something that is very similar, but in different ways under different assumptions and restrictions – algebra-based and calculus-based physics. There’s this concept of a “lie of omission” which is where you are deceiving someone or altering their world view by leaving out some important information which might change how they think about [whatever it is you might be “lying” about]. So, one of the big questions that I want to ask you, **“Do you think that teaching something [and in the process] leaving out details which might provide a more complete image is deceptive in any way?”**

[Mark Misage] – No, so like with physics, its building blocks. You learn the ideal – there’s no air resistance. And then after you’ve learned that you can throw air resistance in, and now fluid dynamics come into play.

[Nancy Misage] – It’s more a recognition of where cognitively your students are. […] Most students come to you with background knowledge, and you’ve got a pretty good understanding of Juniors at Westlake High School and what their background knowledge is. And I think that is where we were particularly successful is we knew where our students had come from and so we knew where we could engage. If a student asked for further clarification, then if it was something that I wasn’t super well versed in, I hope I would have been honest with my students and said “Look, that’s beyond the scope of this course, this is an algebra based course and you’ve got great questions, fabulous questions, let’s see if we can find a resource where we can both learn.” So, I don’t think it was deception, I think it was more about knowing which pieces go together and what sixteen-year-olds can handle.

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah I love that answer, and I think it ties nicely into the follow up question, which is: **“Physics has this kind of ‘ground truth’ and it can be verified, but is there any aspect of our lives as people that you shouldn’t [simplify, because] there’s no real building blocks up to it, and it’s just a hard thing where if you’re going to explain it to someone you have to give them everything [and it’s up to them to ask for simplification]?”** Does that make sense?

[Mark Misage] – Yeah, hmm...

[Nancy Misage] – I think with matters of human relationships, at some point as a human being you have to learn the hard stuff. You have to learn what it’s like to lose a best friend. You have to learn what it’s like to have relationships that were so important to you fall apart. So, it’s kind of like ripping the Band-Aid off. Sometimes life is challenging, and life is hard, and I can be sympathetic and empathetic, but there’s not a lot I can do to help somebody through those life’s challenges.

[Jackson Paull] - Yeah, personally I totally agree with that. It’s so fascinating how there’s this difference between things where we can offer simple explanations to help build people’s curiosity and understanding of the world, but then you have this sort of crux of **what does it mean to omit things? Are you robbing someone of the subjective human experience when you [simplify complex things too far]?**

[Nancy Misage] – And I would also say that, with physics, physics is a model. It’s a model of how our physical universe “works.” To say that there is “objective truth” I don’t know that I would agree with that. It’s a model.

[Mark Misage] – That’s working pretty well.

[Nancy Misage] - That’s working pretty well, but hopefully with scientific endeavor, if something comes up that goes against our current model. Then yes, you have to reformat and reformulate our “laws.”

[Mark Misage] – And you can see that our students would see that in labs. Like when you drop a ball down an incline plane, the ball always ended up short. Everybody would say “why is it ending up short?” And it was always “well what do you think?” And they want the answer, so you tell ‘em, some of that gravitational energy is getting turned into rotational kinetic energy, and that depends on the mass distribution of the ball… and at that point they’re just like

[Mark and Nancy Misage] - UGHHHHHH

[Mark Misage] – That’s why we’re doing it this way first, and we’ll get to it later. We’re not hiding anything from you, we’ll just get to it later. And we had the luxury of doing that in physics, you don’t have the luxury of doing that in a philosophy class, right?

[Jackson Paull] – This is kind of a departure, but I just want to hear your thoughts on this, **do you think it would be ever possible to come up with a model for something like the human psyche? To be able to develop something with more of that building-block approach for something like a psychology course? Or is that something where you really have to go top down, explain everything to the fullest of your ability?**

[Nancy Misage] – I know so little about human psychology, and to me that borderlines on philosophy and faith – what it is to be human. What is the mind and the self? And all that – I can say the words but…

[Mark Misage] – Its messy! I don’t think it can be modeled.

[Nancy Misage] – Nuh uh. And I think this makes me nervous about Artificial Intelligence, because its only gonna be as good as the programmer, and I know it has the ability to learn on its own, but… teaching sixteen-year-olds, you don’t want a sixteen-year-old to develop their understanding with a misconception, so how do you recognize whether a misconception is beginning to develop. So, I have a lot of questions there.

[Mark Misage] – And when we were teaching, we had a model for teaching, but it didn’t always work. Theres just so many variables. And that’s what made the job fun, you were constantly trying to solve how to teach this group of students or this student.

[Nancy Misage] – And every single year I would have a student ask a question in some new way that would allow me to recognize – OHH, so that’s why for ten years people haven’t understood what I’ve said. So, a unique way a student asks a question is what allows me to recognize where my presentation was leading to difficulties, so then I could modify, change, and hopefully improve.

[Jackson Paull] – So when you guys think about deception, **how important is intent to you when deceiving someone else? I.e., Can you deceive your students by saying something totally well-intentioned but in a way that creates that misconception? Is that deceptive? Or does it have to be [malicious?]**

[Nancy Misage] – What? Like, do you mean magnetism used to be spelled with a B?

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah, that kind of thing.

[Nancy Misage] – So that was pure intent, BUT I learned that from [Mark] and I just stole it, so I don’t know if this will answer your question but it’s a memory I have of you, and perhaps I’m remembering a conversation I had with you incorrectly, but this is what’s in my head. You loved magic.

[Jackson Paull] – Yes, I do remember that.

[Nancy Misage] – You loved magic, and you had cards, and you were always doing magic. And I just told you flat out, honestly, that **I hate magic**.

[Laughter]

[Mark Misage] – Yeah, neither of us liked magic.

[Nancy Misage] – Because you’re trying to deceive, that’s the whole point of magic is the sleight of hand, and it’s the building up the “You look here while I do something else there” and it’s just ugh. It just makes my skin crawl.

[Jackson Paull] – That’s so funny, because the reason why I always enjoyed it so much was because I had this burning curiosity to want to know “how did that happen?” So, sharing that curiosity with other people, and seeing their eyes light up […] was really fun. But I can definitely see the other side too.

[Nancy Misage] – So back to… I don’t think deception is inherently bad. I think there are times when deception is necessary. However, I think if you’re trying to gain one-upmanship on somebody. If you’re trying to elevate yourself over them using deception, then I think you’re starting to get into the place where I don’t like it.

[Jackson Paull] – Right, like for self-gain.

[Nancy Misage] – Right.

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah, that makes sense. Can you guys think of a time where a student has lied to you, and you’ve caught them, or something similar to that? Tell me that story, how you guys reacted to it, etc.

[Mark Misage] – Well, we’ve both kind of always been of the mind that we trust you until we don’t. Right? It’s like once you’ve lost our trust it’s hard to get it back. And we were both real straight about that.

[Nancy Misage] – And in the short time frame, right? I mean you have your students for that year, that nine months. And yeah, you get out of my classroom and sometimes I’ll see you when you’re seniors, but then for the most part you go on and you live your life. And so, I’m not gonna have the opportunity to get to know most students as adults, and so I think it’s a recognition that sixteen-year-olds are gonna push the limit. Sixteen-year-olds will see the line and they want to know how far they can get across it, and so of course I trusted you, but I also recognized you were juniors in high school and students are trying on these mini versions of what they are going to become as adults. And so I try not to hold it against students if they did lie to me and if they did something that was egregious and wrong I would try to have a conversation with them about it and be like, “look, I trust you until I don’t and I don’t trust you anymore and so I hope you recognize that here’s what we’re gonna do from here on out”

[Mark Misage] – Well and we kinda knew when it was coming. You could almost model it, you could almost model psychology. Well at least this facet of it. In high stress situations, deception is going to rear its ugly head.

[Jackson Paull] – **Did either of you ever have a Machiavellian student who, no matter how often they were caught they would continue to lie and deceive?**

[Nancy Misage] – Yes

[Jackson Paull] – **Did you hold it against them in any regard?**

[Nancy Misage] – So this is an interesting one, they came in two flavors, I think. There weren’t that many. Yeah, you just knew there wasn’t a fully developed sense of ethics, nor was that my position to build that in my students. I tried to, but you just kinda worry about them in the future. Am I gonna read about them as the next…

[Mark Misage] – President.

[Laughter]

[Jackson Paull] – Right, so not to pass judgement but to understand and worry.

[Mark Misage] – Yeah

[Jackson Paull] – So another question I have, most people say its okay to lie [to] small children. You’re not gonna tell a six-year-old that their dog died, you’re not gonna tell them everything. You might just tell them they’re in a better place, a farm or something. But as they get older there’s this general sense of responsibility of authority figures to tell the truth and let them experience the hard parts of the subjective human experience. And so, following that line, **at what point in a child’s development do you think they’re going to start to learn how to lie, and where we should stop lying to them?**

[Nancy Misage] – Gosh, well never having been parents.

[Mark Misage] – Yeah and we never had much experience with little kids.

[Nancy Misage] – Well, our nephews. Our nephews, right? We watched them grow up, and we watched them go from the “I don’t want to get in trouble” so I think that a lot of times young children will lie because they don’t want to get in trouble. And moving forward to high school students taking physics, and they’re gonna lie, it’s because they don’t want to get in trouble. They haven’t done what they needed to do, and so they’re gonna try and work their way out of it. Because the incorrect thoughts that it will be easier that way, instead of just accepting it. “I didn’t study enough” and move on.

[Jackson Paull] – So that brings up an interesting point, we sort of see that lying is very “natural,” particularly in children to lie out of self-preservation especially when you’re young. You have a sort of malformed sense of ethics, you might not have experienced what it feels like to be lied to, you might not have a developed theory of mind. So, **to what extent should we punish deception in children, like you said trying not to hold it against students while they’re still learning, and how does this change as they get older?**

[Nancy Misage] – Well, I will say that I always had a difficult time with the honor code that we had. Because I wanted students to recognize that the amount of effort you put in individually is directly proportional to your own understanding of the subject. So, if you feel like you have a lack of time, and you know that the homework is due, so yeah, you’re gonna grab Jackson’s homework and you’re gonna turn it in and Mrs. Misage will never know! Except yeah, I always knew. It wasn’t about the fact that I was allowing students to pull the wool over my eyes. It was more about allowing the students to realize that “Oh! I do so much better when I do my homework myself” Then I wanted my students to make those connections for themselves. So, I didn’t want to do the whole honor code thing. If you cheated on a test, I would call you up and be like “So you cheated on a test, what are we going to do about it? We’re gonna call your parents in and go from there” Because I felt it was more the parents’ responsibility than my responsibility to deal with those kinds of issues.

[Jackson Paull] – Right, interesting. So, this one, regardless of whether you believe the following justification is true, how would you respond to a someone sort of justifying lying and cheating by saying “A lot of the powerful people in our society lie easily and often,” you mentioned earlier the Machiavellian student becoming president. **What if they were like, “politicians lie on their campaigns all the time and they have a bunch of money and power, so why shouldn’t I?” How do you think you would respond to that?**

[Nancy Misage] – My kind of standard response is that tells me a whole lot about you, and I would never do that. But if somebody said that to me, then automatically my vision of them and the time I spend with them is gonna get altered.

[Mark Misage] – You don’t want to be like Mr. Bungle.

[Nancy Misage] – Right.

[Jackson Paull] – **Why don’t you want to be like Mr. Bungle?**

[Mark Misage] – Because Mr. Bungle takes advantage of everyone. Mr. Bungle might have some tangible benefit from that, but he’s gonna rue a lot of these actions later in life is my bet.

[Nancy Misage] – And also, I think your question touches on that intrinsic belief in right and wrong. Both of us are fiercely… we really, really expect our friends and close acquaintances to be ethical, good people. That’s the line in the sand for us?

[Jackson Paull] – **Well how do you view prosocial, or white lies? That whole, “Oh this dinner is delicious, I can’t eat enough of it.”**

[Mark Misage] – We avoid conflict. It kind of goes back to, “If you’re not doing this to one-up somebody” if you’re doing this to spare someone’s feelings, then I’m okay with it.

[Jackson Paull] – So its okay to lie to save someone’s feelings but it’s not okay to lie to either hurt someone else, or purely for self-gain.

[Nancy Misage] – No malicious intent.

[Jackson Paull] – There’s no malicious intent, but there’s definitely self-gain in avoiding that conflict. There’s kind of this mutual benefit.

[Nancy Misage] – I would say it depends on the relationship you have with the person. If Mark makes some terrible lasagna, I’m probably going to be a whole lot more honest and be like “Well this is the worst lasagna you’ve ever made.” But if it’s somebody that I don’t have quite as strong a relationship with, like if I’m at a friend’s house, and I don’t really know that person, I’m gonna say that its great, because what does it hurt?

[Jackson Paull] – **If you had to choose, would you rather live in a society where everyone always tells the truth, even if it hurts someone’s feelings, or in a society where everyone ALWAYS lies, and nobody ever once tells the truth?**

[Nancy Misage] – Would you know??

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah, if someone says “2+2=5” then you know its not 5, but you can kind of think of that old riddle with two people, one tells the truth and the other lies, and you have to try to be clever [to find out whatever you need.]

[Nancy Misage] – As really, horribly difficult as it would be. I think I would want to be with the truth tellers. But I couldn’t stand walking around knowing everyone is lying all the time. I think you would learn to deal with that personal hurt.

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah and it clearly demonstrates why lying exists in our society, and then you get to the gray area of “what lying is good?” and “what lying is bad?”

[Nancy Misage] – Yeah, and so then we’re back to that personal sense of right and wrong. Where does that come from? I don’t know. Parents have a lot to do with it, but if you’re in a family without a strong family relationship, where do you as an individual learn it? I don’t know.

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah, so my next question is about that intent behind deception. **If someone makes up a lie with the intention to deceive someone, pretty much everyone agrees that that’s bad. But sometimes somebody might deceive someone simply by misremembering something. “They’re in a red shirt” when actually they were in a blue shirt. Nobody would call that a “lie,” but it is still incorrect information they’re telling someone. So, when somebody says they just remembered that thing wrong, even when they’re this kind of Machiavellian person, and you know they’re not telling the truth. How does that play in to whether or not you consider it to be deceptive or not?**

[Nancy Misage] – I think if it’s a pattern, if it becomes a pattern, then once again I’m back to the “I have a totally different relationship with that person,” if it happens once, then [that’s okay.] I can forgive high school students for engaging in that behavior, than I can the people that we worked with who were supposed to be adults. So, if there’s somebody that you work with who is constantly misremembering, then you’re not gonna be somebody that I gonna spend my Friday nights with.

[Jackson Paull] – Right, so it very much relies on your past experiences with a person that impacts how you view their deception, intentional or not.

[Mark Misage] – Well, and I was thinking about this just as you were answering that. If the purpose of the deception, in a real non-malicious way, is to grease the wheels of society. I’m okay with that. But if the reason is for something like a coworker “I didn’t do that,” instead of saying “That was my mistake,” if somebody makes up a lie about that. That’s where I kind of draw the line. Being catholic I’m supposed to be ALL [lies are bad.]

[Nancy Misage] – And neither one of us wanted to make work for somebody else, so if there was deception, then that always made work for somebody else. Like I don’t like April fools’ day, and it goes with the whole magic thing, I realize there’s no malicious intent, but it’s the joke, prankster thing. So, you just filled up my room with balloons? Ha ha, funny funny, now I have to clean up the balloons.

[Jackson Paull] – How would you feel about students who filled your room with balloons, if they told you they would clean it up?

[Mark Misage] – Much better, but not a true universe.

[Nancy Misage] – And they wouldn’t do it the way I wanted it done, and there would be balloon bits everywhere.

[Jackson Paull] – Yeah. Ok, so you kind of already answered this, but **a lot of the questions have been focused on your experience with high school students, but would any of your answers change if it was somebody in their thirties?**

[Nancy Misage] – Absolutely.

[Mark Misage] – Yeah because we’ve had coworkers who had a habit of lying to cover themselves when it really affected the entire team. I don’t know that we ever called them on it?

[Nancy Misage] – Yeah because somebody has to clean up the mess, so we’ll just take care of it.

[Mark Misage] – But I think they knew we knew.

[Nancy Misage] – One would hope. And I think it was because of the whole interaction with them, your whole interaction with people that are your contemporaries alters if you think that person is lying to you. Those are those subtle personality quirks that I think being teachers of high school students that allows us to pick up on where you have this extrasensory radar where you can kind of sense “Ehhh I don’t think that’s the whole story.”

[Mark Misage] – And so your relationship becomes much more superficial.

[Jackson Paull] **– And when you have a relationship like that, and you’re putting on a fake smile, does that feel deceptive to you? Does it feel like you’re lying to them?**

[Nancy Misage] – Absolutely, and it exhausts me. It’s so exhausting, I can’t stand it.

[Jackson Paull] – Ok, I have a hypothetical lie, and I want to ask if its okay or not. **So, you have a small child who is trying to get a cookie from the cookie jar, and in the process, they break it. And they think to themselves, “Oh no, this is terrible Mom and Dad are gonna be so mad. But they wouldn’t be mad at the cat, or the baby. So, if I blame it on them, I know they won’t get punished, and I won’t get punished either” So by lying, they make sure nobody gets punished. It’s like a trolley problem where one of the tracks have nobody on them. Is that kind of lie okay?**

[Nancy Misage] – If I were a parent, and I had a child who broke a cookie jar, I don’t think I would necessarily believe the child when they say the cat did it. Because once again the young child’s sense of right and wrong isn’t fully developed, so its easier to tell [that they’re lying.]

[Mark Misage] – And you say it’s not developed, but I think some of its intrinsic. I think people aren’t good liars, unless they develop into good liars. And I wouldn’t want my child to be a good liar, so I would try to snuff that out immediately.

[Jackson Paull] – **Do you think lying could ever be used as a tool that could be useful for good people? Or is it only useful to “bad people?”**

[Nancy Misage] – I think it’s so circumstantial, it depends on the relationship with the person, it depends on the age of the person, it depends on the lie. For instance, my mother had Alzheimer’s for the last years of her life, so when she asked a question that I knew would agitate her, or cause discomfort, I would be deceptive. But once again I was thinking about doing that so that she wouldn’t have to experience the anguish of hearing the truth. And she would ask “What’s wrong with me?” And I would tell her “Your brains just not working right anymore” and every time we had the conversation about what was happening, and what she had to experience moving forward, that was traumatic for her, and I didn’t want to cause any more trauma for her, so yes, I think good people tell lies for good reasons.

[Jackson Paull] – Funny enough I had this exact scenario in my notes sheet to bring up, as to whether or not its moral, so its funny it came up naturally. Ok, so, **is an authority figure lying to someone that they have power over more less or equally dubious when compared to the reverse?**

[Mark Misage] – I would say the same.

[Nancy Misage] – Yeah, I’m like “time and place.”

[Mark Misage] – And we’re kind of at the place where authority is like “whatever.”

[Laughter]

[Jackson Paull] – Its very interesting because people like to come up with these rules for things, and some people have these absolutist rule that [all lying is bad,] but as you’ve kind of said throughout the interview it really comes down to the context. **Yeah, so now I’d like to talk about if there’s any specific moment that stands out, I’d love to get some stories on a time where someone deceived you, or you’ve had to deceive someone, and how has that taught you about how deception feels either as the deceiver or as the deceived?**

[Nancy Misage] – Yeah so, the story that pops to mind is right after I graduated from college. I was working in a lab, and there were like four or five PhDs, and one of the PhDs was doing [DNA sequencing.] And it would have to sit in a dark room for a day or two before you could expose it. And there was this cabinet in the dark room specifically for the DNA sequences. And I asked them if I could borrow the cabinet, and they said “Absolutely, just be careful because we have tens of thousands of dollars of DNA sequencing that’s being exposed in there.” So, I’m being as careful as I can, but one time I got my gels out, and I developed them and everything, but since I’m not used to the cabinet, I left it open when I flipped the lights on. So, I shut the cabinet, locked the cabinet, and I remember in that moment I was the little kid in the cookie jar. I can pretend that I know nothing about it. Or I can go out there and just be honest, and say “what can I do to fix it?” So that moment was a big switch in my psyche, this is how I am going to deal with people in the future. If I make a mistake, I’m going to own up to that mistake and do everything I can to fix it rather than try to protect myself. Ultimately, I just had to buy a case of beer. It actually turned out okay, because there were like 20 photographs, and only the bottom two kinda barely got exposed, so because I was so fast, and because it wasn’t as bad as it could have been, I think the PhD got off easy.

[Jackson Paull] – **What about you, Mark, do you have any stories?**

[Mark Misage] – Mine are all from when I was a kid, and I didn’t learn my lesson so quickly. […] So, in our neighborhood when we were kids, they were working on the water main in our neighborhood, and they dug it up like ten feet down, and we were throwing rocks at it to see if we could hit the pipe. And we hit the pipe. And my two friends ran home. And for some reason I ran the other way. I ran down to a friend’s house. “Can Ed come out and play?” It was like 7:30 and we were supposed to be home, “Can Ed come out and play?” So, I ended up having to walk home, and that didn’t end my deception…

[Jackson Paull] – **Did you ever get any better at [lying]?**

[Mark Misage] – No, not really.

[Nancy Misage] – As a child, I think all children are [liars]. Even the best kid is gonna lie at some point, because of that whole self-preservation thing. But at some point, you develop the much more adult sense of when and where to lie.

[Mark Misage] – But I really do think that there’s something deep inside all of us, except for the damaged Machiavellian types, that, you know is wrong. Even little kids know it’s wrong. Which is why they’re so bad at it. The only people who get really good at it are the ones that you worry about.

[Jackson Paull] – **Alright, so like for the last fifteen or so minutes of the interview I’d like to give you the chance if there’s anything you want to expand upon, or if there’s anything you thought you didn’t get to fully answer?**

[Nancy Misage] – Well so I’m just curious about the project. What class is it for? What is the point?

[Conversation catching up as people, personal lives, etc]

[Jackson Paull] – Awesome, so that concludes the official part of the interview, thank you so much for your time!