

## TRUTHTELLING

From the point of view of ethics, truthtelling is not a matter of speaking the truth but is rather a matter of speaking what one *believes* to be the truth. So too liars do not necessarily say what is false; they say what they believe to be false. Further, one can mislead without lying. An executive answering in the affirmative the question whether some employees are in excessive danger on the job will mislead if he knows that in fact most employees are but does not say so. Yet he does not lie. Similarly there is no lie in an advertisement suggesting that those who use a certain product will win garner wealth and power. This article deals with the ethical and practical dimensions of truthtelling and lying only.

Sincerity is a virtue and yet lies both great and trivial are sometimes in the best interest of the liar or even the party to whom they are addressed. While some, such as Augustine and Kant, have taken the view that lies are morally objectionable under any circumstances, others such as Grotius and Mill have thought there to be conditions under which lying is morally acceptable, and perhaps even obligatory. This latter position raises the question whether there are general principles in the light of which one may determine the moral status of a lie.

Our deeming sincerity a virtue may be due to the fact that each of us is better off in a society in which people are truthful most of the time than we would be in a society in which, say, people lie as often as they tell the truth. This fact may create a presumption against lying so that even those who are not deeply moved by the claims of morality will require special grounds for lying rather than being veracious. If so, then the general principles mentioned above could help to shed light on this presumption and the conditions under which it is reasonably overturned.

### *I. The rationality of truthtelling*

That each of us is better off living in a society in which people are truthful most of the time than we would be in a society in which, say, people lie as often as they tell the truth, may be brought out with the following example. You and another person, X, are both people who act in their own best interest, and you have been placed in separate rooms. In each room there are two buttons, one red and the other green. If you both push the same button (no matter the color) then you each receive a large reward, say \$1 million each. If you push different buttons then you each receive a small reward, say \$1 each. You receive a slip of paper from X with the words, "I have just pushed the green button." Each of you knows that the other is self-interested and each knows that the other is aware of the structure of the situation. Can you infer from these facts alone which button it would be rational to push?

It may seem obvious that the rational thing to do is to push the green button. But as Hodgson has pointed out this inference presupposes that X, as a rational agent, is inclined to tell the truth. You have no reason to accept X's message as veracious unless you have reason to believe that veracity is in X's best interest. Perhaps X believes that the rational thing to do is to assert the opposite of what he believes to be the case. Unless this possibility can be ruled out it is difficult to see what ground you could have for pushing the green rather than the red button.

There is nothing intrinsically more rational about driving on the right side of the road than driving

on the left. However, *given* that in a certain society the regularity is to drive on the right side of the road, sane drivers in this society have no incentive to deviate from this regularity. The regularity of driving on the right side of the road thus seems to be an *equilibrium*: an outcome that is a function of the choices of multiple agents, and such that no such agent has an incentive to deviate from this outcome. It has been suggested by Lewis that the practice of asserting only what you believe is another such an equilibrium, in that given that speakers generally do so there is typically no reason to deviate from this regularity. This may be what Samuel Johnson has in mind in suggesting that even in Hell the devils tell one another the truth.

If we assume that X in the above scenario is from the same society as ours we may be able to infer that X's message is sincere. On this basis we may then infer that the rational choice is to push the green button. This allows us to see the importance of conventions such as truth-telling in societies like ours: Were there no such convention we would be at a loss to know what to make of one another's utterance even if we knew what their words meant.

Each of benefits from the practice of truth-telling. This suggests that in an individual case even the self-interested, amoral agent will presume against lying. What sorts of considerations can overturn this presumption?

## *II. Conditions that may excuse lying*

It has been said that it is easy to tell one lie but hard to tell only one, since the covering up of a lie can involve one in further untruths or dissimulation. What is more, the liar runs the risk of being found out, with the consequent tarnishing of the liar's credibility. Nevertheless, it seems to be in one's best interest to lie to an enemy who, were they to have the truth would do you harm. Further, there seem to be cases in which, not only is it in one's best interest to lie, one is right to do so. A farmer hiding Jews from Germans acts heroically in lying to Nazis who come to his door asking whether he is keeping any Jews in his house. Ethicists and theologians have dealt at length with the question of the conditions under which a lie is morally acceptable.

Augustine held all lies to be morally blameworthy, while conceding that some lies are more blameworthy than others. Following him, Thomas Aquinas held that only some lies constitute mortal sins. Kant held a more stern view, claiming that not only are lies wrong in all circumstances, but that the liar destroys his dignity as a person. Similarly we find in Dante's *Inferno* that liars are tormented in the eighth circle of Hell, and so are superior only to traitors.

Adopting a more temperate view Grotius held that stating what one knows to be false is a lie only if it violates the right of the person to whom it is addressed of liberty in judgment. One with evil intentions gives up this right, and children have yet to acquire it, so lies to such people may be justified. However, an ailing person seems to have all his rights in place and yet a lie to such a person may well be justified.

Bok suggests four major conditions that can excuse lies: avoiding harm, producing benefits, fairness, and veracity itself. Concerning the first condition, some lies are done for the sake of preventing some evil greater than the evil of lying itself. The example of the farmer protecting the lives of the

Jews he is harboring is a case in point. Similarly a lobbyist for a large firm may believe that preventing the layoffs that would result from her company's losing a large government contract justifies lying to public officials. Other untruths are calculated to produce benefits, as in the case of a lie told to a person on her deathbed to lift her spirits, or in the giving of a placebo.

Third, fairness is sometimes invoked as exculpating a lie. One form that this appeal takes is in the thought that the other party would have no qualms about deceiving the liar. Also, some might take their lie to be fair on the ground that it rectifies some earlier wrong done to them. Fourth, one might try to justify a lie on the ground that it is required to preserve one's reputation for veracity. One who has told a justified lie may need to tell other lies in order to protect her reputation for veracity. Bok argues forcefully that although each of these four conditions can legitimate a lie, we are all too prone to invoke them opportunistically in an effort to justify our deceptions. One way to resist this tendency may be to highlight the respect in which the norm of truthfulness is one of many public commodities.

### *III. Liars as free-riders*

Each of us benefits from an ability to presume that others are on the whole veracious. In light of this we see that the opportunistic liar is a "free rider": Such a person exploits a public commodity for her own purposes, such that were many others to do the same this commodity would cease to exist. The commodity that the practice of veracity creates is the ability to rely upon the word of others as in all likelihood sincere. Those interested in the preservation of diverse commodities for the future will scrutinize carefully any claim to justify a departure from the norm of truthfulness.

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Mitchell S. Green  
University of Virginia

*Possible cross references:* ADVERTISING, ETHICS OF; APPLIED ETHICS; AUTHENTICITY; BLUFFING AND DECEPTION; CONSCIENCE; CONSEQUENTIALISM; DECISION THEORY; DUTY; GOLDEN RULE; INFORMATION, ETHICAL ISSUES IN; INTEGRITY; KANTIAN ETHICS; MARKETING, ETHICS OF; MORAL DILEMMAS; MORAL IMPERATIVES; PROMISE AND PROMISING; RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY; REFLECTIVE EQUILIBRIUM; SELF-DECEPTION; SELF-INTEREST; SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY; TRUST; UNIVERSALIZABILITY; UTILITARIANISM.