

# Occlumency

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“Now, Occlumency. As I told you back in your dear godfather’s kitchen, this branch of magic seals the mind against magical intrusion and influence.”

“And why does Professor Dumbledore think I need it, sir?” said Harry, looking directly into Snape’s dark, cold eyes and wondering whether he would answer.

Snape looked back at him for a moment and then said contemptuously, “Surely even you could have worked that out by now, Potter? The Dark Lord is highly skilled at Legilimency —”

“What’s that? *Sir?*”

“It is the ability to extract feelings and memories from another person’s mind. . . Only those skilled at Occlumency are able to shut down those feelings and memories that contradict the lie, and so utter falsehoods in his presence without detection.”

*—Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*

We may not be wizards and witches, but the ability to seal the mind against intrusion and influence is just as important for us, if not more so. At any given point we want to be secure from all sorts of threats, physical and mental. Occlumency is a skill that protects the mind from certain kinds of assault.

## 1 Theory and Lies

### 1.1 Background Theory

There are three basic ways to classify everything: in terms of commitments, objects, or descriptions. These three classifications are fundamental because it is impossible to deny understanding what each means without contradiction. For example, when commitment is referred to, it is always the commitments of a particular person. In order to deny that you understand what making a personal commitment is, you make a commitment to saying something, a commitment to denying you understand something. This may be a very small commitment, but it is a commitment nonetheless. When objects are referred to, they are always the objects associated with a person: the things that person believes to exist. Again, if someone tries to deny that he or she believes things exist, then that person will use words to make that denial and words are a kind of thing. Lastly description refers to the way an individual describes the world: his or her personal descriptions of anything and everything. Denying that you describe things is a description of how you are and hence is contradictory.

Everything that follows will be construed in terms of commitments, objects or descriptions. For dogmatic reasons, sometimes these three will be referred to as substance because of their fundamental nature.

## 1.2 Lying

Lying is perhaps the most obvious way to avoid intrusion: a direct question is asked and a misleading answer given.

In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* there is a scene in which Professor Lupin lies to Professor Snape about the significance of a particular enchanted piece of parchment in Harry Potter's possession. Lupin recognized the enchanted parchment to be a very powerful interactive map that he had a hand in creating many years before. However, Snape was knowledgeable about Lupin's past and hence knew about Lupin's vested interest in Harry's happiness and possibly even something about objects Lupin believed to exist, which could have included the map. He would not have accepted an argument along the lines of a vote of confidence in Harry ('Harry would have turned any such thing in.') from Lupin because he knew Lupin was more committed to Harry's well-being than to strictly following school rules. Snape was not aware, however, of the physical description of the map and hence could not be sure what the parchment was. Therefore Snape knew he had a potentially dangerous object but no more. Lupin was able to harness Snape's relative lack of understanding about (magical) objects to claim the map was a toy and remove it and Harry from Snape's malevolent grasp.

We will never have to deal with someone attempting to detect a lie knowing more than one of our commitments, objects or descriptions in detail. If our inquisitor knows two of the three (objects we believe to exist & our commitments, our commitments & our descriptions, or objects we believe to exist & our descriptions) then usually there would be enough to reveal the secret and there would be no secret. For example, if someone is denying their intolerance of minorities there is no reason why more accusations won't only be met with more denials. However, if the person knows that you have procured hard evidence, e.g. a video of the accused acting intolerant, and have heard him or her describe minorities as inferior, there is no longer a need for that person to deny his or her intolerance: at this point no one needs an admission to determine this person's convictions and more denials will be of no use. The beginning of the lying process is to make an educated guess which of the three substances is the least likely to be known to those who want to determine the secret and base the lie off this guess. This can include the substance of the secret itself.

### An Example

"Did you steal the cookie?"

Let's look at the possible responses to this question depending on which substance is believed to be least known:

**If Your Commitments are Least Known:** "No. (I'm no thief.)"

This response is of moral indignation at being accused of stealing the cookie. The underlying argument is that the commitment of the accused to not stealing would outweigh the chance that he or she stole the cookie. This response works well when there is a perceived commitment to law and order presented (muster your best look of shock at being accused). If the accused is four years old, though, it is unlikely that the commitment to law and order will be believed.

**If Your Familiar Objects are Least Known:** “No. What cookie was this?”

This response is a denial by ignorance: If the accused does not know about the cookie, then the accused couldn’t have stolen it. This response works when there is nothing that specifically connects the accused to the crime. As soon as a connection is made, however, the accused has to backtrack quickly (“Oh, *that* cookie.”) because it looks like an outright lie used to cover the crime.

**If Your Description is Least Known:** “No. I did not *steal* it. (I *thieved* it.)”

This response is a denial by ‘technicality.’ The accuser has asked a question but because of a distinction, usually unrelated to the issue at hand and arbitrary, the accused answers in the negative. In this example the accused was able to deny stealing something by making an arbitrary distinction between stealing and thieving and then classifying what was done as other than what was proposed.

### 1.3 Sophisticated Lying

Many times there is a pattern of action that needs to be hidden and simple denials will not suffice in the face of multiple problems.

**Character** If a simple commitment to being good is not enough to stave off accusations of something heinous, perhaps a pattern of being good will be of more use. Strong moral fiber as demonstrated on multiple occasions attested to by people of unquestioned character can go a long way. Most of us will never need such a line up of people but we can still make use of the basic idea: if it is possible to merely show that a particular action is out of character, then the action can be denied.

Perhaps this quote<sup>1</sup> said it best:

“Me? I’m dishonest, and a dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest. Honestly. It’s the honest ones you want to watch out for, because you can never predict when they’re going to do something incredibly...stupid.”

If a person is honest and acts consistently, then that person can never be completely trusted because he or she will be able to break character and do something unexpected without anyone suspecting him or her to do so. At least with the dishonest ones you always know where they stand.

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<sup>1</sup>Quote from Captain Jack Sparrow: Pirates of the Caribbean, Dir. Gore Verbinski. Performed by J. Depp. Disney Pictures 2003

**Alternate Theory** When presented with hard evidence that you were lying, making a denial by a simple disassociation is impossible. Instead you can provide a different version of how the evidence came into existence. For example, it is a conspiracy: A sophisticated group of people worked hard to make it appear that you are lying by fabricating evidence. By claiming you were framed, you can stick to your story about not knowing anything about the issue at hand. Any alternate theory that dissociates you from the evidence will do, but the more convincing the better.

**Ambiguity** Take the famous, “It depends on what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” By using ambiguities surrounding general and legal use of language former president Clinton was able to initially deny things that he later had to admit to when more evidence surfaced. Since the ambiguities exploited had a greater scope than a mere technical difference between certain words (such as steal and thief) he was able to deny multiple accusations at once.

## 2 Confusion and Dogmatism

“If you can’t convince them, confuse them.”

–Harry S Truman

### 2.1 Being Confused

The purpose of lying many times is not to make someone believe something, but to prevent a person from discovering something. To this end, prevention of discovery, confusion is an effective tool.

If you are unable to convince someone of something, be it a truth or a lie, then causing that person to question his or her beliefs is the next best thing. Forcing a person to question underlying assumptions will prevent that person from mounting a counterargument. In lieu of convincing someone, not having him or her strongly object to your version of events is a victory.

Causing confusion by attacking underlying assumptions requires the arguments used to attack the assumptions be as strong as those assumptions. Insofar as most people’s underlying assumptions are well entrenched, generating arguments strong enough to question assumptions requires more than mere sophisticated lying. Most people don’t believe conspiracy theories, sneer when someone tries to sneak an ambiguity by them and scoff at someone professing to be above suspicion.

Like lies, underlying assumptions can be broken up into the three categories of commitment, object and description. When trying to confuse someone, as with lying, it is important to figure out where that person’s strength is: do they doubt your story because of some commitments, objects or description? For example, let’s assume it is an object: you have chocolate on the side of your mouth while are standing there denying that you ate the chocolate chip cookies and *you realize you have chocolate on the side of your mouth while standing there*. It is safe to assume that at this point the person

asking you about the cookie has a very strong object-based reason for suspecting you: there is an object, the chocolate on your mouth, that directly links you to the crime.

Instead of trying to come up with some story about how the chocolate got on your mouth other than by you stealing and eating the cookie as prescribed above, the strategy now is to try to inject doubt into the situation as it stands: deny that it is actually chocolate on your face. Claim it is a rash, a birth mark that only shows up the third Tuesday in even numbered months, black marker that was jabbed in your face, anything but chocolate. If you come up with a good enough lie, it will confuse the accuser by making them doubt what they previously thought to have existed. You will not have convinced him or her that you are not the thief, but at least you won't be the prime suspect.

The chief difference between confusing someone and mere lying as described above is that the story used has to be more than just sophisticated, it has to force that person to amend his or her basic beliefs about the situation. In the case of a rash or a birthmark with chocolate-like properties, there would be medical information available about such things. If this medical condition is used as an alibi, then the person has to provide this information to show that the situation is not as it previously seemed.

## 2.2 Dogmatic Lying

Dogmatic lying is lying convincingly enough to make someone amend what they believe in order to assimilate the new information you have provided. As usual there are three versions:

**Discipline and Religion** If you are so disciplined in your commitments (or appear to be so), then you can harness religious authority. You become a prophet. From this standpoint questions about your character becomes unassailable and any questions about your actions can only be answered through theological reflection and study. In this way, by answering questions as a function of religious commitment, the answering process is an indoctrination process. This indoctrination process changes underlying beliefs such that the world no longer appears as it did before indoctrination: it creates a zealot. Certain commitments, such as faith in the prophet, become so strong that other commitments, such as to law and order, seem inconsequential.

**Science and Bad Luck** When it is Nature that has conspired against you, then responsibility is no longer yours, but Nature's. For example, when pleading temporary insanity, bad luck caused a 'perfect storm' of events that inextricably set that person on a path to commit a crime. We do not hold someone accountable if science deems these external forces responsible and the accused was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. This belief that nature is beyond our control can be used to cause someone to revise their previous beliefs about what actually occurred, be it temporary insanity, a chemically induced mania or whatnot: there was no crime, only a physical inevitability.

**Skepticism and Existential Research** If you are able to consistently find ambiguities within arguments then you can harness skepticism. By identifying and exploiting

ambiguities even in the simplest of situations, it is possible to prevent people from identifying your motivations. The goal is to cast enough doubt upon memories and beliefs such that the person questions what he or she previously saw, heard, felt, etcetera.

Insofar as this method casts doubt but does not force an amendment of underlying beliefs, it requires a further explanation of what did happen. Some previous commitment can be used (I was over by the Sleazy Motel because there is a nice jogging route there.) but this leaves you stuck with some half-baked story. Instead of using a prior commitment, a skeptic can use every opportunity to research new and different areas of the world in his or her search for knowledge. So, taking the above example of the cookie thief, after confusing the accuser as to the facts, the skeptic should claim that he or she was in the kitchen researching our relationship to tools and how technology affects our lives, or some other sophisticated kitchen-based philosophy. This steers the conversation away from whatever you want to avoid and toward being a philosopher, providing new beliefs that supplant the accusations.

### 3 Occlumency

Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.

—Groucho Marx

At any given point there can be some truth to each answer discussed above. However, there will always be one answer that you favor, that has more meaning for you, that you believe to be the truth. The goal of Occlumency is to prevent this information from being revealed.

Telling dogmatic lies can obscure the truth for long periods but it has its drawbacks. It takes effort to set up and maintain dogmatism when not actually following the dogma. Like any guard wall, cracks form due to time and pressure and they become increasingly hard to patch over time.

Instead of hiding behind a dogma that is eventually bound to fail, increasing your ability to answer questions competently in any of the three categories likewise obscures which of the three you believe to be true. If your answers are not dogmatic but pluralistic your beliefs will become opaque. Not because you do not answer the question directly, but because your answer cannot be reused to determine other beliefs: since you have other answers (just as good as the one given) that do not contradict, the answer given cannot be used to corner you into a single position. The strategy is not to build a wall with dogma, but to present a nimble, moving target.

An assault is generally a systematic questioning process that tries to find patterns and regularities usable for interpreting past and predicting future actions. Thwarting such an assault can be done in two ways as indicated above: by being as dogmatic as possible or by being completely undogmatic as possible. The dogmatic approach provides ready made answers that fit into a specified pattern. As long as the inquisitor finds no information that contradicts this pattern he or she will believe that this dogmatism is an accurate predictor of future actions, when it is really a ruse. The undogmatic approach provides too little information to be useful; by not being beholden to a dogmatic approach, there is no way to distinguish arbitrary and truthful answers

to questions. While the deception provided by the dogmatic approach may be useful at times, when this defense breaks it is more likely to reveal valuable information. The undogmatic approach, while not providing deception, has the benefit of making all information seem of indeterminate truth and hence it is of more use.

After the information has been extracted it is used to influence behavior. This is done by recognizing specific patterns of behavior and causing the person to believe him or herself to be in such a situation. For example Harry Potter is constantly searching for his lost family and he is dogmatically committed to his friends (in a good, non-lying way). His zealously protects those around him. This information and the knowledge that Harry cared deeply for his godfather, Sirius, was used to lure Harry into an unsafe situation by making him believe that his godfather was in danger. If Harry had been able to prevent his enemies from knowing how much he cared for Sirius, perhaps by using skepticism to cast doubt on this information, it may have slowed or even prevented his enemies from finding and using someone for whom Harry was prepared to rashly risk his life. Unfortunately, for both Harry and Sirius, this information was found and used successfully.

## **4 Conclusion**

The issues associated with Occlumency are useful to understand on their own and, when combined, provide a method for protecting important information within the mind. As with any skill, practice and experience matter, and this should be taken as inspiration for what is possible. Occlumency, as I am able to present it, is not magical, though it is metaphysical: it is based upon undeniable propositions about what exist and is independent of any particular commitment, object or description. Hopefully this analysis will prove useful to whoever reads this, magician or muggle.