

# A Brief Consideration of the Ethics of Lying

## *by Ted Slater*

### *Introduction*

Strict deontologists say that lying is wrong. Saying something which conflicts with what one believes to be true is morally wrong, they would say. The Bible appears to support this deontological view of lying. On the other end of the scale are the teleologists, who say unflinchingly that there are numerous occasions where a liar is inculpable. Fletcher (1966) explained, “For the situationist, what makes the lie right is its loving purpose” (p. 65). It would be difficult, for example, to find a person who wouldn’t tell a lie to save a friend’s life. And then there are those such as the eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant and Sissela Bok who seem to hold these two conflicting approaches simultaneously.

It is difficult to think of a more fundamental issue in communication ethics than lying. A review of various writers’ ideas concerning The Lie should give us a better idea of how to behave ethically in our communicating.

### *A deontological view of lying: the Bible*

The Bible lays out many commands regarding the practice of lying. Although there are cases where individuals’ deception is acceptable and even praised, lying is consistently portrayed as being a very serious sin.

The Ninth Commandment states, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). Eighteenth century Bible scholar Matthew Henry (1961) explained, “This [ninth commandment] forbids, 1. Speaking falsely in any matter, lying, equivocating, and any way devising and designing to deceive our neighbour...” (p. 95). This leaves little room for what Fletcher considered pure, unrestricted, unconditional Christian love — lying lovingly (Leslie, 1992, p. 15).

The psalmist wrote, “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:13). “We must learn to bridle our tongues,” Henry (1961) wrote, “and be careful what we say, that we never speak amiss, to God’s dishonour or our neighbour’s prejudice” (p. 610).

Many of the Proverbs indicate plainly that lying is wrong. “There are six things that the Lord hates ... a lying tongue...” (Proverbs 6:16-17a). “Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 12:22). “It is better to be poor than a liar” (Proverbs 19:22). Concerning this last verse, Henry (1961) wrote, “A poor man, who wishes you well, but can promise you nothing, because he has nothing to be kind with, is better than a liar, who makes you believe he will do mighty things, but, when

it comes to the setting, will do nothing” (p. 768). Throughout the Old Testament similar verses point out that lying is always wrong.

Jesus, as recorded in Mark 7:21f, said, “It is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: ... deceit.... All these things come from within, and they defile a person.” People, Jesus points out, are made unclean, in part, by their deceptive words.

“Do not lie to one another,” Paul wrote to the church in Colossae (Colossians 3:9). Henry (1961), provided one explanation why one should not lie: “Lying makes us like the devil (who is the father of lies)” (p. 1873).

As a final example, Paul wrote to further instruct his friend Titus about “God, who never lies ...” (Titus 1:2). Jesus, during his Sermon on the Mount, said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). If one of God’s perfect characteristics is never telling a lie, then it follows that his children should struggle to be like him in this way as well.

### *Other sources which support the deontological view of lying*

Major religions from other cultures support the idea that telling the truth is absolutely good, while lying is absolutely wrong. According to an ancient Hindu text, “A sacrifice is obliterated by a lie and the merit of alms by an act of fraud” (Lewis, 1955, p. 112).

One ancient Babylonian text states the fury which awaits those who lie: “Whose mouth, full of lying, avails not before thee: thou burnest their utterance” (p. 112). A different Babylonian text asks pointedly, “With his mouth was he full of Yea, in his heart full of Nay?” (p. 112).

Homer wrote in the Greek epic, the Iliad, “Hateful to me as are the gates of Hades is that man who says one thing, and hides another in his heart” (p. 113). When the words of one’s mouth conflict with what one believes in one’s heart, that is wrong.

The idea that lying is wrong in itself, regardless of the beneficial ends which may be achieved by doing so, is found in the foundational religious texts of many ancient societies.

### *A more teleological view of lying*

People lie. A lot. Parents exaggerate to their children. Unmarked police cars are inherently deceptive. Researchers hide facts from the subjects of their experiments in order to get less biased results — after all, Saxe (1991) wrote, “lying enables one to conduct high-impact research that potentially serves the public good” (p. 414). Between one third and two thirds of college students cheat (p. 410). Some physicians deceive their patients about their failing health. In order to better understand why

people lie, many have undertaken to research this behavior scientifically (and consequently humanistically).

Rarely will anybody say that lies are categorically good. Instead, they will say that one shouldn't lie, but that there are often times when it is necessary, and laudable, to lie. Occasions which permit lying include avoiding harm to ourselves or others, producing benefits for others, promoting fairness and justice, and protecting the truth by counteracting another lie (Johannesen, 1990, p. 111).

Leslie (1992) wrote that people lie primarily to casual friends or acquaintances in order to avoid conflict or to increase or decrease social interaction (p. 9). Saxe (1991) pointed out that complete honesty could make relationships tedious, if not conflict laden (p. 414). Being selectively deceptive eases tensions that crop up in every relationship.

Concerning the conflict resolution characteristic of lying, Ludwig (1965) wrote, "Lying has been, still is, and always will be ... an important form of behavior which permits [a person] to adapt to society [and] the world of nature (p. 217). He also said that "in many instances, conscious and willful lying may be more merciful than rigidly adhering to the truth" (p. viii). One of his aims is to help people distinguish between "useful and constructive forms of lying [and] the useless and destructive forms" (p. 5).

Destructive consequences of lying include the breakdown of community, its central values and absolutes, the loss of the other person's freedom to act freely on the truth, an erosion of character and integrity, and the breaking of the Ninth Commandment (Leslie, 1992, p. 8).

At the extreme, one finds researchers such as Wolk and Henley writing manuals intended to "show how to see through lies that intend no good and improve any healthy liar's competence when appropriate lies are called for" (Johannesen, 1990, p. 112). Gone is any indication that lying is basically wrong. Instead, readers are instructed to consider the outcome of the deception — if good results, then the deception is good.

### *Kant's and Bok's views of lying*

According to Kant, moral imperatives exist which are inherent in human nature. The existence of these imperatives provides evidence that the goodness of an act is not related to its outcome. The foundation of his ethical system is the following two-part Categorical Imperative: "Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will to become a universal law" and "Always act so that you treat humanity ... as an end, and never merely as a means" (pp. 47-48).

When considering the morality of lying, Kant (1978) applies the Categorical Imperative. He revealed his concern for universal mankind when he wrote that if he

were to lie, “I act against the right of mankind, since I set myself in opposition to the condition and means through which any human society is possible” (p. 227). He reaffirmed the value of individuals as an end when he wrote, “Every lie is objectionable and contemptible in that we purposely let people think that we are telling them our thoughts and do not do so” (p. 228). Lying is wrong because it adversely affects mankind universally and man individually.

Kant is categorically against lying: “... a lie is a lie, and is in itself intrinsically base whether it be told with good or bad intent... a lie is always evil” (p. 229). But he’s not against telling “untruths,” which he defines in the following manner: “If I indicate that I mean to speak my mind, and instead of doing so make a false declaration, what I say is an untruth” (p. 226). Something is a lie, however, “only if I have expressly given the other to understand that I am willing to acquaint him with my thought” (p. 228).

To better illustrate this idea, Kant wrote, “To attack a man on the highway is less vile than to attempt to poison him” (p. 229). Telling an untruth is like attacking a man who is able to defend himself; lying is like poisoning a man’s food — he must eat, and so is defenseless against the poisoner/liar.

If a thief asks a person with \$50 if he has any money, according to Kant, a justifiable answer would be, “I have no money.” He states plainly, “The forcing of a statement from me under conditions which convince me that improper use would be made of it is the only case in which I can be justified in telling a white lie” (p. 228). And here it seems that Kant is breaking from his formalistic ethic of “lying is wrong in itself” to a more teleological “if the result would prove good, then the means are good.” It’s not clear what the reader is to do with this inconsistency.

Kant, later in his essay, provides another instance where telling an untruth is okay. If a neighbor asks you to point out his faults to him, to do so would hurt his feelings: “If we must blame, we must temper the blame with a sweetening of love, good-will, and respect. Nothing else will avail to bring about improvement” (p. 232). At one time it seemed that Kant was concerned with doing what was right because it was intrinsically right. Now it seems that he’s more concerned with the consequences. Two pages later he is even more extreme in his teleological views: “... a man who seeks to do good through evil and error is not an object of hate” (p. 234). In one sense this tempered approach appears to be more loving than strict formalism, but is fraught with apparently irreconcilable inconsistencies.

Bok, like Kant, insists that “truthfulness is a duty which no circumstances abrogate” (Leslie, 1992, p. 8). Bok, also like Kant, introduces redefinitions: intentional deception (like Kant’s untruth) and intentional lying (like Kant’s lying). Deception includes “messages meant to mislead ... [to] make them believe what we ourselves do not believe” (Johannesen, 1990, p. 110). Lying, however, is “any intentionally deceptive message which is stated” (p. 110).

Bok emphasizes, Kant-like, that “truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations” (p. 110). But where Kant took a more rationalistic approach to identifying acceptable and unacceptable lies, Bok takes a more democratic one: She contends that “there should be opportunity for public debate among the public at large” (p. 112). A town meeting should be held to decide whether or not police should perform a sting operation to catch drug runners, for example.

### *Brief discussion and conclusion*

For millennia many religious texts, including the Bible, have seemed to support the idea that telling the truth is categorically better than telling a lie. While there are biblical accounts of people who used deception craftily, there appear to be no scriptural dicta blatantly advocating such practices.

There are many apparently reasonable arguments which support the practice of lying in certain circumstances. None of them come from the formalistic camp, even though some of the proponents of calculated lying seem to have begun from there. Some, such as Kant, have illustrated ways in which lying appears to demonstrate more love than telling the harsh truth. At this point, however, the development of Kant’s ethics of deception seems irrational, and highly dependent upon acceptance and understanding of the redefined words lie and untruth.

The Bible does hint that there are times when it is acceptable to lie, if your definition of lying is saying something with your mouth which is different from what is in your heart. Proverbs 10:19 reads, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but the prudent are restrained in speech.” Cautious people watch their words, censoring those which are hurtful. “Whoever belittles another lacks sense, but an intelligent person remains silent” (Proverbs 11:12). Practicing restraint, rather than always letting known what is being thought or felt, is a good thing.

Finally, “The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness to their lips” (Proverbs 16:23). Again, the writer of Proverbs emphasizes that it is important to judge one’s words, discriminating between those which are useful and those which are not. Is it immorally deceptive, for example, to tell your wife, who is undergoing radiation treatment, that she is beautiful? Is it wiser at times to emphasize certain thoughts and emotions while downplaying others? After all, how many of the thousands of words on one’s heart is one able to speak?

Perhaps Paul made it most clear when he wrote, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). Just as salt is not the staple of a meal, but rather an ingredient which makes eating certain foods more pleasant, so guarding one’s speech is secondary to speaking the truth clearly. Although saltless food is often bland, you would not last long if your diet consisted of salt alone. Similarly, your

dialogical health would be impaired if your speech were pleasant, but insubstantial and consistently deceptive.

It appears that lying — leading others to believe something which you don't believe in your heart — though often bad, is sometimes good, according to certain Bible passages. Perhaps the best way to reconcile the inconsistencies which the Bible appears to have is to redefine, or specify, terms, as Kant and Bok have done. For the Christian, however, it would be ideal to gather deontological support for the use of deception instead of relying on the more teleological approach which Kant and Bok appear to have adopted.

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