Brian Martin’s *The Deceptive Activist: A Review*

Brian Rappert, University of Exeter


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3Ml
Saying things we don’t really mean. Omitting relevant considerations. Leaking. Making the best impression. Spinning. Just adding that little tail to the story that gets the laugh. Feigning. In *The Deceptive Activist*, Brian Martin extends an invitation to open to the myriad of ways in which dishonesty figures within day-to-day interactions and political life. The reasons for deception are presented as manifold as its manifestations. Higher purposes. Convenience. Loyalties. Face saving. Ideologies that mark what Noam Chomsky called ‘the bounds of thinkable thought’.

Being completely frank and with no reason to do otherwise, my judgement of *The Deceptive Activist* is that … well … more on this later.

The kind of invitation extended by this book is one that is as sobering as it is destabilising. Its core claims are two-fold: (1) deception is commonplace and (2) this applies to you too (admit it…). As such, ‘rather than sweeping the tensions under the carpet’, Martin argues, ‘it may be better to start talking about deception and about when it can serve worthwhile purposes’.

Through use of case studies and other examples, *The Deceptive Activist* reasons through the pros and cons of not presenting it like it is, with particular reference to political activism. As elsewhere in his work, Martin’s goal is not trying to definitely specify appropriate conduct. Instead, he takes it as one of skilling up readers to think through possible courses of action. Towards this end, he recounts different frameworks for helping to determine when deception might be warranted. The framework accorded with most traction is one Martin previously developed for assessing nonviolent action. Dissimulation of various kinds might be appropriate depending on whether it is standard, limited in harm, voluntary, fair, what it prefigures (do means and ends align?), whether it opens up participation, and whether it is skillfully done.

For my part, I can recall few books that explicitly encouraged readers to think about when dishonesty may be the best policy. In this the argument is bold. It is not that talk of dissimulation is rare though, even with scholarly traditions. It has a long history in the canons of Western thought. Socrates’ enthusiasm for a ‘noble lie’ in *The Republic* is one well-known instance. Yet, as with so many other examples in political thought, this message of

---

1 Page 4.
dishonesty was one aimed at elites of the day, not those seeking to challenge them. To note this is to signal the way the pervasiveness of deception also comes accompanied by a sense of its boundaries. It has an endpoint or an end-person to which it is pursued. It is not hard to see why. Deception unbound provides no place for anyone to stand. For this reason, talk of being deceptive often entails appeals to truth.

As *The Deceptive Activist* elaborates, appeals to truth can entail deception too. Take the domain of scholarship. As Martin contends with reference to biomedical research, ‘even domains where truth-telling is vital can be plagued by passions, biases and the presence of vested interests. Whenever an area develops a reputation for honesty, it is predictable that interlopers will try to benefit from a false impression that they too are honest."

Taken together though, the pervasiveness of deception, its subtleness, and the potential for it to be present where it should be least prompt a question back to *The Deceptive Activist*: namely, is Martin trying to, well, beguile readers himself? To put it more bluntly, perhaps too bluntly, does *The Deceptive Activist* entail deception?

Consider some possible grounds. There are many claims to truth presented, often substantiated through citations to scholarship. Given the argument in *The Deceptive Activist*, though, these are prime candidates for where we might look for finessing. Charged controversies such as the torture at Abu Ghraib, the intentions of the public relations of firms, and the rationales for the machinations of US statecraft are recounted, and recounted in a language that makes definitive claims to have grasped how authorities attempted to dupe. Have the specific glossings of the topics given, it might be asked, perhaps scarified complexity for the sake of advancing the overall argument of *The Deceptive Activist*? Have any relevant considerations that might have given a different spin to these matters been excluded? Deliberately or otherwise? Or have considerations been left out that would impact on how definitely scholarship can resolve what counts as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? The text of *The Deceptive Activist* itself suggests some grounds for caution about whether it is providing facts that fit the argument. While at times unpicking factual claims for what is going on behind them, at other times factual claims are taken as a solid bedrock for knowing. While at times questioning how motives are attributed to large organisations, at other times motivations are attributed.

Given the argument in *The Deceptive Activist*, rather than concentrating on whether deception is taking place in some more or less subtle ways, it would seem more important to ask whether any such dissimulation would be appropriate. How though to evaluate the potential for deception? Four options are:

Martin is not deceiving in the crafting of *The Deceptive Activist*, and…

---

2 Actually the story was more complicated. Since in his dialogues Socrates admonished the capacity of the written word to discover truth, scholars since have questioned why Plato reduced the dialogues by codifying them into writing. One theory is that Plato may have only written down certain teachings, teachings of lesser value. Whether a ‘Unwritten Doctrine’ of teaching existed and who it was shared with have been topics for conversation since the time, see Lamberton (1995) and Hanegraaff (2012).

3 Page 58.
… this is problematic because it stands as a refutation to the thesis of the necessity and even desirability of deception. 
… this is not problematic because it illustrates the high standards possible for human conduct (even if calling into question a central premise of the book).

Martin is deceiving in the crafting of The Deceptive Activist, and…

… this is not problematic so long as he did so in-line with a framework such as the one for assessing nonviolent action. 
… this is problematic because (a) truth-telling is vital in scholarship or (b) he is missing a trick in really getting to grips with the potential for deception.

Writing out of these options prompts a pause. It seems that having a serious debate about the appropriateness of the options would painfully grate against many of the mores projected as central to scholarly and political life – like an open hand scraping along a brick wall. Now, perhaps more so than in recent times, assertions of (self-)deception figure prominently in the arsenals of rhetorical put downs. Fake this, alternative that. Which side are you on? While The Deceptive Activist does not engage with the latest international parlance for fakery, and probably with good reason, many will likely interpret its arguments against this political context. It is time of clashing binaries of right of wrong, not fine lines.

Which institutions then might support a discussion about the place of deception, and too the place of deception in the analysis of deception? This is a weighty matter that cannot be addressed within the limited scope of a review essay. Turning the issues on their head though, we can ask instead whether a book review would be a good place to locate such a serious debate. Reviews such as this one don’t operate in a pristine space free from conventions. Instead, reviews help to define communities (a sense of ‘we’ and communities come to learn how to interpret reviews. Within the expectations of a review, a statement that notionally reads as stinging criticism or high praise might be taken as otherwise by seasoned community members. Audiences may, in fact, bring a good deal of scepticism to what they read in book reviews because they judge them as a form of endorsement genre, or if not this then a place of petty one-upmanship, or a space where reviewers forward their pet ideas instead of dealing with the serious matters they are meant to be minding. Perhaps it may be time too to start talking about dissimulation in reviews genres and when it can serve worthwhile purposes.

Where and how can we have a frank discussion about a book on deception, let alone about deception itself?

4 So if you aren’t getting the joke, you aren’t getting the joke.
5 Would it help to decode my writing or just confuse the situation further if I noted Brian Martin has been a stalwart colleague for over twenty years?
6 My thanks to Claes-Fredrik Helgesson for the wording of this ending and comments on this review. And Brian Martin too.
Contact details: B.Rappert@exeter.ac.uk

References
