

## Telling lies<sup>1</sup>

Normative ethical theories are intended to guide us in knowing and doing what is morally right. It is therefore very useful to consider theories in relation to practical issues, in order to understand the theories and their implications better. The primary purpose of this handout is to think about how three normative theories - utilitarianism, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics - would respond to the practical issue of telling lies.

### UTILITARIANISM

Act utilitarianism, in its simplest form, says that an action is right if it maximises happiness, and wrong if it does not. So a simple act-utilitarian approach to lying would consider whether telling a lie creates greater happiness than telling the truth (or keeping silent). If it does, then it is morally right. If it doesn't, then it is morally wrong.

John Stuart Mill's brief discussion of lying in *Utilitarianism* demonstrates that his version of utilitarianism does not evaluate actions just in terms of immediate or obvious consequences, but places them within a bigger picture. A person's being truthful is of great benefit to people's happiness generally, and our being able to trust what others say is not only the basis of social well-being but also a foundation of civilisation and virtue more generally. Weakening either our tendency to be truthful or other people's trust is, therefore, severely damaging to happiness. To tell a lie just for the sake of convenience is therefore morally wrong.

That said, Mill allows that lying is sometimes permissible; e.g. when it is the only way we can withhold information from someone who intends to do harm. We need to carefully consider which situations permit lying by weighing up the conflicting utilities involved. Mill discusses an example from Kant's 'On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives'. Suppose someone comes to your house to seek refuge from someone who wants to murder them. Soon after they have hidden, the would-be murderer arrives and asks you where they are. In this case, says Mill, the harm done by lying is outweighed by the good done by saving a life, and lying is permissible.

Rule utilitarianism says that an action is right if, and only if, it complies with those rules which, if everybody followed them, would lead to the greatest happiness (compared to any other set of rules). Rule utilitarians may argue that the rule 'don't lie' will, if everyone followed it, create more happiness than a rule that permitted lying. However, we can object, with Mill, that never lying will lead to harm in certain situations. We need a rule that allows for exceptions. It may be

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 339-42

very difficult to put such a rule into words, since the situations in which telling the truth will lead to more harm than good are quite varied. We might lie to prevent someone from doing harm to others; or from doing harm to themselves; or because the truth would hurt (e.g. in cases of terminal illness or sexual infidelity); or because the truth would be damaging to some long-term good (e.g. in politics); or ... It is hard to know what the right 'rule' for lying should be.

## **KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY**

Kant argues that we should 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' - his 'Categorical Imperative'. If we lie, we are usually following the maxim 'to tell a lie to get what I want'. If everyone told lies when they wanted to, people would stop believing each other. But you can deceive someone with a lie only if they believe you. So the maxim cannot be universalised, and lying is wrong. Even in the example of the would-be murderer who asks you where his victim is, Kant says you should not lie.

Most people would disagree, and argue that lying in such a situation is the right action. But perhaps Kant is wrong about your maxim in this case. Your maxim may be more specific than lying whenever one wants. For instance, you may adopt the maxim 'to lie when it is necessary to save a life'. Arguably, this can be universalised. Because in most situations, no lives are at stake, if everyone acted on this maxim, people would still believe each other most of the time. This would mean that in Kant's example of the would-be murderer who asks you where his victim is, it would be permissible to lie.

There is a question why Kant didn't simply take this approach when discussing. Why does he argue that even in this case, lying to the would-be murderer is morally wrong? Perhaps Kant might reply if everyone lies when it is necessary to save a life, then the would-be murderer knows this. So they won't believe us when we answer their question about where their victim is hiding. So we can't deceive them. The maxim 'to lie when it is necessary to save a life' isn't universalisable after all.

In fact, in his essay on lying, Kant adds a further argument against lying. We don't know what consequences will follow from our lying. Suppose we lie about the person hiding in our house, saying they ran down the street. Suppose that, unknown to us, they did exactly that. They left their hiding place and ran off. And so our lie sends the murderer straight to where the person is. We would be responsible, Kant claims, for this consequence. If we are tempted to lie because we think the consequences will be better than if we told the truth, it is possible that we are mistaken. We will have failed to do our duty, achieved nothing, and be responsible for the results. It is better to do our duty.

But, we can object, why aren't we similarly responsible if we tell the truth: if we say where the person is hiding, and the murderer finds them there?

Kant gives a second formulation of the Categorical Imperative, known as the Formula of Humanity: 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but

always at the same time as an end'. This provides another argument that rules out telling lies. To lie to someone is to treat them as a means to our own ends. They are not able to make an informed choice about what to do, but are manipulated in a way that they are unaware of. They can't share in our ends, because we have not been honest about what our ends are. We should not lie even when the other person's ends are immoral, and we are trying to prevent those ends being realised. We should not deceive the other person about our intention to thwart their ends. We must give them the chance to share our end of persuading them not to act on their immoral ends.

What seems to follow from Kant's deontology is that if everyone were morally good, then lying would always be wrong. But sometimes we need to protect ourselves (and others) from the wrong actions of others, and lying may be the only means of doing so. If the action someone intends to do would treat me as a means to an end, then we can, by lying, prevent this result. Kant himself recognises this in his Lectures on Ethics: 'if I cannot save myself by maintaining silence, then my lie is a weapon of defence'.

### **ARISTOTELIAN VIRTUE ETHICS**

When Aristotle discusses truthfulness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he opposes being truthful to boasting and mock-modesty. So his primary focus is on being truthful about oneself. But he also comments that 'falsehood is in itself mean and culpable, and truth noble and worthy of praise'. One way of understanding this is to say that lying is an act, like adultery and murder, that has no mean. Lying is already an excess or deficiency in some way, and cannot be virtuous. An alternative interpretation is to say that truth is a final end, something that we should seek not for some further purpose, but for its own sake. This doesn't entail that lying is always wrong. Pleasure is a final end, but we should not always pursue it - there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of doing so. Perhaps the same can be said of truthfulness.

Aristotle is not particularly critical of boastfulness - to lie about what you have or can do, just because you enjoy lying, is contemptible but 'futile rather than bad'. To lie in order to gain or protect one's reputation is not particularly blameworthy, since having a good reputation, in Aristotle's eyes, is good. Someone who lies to gain money, on the other hand, 'is an uglier character'. These remarks indicate that there are better and worse motives for lying.

But they also suggest that lying is never virtuous. We might object, however, that as discussed above, there are occasions and motives that justify lying. If there are few strict rules in ethics, as Aristotle says, it is unlikely that lying is always wrong. Instead, we will need practical wisdom to judge when it is justified and when it isn't. If we seek to deceive someone, to do so virtuously, we would need to do so at the right time, with the right motive, about the right truths, and in the right way.

This last point returns us to the point that there are ways of not sharing the truth other than lying. Perhaps the virtuous person will exhaust all the alternatives first before resorting to a lie.