Deception and the telling of lies

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.

UTILITARIANISM

A simple act-utilitarian approach to deception and 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.

Mill’s brief discussion of lying in Utilitarianism, Ch. 2, 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. 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 example, it seems fairly clear that lying will cause more happiness (or less unhappiness) than telling the truth.

Rule utilitarianism 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 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 rules out making a false promise as immoral because it involves a contradiction in conception. The same applies to lying in general. If you lie, you
are following the maxim to tell a lie when you want to. 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.

Kant argued that lying is always wrong. The example of the would-be murderer
comes from his essay ‘On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives’. Even in
this situation, Kant says, you should not lie.

We can object, however, that one’s 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.

Kant might reply that it would nevertheless fail in the case above. The would-be
murderer knows that everyone lies when it is necessary to save a life. So they
won’t believe us when we answer their question about where their victim is
hiding. So we can’t deceive them.

Rachels responds that if they knew we would lie, they wouldn’t bother asking. On
the other hand, if they thought that we didn’t know that they intend to kill
someone, they might believe us. So is the maxim ‘to lie when it is necessary to
save a life’ universalisable or not? It is unclear.

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?

The prohibition on lying also follows from the second formulation of the
Categorical Imperative. 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’.

**ARISTOTLE’S VIRTUE ETHICS**

When Aristotle discusses truthfulness, he opposes being truthful to boasting and mock-modesty (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk 4.7). 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 deception and lying are acts, like adultery and murder (Bk 2.6), that have no mean. Lying is already in 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 rules in ethics, 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.