

## *Honesty as a Vice* \*

24 June 2007

Laurence Thomas  
Syracuse University

Example 1: Suppose that Miriam, a 9-year old child, asks her parents whether she was wanted from the very moment of conception. As it happens, this was not at all the case. The pregnancy was hardly intended; and to both the husband and the wife, abortion seemed to be the most reasonable option. But unrest while traveling abroad delayed their return home for an entire month. It was too late for an abortion. Upon giving birth to Miriam, who is ever so much the darling of their lives, the parents wonder how they could have ever thought about having an abortion. But indeed they had done so. What should the parents' answer be to their daughter's question? No one will ever know the truth unless either or both of them tell it.

Example 2: Samuli's wife, MoChandra, is a brilliant scientist and a stunningly beautiful woman. Samuli and Joachim are the best of friends, and Samuli asks Joachim the following question: Have you ever been aroused by or had a sexual thought about my wife? The answer, alas, is that Joachim has indeed experienced a few spontaneous erections towards MoChandra. But he has never in the least entertained those feelings, let alone acted upon them. He has never in anyway acted inappropriately towards MoChandra. He would simply never violate anyone's marriage, let alone the marriage of a beloved friend. Now, let us suppose that what motivated Samuli to ask this exceedingly awkward question is that another friend had propositioned MoChandra. And it is in the throes of that devastation, while talking to Joachim about the matter, that Samuli asked the question. How should Joachim answer Samuli? No, one will ever know the truth unless Joachim tells it.

### I. Truth as an Excess

I maintain that telling the truth in either of the above examples would constitute the vice of being honest to an excess; for in a context where no wrong whatsoever has been done and no truth is owed on independent moral grounds, telling the truth would be tantamount to causing unnecessary harm deliberately: to the child in the first case; to the friend in the second one.<sup>1</sup> I am inspired by Aristotle's general account of the virtues,

---

\* Versions of this essay were read in Durham, England at the Royal Institute of Philosophy (2004), at Union College (2004), and at the University of San Francisco (2005). I am grateful to these audiences for their searching comments.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent defense of the view that all lies are immoral, see J. L. A. Garcia, "Lies and the Vices of Deception," *Faith and Philosophy* 15 (1998). See also the response by Thomas Williams, "Lying, Deception, and the Virtue of Truthfulness," *Faith and Philosophy* 17 (2000). Garcia is a virtue ethicist who is arguing that lying of any kind makes us less capable of acting virtuously. Williams challenges this thesis by Garcia. Not surprisingly, I concur that lying does not ipso facto render a person less capable of being virtuous. But, of course, the thesis that wrongful behavior  $\emptyset$  makes it the case that one is less likely

though it is not my aim to capture his official views regarding lying.<sup>2</sup>

As is well known, Aristotle held that virtue is the mean between two extremes: the extreme of deficiency in one case and the extreme of excess in the other. With regard to the virtue of honesty, the deficiency is straightforward enough. It is called lying, which is to say what one knows to be false in order to deceive someone. At the other extreme, some excesses in telling the truth are readily recognized. We all know that it matters how and when we tell the truth. It is possible to be exceedingly vicious and cruel all the while telling the truth and nothing but the truth. This one can do either by telling the truth at the wrong time or in the wrong way. For instance, it is one thing to tell a student that his paper is quite unacceptable. It is quite another to tell that same student the truth that one regards the paper as the worse paper that one has read in one's 20 year career as a professor. In most cases, this latter truth is mean. It would be equally mean, if not more so, to tell this latter truth to the student while attending the funeral service for his two parents who were killed in a car accident. These cases constitute a form of excess in telling the truth.

Another excess is when a person tells more than she or he should in order to answer a question truthfully. If, for instance, Opidopo knows that Rachel was at home watching a pornographic film per orders of her therapist (since that is what Rachel told Opidopo when he asked her what she was watching) and Meralie asks Opidopo where was Rachel last night, then Opidopo's response ought to be simply that she was home. In thus responding, he answers truthfully and ever so adequately without providing the additional facts. He clearly says more than he needs to say if he goes on to tell Meralie that Rachel was watching a pornographic film. So it is even if he adds that it was per her therapist's orders that she was doing so.

With the example of the student essay and Rachel watching television, it is easy enough to avoid the excess of honesty by telling the truth in a different way or by telling it at a different time or by not saying as much. In no case is it necessary to tell a lie. Not so, however, with the two examples with which I opened this essay. The only way to avoid the excess of telling the truth in the case of the two opening examples is by lying. Let me elaborate.

It is manifestly obvious, I trust, that there is no nice way to tell one's 9-year child that she was initially unwanted. Were the child 20 years old, for instance, it would be a different matter entirely. And if one believes that abortion is justified, then one believes that the couple did nothing morally wrong in having first made the decision to have an

---

to do what is right is not identical to the thesis that we always have wrongful behavior with behavior Ø. The concern of this essay is the latter thesis, with respect to lying, where saving life is not an issue.

<sup>2</sup> See Jane S. Zembaty, "Aristotle on Lying," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31 (1993) for a very informative discussion of Aristotle's official views on the subject.

abortion. The fact that traveling complications got in the way of doing so most certainly does not retroactively render the decision wrong, especially in view of the fact that it is now the case that the couple so loves and adores the child.

With the second example, I take it to be equally obvious that there is absolutely no palatable way to tell a person that one has had sexual feelings, however fleeting and spontaneous, for the individual's spouse. It seems not to matter in the least that the spouse is by all accounts unbelievably attractive. Nor, again, does it matter that human beings are human beings, and that unintentional sexual arousal occasionally occurs as a matter of human nature. Every one of us knows that there is all the difference in the world between being spontaneously aroused, on the one hand, and entertaining an arousal or contemplating acting upon it, on the other. Anger has occasioned many a thought that a person would not dare act upon. Spontaneous sexual arousal is very much a part of the human condition. Just so, this truth does not serve as a palliative in example 2 with the scenario between Samuli and Joachim.

Let me underscore here the point that we do not in either case have a situation in which the question asked arises from compromising behavior on the part of the individuals to whom the question is asked. Not even the appearance of impropriety is at issue with either example. So in neither instance do we have a case where an embarrassing truth has to be told as a form of yet further damage control or as a means of accepting responsibility for inappropriate behavior. What is more, the truth is not one that either person who asked the question needs to know in order for the individual to have a proper assessment of her or his talents, as is the case with a student or an employer or a contestant. Nor again does the truth allow for a proper assessment on the part of the child of the parents or on the part of Samuli of Joachim. Even more forcefully, there is no respect in which either the child or Samuli is, on entirely independent grounds, entitled to the truth anyhow.

So it would seem that there is no good reason whatsoever to tell the truth in either instance save that the truth is the correct answer to the question that has been posed. And I maintain that this reason is not good enough in view of the following: (1) telling the truth will do tremendous (if not irreparable) damage; (2) no relevant wrong of any sort has been done by either individual who has been asked the question; and (3) there are absolutely no independent considerations in virtue of which the interlocutor is entitled to the truth in question.

As is well-known, Kant held that respect for truth is the backdrop against which all social interaction is possible.<sup>3</sup> This is true enough. Granting this point, though, does

---

<sup>3</sup> "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives". For an excellent discussion of Kant's views here and an attempt to make sense of how Kant might have advanced this position, see Robert J. Benton, "Political Expediency and Lying: Kant vs Benjamin Constant," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43 (1982).

not suffice to show as much as many suppose (as shall become evident when we discuss the topic of self-defense in §2 below). A further consideration in this regard is that it is implausible to think that a person is entitled to the truth merely on account of the fact that someone managed to ask that individual just the right question. Suppose that a would-be-murderer is chasing a woman who is fleeing from him, and he asks me whether she ran west or east. To that question, I truthfully answer that “I have not a clue” (for I do readily ascertain directions in terms of these coordinates). Sensing this, the would-be-murderer pauses for a moment and then asks: “Did she go right or left?” Needless to say, I know the answer to that question and this the would-be-murderer knows. Is that individual now entitled to the truth? I should think not. Of course, I could say none of your business, but he is threatening to kill my two children who are with me if I do not give him an answer. Surely, one makes a vice out of honesty in insisting that the truth be told in this instance. In section §IV, I shall say more about not being entitled to the truth merely because one has managed to ask the right question.

## II. Not Quite True nor False

Although every instance of lying constitutes not telling the truth by knowingly saying what one knows is false, it is of course possible to answer a question without either telling the truth or lying. There are lots of times when one can simply refrain from answering the question; and this one can do in a multitude of ways. One can remain silent to the question or declare the question beyond the bounds of propriety. Or, one can offer a vague non-prevaricating evasive (VNPE-) response that at least puts an end to the questioning, but which does not, strictly speaking, constitute an answer the question—a response that is more of a non-lie than a truth.

Take, for example, the case of Rachel who was watching a pornographic film at home (per orders of her therapist), if Meralie asks Opidopo what was Rachel doing last night at home, he might declare the question beyond the bounds of propriety by insisting that it is not his place to report what Rachel was doing in her home. Or if he had told Meralie that Rachel was watching a film, and contrary to what he had expected Meralie asks him what film was she watching, Opidopo might very well offer the following vague non-prevaricating evasive (VNPE-) response rather than tell Meralie that she was watching a pornographic flick: “Oh, it was one of those crazy non-traditional films. Please don’t ask me to describe it”. In all likelihood, Opidopo will have thereby put an end to Meralie’s questioning here, although Opidopo did not tell the truth about what Rachel was watching and although his response is more of a non-lie than a truth.

---

As Benton notes, Kant’s views here are most disconcerting and philosophers have spent a great deal of intellectual energy in the attempt to render Kant’s views more palatable. See, e.g., Christine Korsgaard, “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 15 (1986).

VNPE-responses often play on the prevailing conversational implicature.<sup>4</sup> Pornographic films are certainly non-traditional films. In the United States, though, the expression “non-traditional film” usually calls to mind a foreign film rather than a porno flick, which is precisely why Opidopo responded as he did. So the response is at least somewhat misleading without being a lie. Sometimes a misleading response is innocuous enough. Sometimes a misleading response is vicious.

Suppose that I ask my wife, Ruzella, whether she had a nice day at the office, to which she responds “Things really went well today, dear”. Ruzella understands all too well that I am asking her about job activities as company president. In fact, she is counting on us both having precisely that understanding. It is just that what really went well is the affair with Jowell (that took place in the lounge compartment of her office) that had been in the planning for months. Without a doubt, my wife was at the office. Needless to say, this misleading response is vicious, in that it was knowingly uttered with the intention of masking a wrong.

I shall not here attempt to offer an account of the difference between vague non-prevaricating evasive (VNPE-) responses that are innocent and those that are vicious, save that innocent responses do not mask wrongs and such responses are generally morally unobjectionable. What suffices for the purposes of this essay is that an innocuous VNPE-response would not appear to be an option in the case of the examples with which I opened this essay.

With example 1, we can imagine that a profound kind of affirmation is at stake with the child’s question. One does not play with the child’s psychological well-being here; and this question on the child’s part most certainly cannot be declared out of bounds; for as a matter of fact there is nothing out of bounds about the question. In any case, though, so declaring the question would only make matters worse. Suppose that in the hopes of getting around the child’s question, the parents respond “We have always loved you”. If the child then responds “Oh, so that means you loved me from the moment of conception, right?”, a clever and innocuous non-answer on the part of the parents (who have committed no wrong to mask in this regard) is now out of bounds.

With example 2, anything but a direct and unequivocal “No” tends to be incriminating. No doubt, Samuli ought not to have asked the question. However, it will be remembered that it is because Samuli’s was emotionally wrought by the betrayal of another friend that Samuli posed the question Joachim. In any event, declaring the question beyond the bounds of propriety does not work, no matter how much one insists upon both the question’s impropriety and the fact that one is merely not answering it. Indeed, such insistence seems only to make matters worse—a case of protesting too

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Grice, *Studies in the Ways of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), ch. 2, “Logic and Conversation”.

much. The same holds for clever non-answers. If to Samuli's question, Joachim responds, "Man, I am sure that every red-blooded male who has seen your wife has experienced a spontaneous sexual impulse," Samuli's retort will undoubtedly be "I am not asking about what every red-blooded-male has experienced, I am asking you about what you have experienced". Whatever else is true at this moment, clever and innocuous non-answers on the part of Joachim (who has committed no wrong to mask in this regard) are now out of bounds.

As an aside, the second example brings out the sublime truth that at times there is all the difference in the world between its being ever so highly probable that so-and-so did X and its being unequivocally affirmed, by that words of that very individual, that so-and-so did X. This reality, though, is beyond the purview of this essay.

Let us return at this point to Kant's view that one should tell the truth to a criminal who inquires of one as to the whereabouts of an innocent individual even if one has every good reason to believe that the villain will murder the person. If, as it happens, that is exactly what the villain does, one can take solace in the fact that one nonetheless did one's duty and that the only thing that one did was tell the truth. It is someone else who did the actual killing. Interestingly, there is an odd way in which the supposition that the villain will commit murder makes the case too easy; for the truth teller never has to worry about answering to the moral outrage of the murdered victim.<sup>5</sup> Suppose, though, that what is known is that the villain will commit a vicious rape, as is his criminal trade-mark. It is all but inconceivable to me that anyone would take any solace in the thought that he did his duty and that all he did was tell the truth in answering to the viciously raped victim who asks "Why didn't you lie, as the villain would have believed you of all people and looked elsewhere?" The understandable moral outrage of the rape victim would underscore this point.

In any case, what we have with Kant's example are two entirely different moral agents: the one who tells the truth and the villain who murders. So there is indeed some moral distance that the truth teller can point to even if that distance should prove to be woefully insufficient to excuse his telling the truth. By contrast, with the two examples given at the outset of the essay the persons who tell the truth and the persons who occasion the harm of the rupture are one and the same. So they can take no solace whatsoever in the thought that, in the matter at hand, their moral agency completely stops at the portal of telling the truth and someone else's moral agency is responsible for the

---

<sup>5</sup> The importance of moral outrage has been developed in my essay "Forgiving the Unforgivable", in Eve Garrard and Geoffrey Scarre (eds.), *Moral Philosophy and the Holocaust* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2003). Sometimes we wish to express moral outrage for the wrong that a person has committed even if we do not want to see that person punished or punishment is not even in the offing. This seems to be common enough among parents, for instance, with older children especially. Parents are typically not in the position to punish an older child; and perhaps they would not want to do so even if they could. By contrast, an expression of moral outrage over that child's behavior may not only be most suitable but ever so effective.

harm that occurred.

We know that the truth can sometimes hurt, although it is not our intention to hurt the person in question. I mentioned this in passing in connection with offering assessments of a person's work. It is always disappointing to say the least to be told that one's work is not up to par. Yet, we understand that people have to be so informed, and that in fact it can be very, very wrong not to do so. For we understand that not to do so is to mislead them in a fundamentally important way that is likely to make things worse for them further down the road. As I trust is obvious, the two examples that I have offered are not at all like this. And once more, there is no wrong here that needs to be acknowledged or of which anyone needs to be informed. So examples 1 and 2 are quite unlike the case of my wife, Ruzella, having an affair in the lounge compartment of her office and forgetting about the surveillance cameras that had been installed a decade ago for security purposes. The chief security officer reviews these films and thereby learns of the affair. The truth will cause a lot of hurt. But it needs to be told.

With our two examples, there is no truth that the child needs to know about her abilities, which the parents withhold from her if they lie and tell her that they wanted her and loved her from the very moment of conception. There is no future respect in which the lie will turn out to harm the child. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for Samuli. Of course, in either case it can be said that one never knows what will happen. The problem with this line of thought is that it cuts deeply in every conceivable direction. If all it takes for there to be a reason not to do something is the slightest, and most implausible, possibility that something might go wrong, then there is very little that we could do. Making promises for instance would be out of the question, since there would always be the possibility that one could not keep the promise. This is part of the reason why Kant's own explanation for why lying is wrong to save the life of an innocent person is so incredibly troubling. It is true enough that as a result of the lie there is the possibility, however small, that something worse could happen. But if this is a reason that militates against prevaricating, then it also militates against doing all sorts of things, which brings us (rather surprisingly, no doubt) to the topic of self-defense.

As with respect for truth, respect for life is also a backdrop that makes genuine social interaction possible. It goes without saying that if, at every turn, we had to worry about being killed by one person or another, life would simply be unbearable. Yet, what surely does not follow from this latter consideration is that killing as a form of self-defense is morally impermissible, even if this involves killing an innocent person.<sup>6</sup> If

---

<sup>6</sup> The literature on self-defense is quite rich. While there is much discussion regarding just how the justification of self-defense goes, there is little to no discussion denying its defensibility. The most significant issue pertains to different categories of cases. See, among others, the following: Judith Jarvis Thomson, " *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991): 283-310; Larry Alexander, "Self-Defense, Justification and Excuse," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993): 53-66; and Suzanne Uniack, "In

innocent person Alpha has been programmed to kill me and the only way that I can prevent this is to kill Alpha, then surely I may kill Alpha in order to save my life, notwithstanding both Alpha's indisputable moral innocence and my indisputable respect for life. What is more, my doing so in a case where the person's innocence is beyond dispute would not in any way call into question my respect for life. This is because what respect for life entails is not that one may never under any circumstances kill a person, even an innocent one, but that one may never do for certain kinds of reasons.

Significantly, self-defense is not the only exception. Suppose that innocent Alpha has been programmed to kill my two children. When I arrive home all that is left for Alpha to do is pull the string that will release the blade that will cut off their heads. Surely I may stop Alpha even if the only way to do that is to kill her. Suppose that Alpha's entire body is covered except for her left earlobe (for cell phone use); and it is that ear that is turned towards me. If I shoot Alpha in that ear, the individual will surely die. As it turns out, I work for the special police force and I am an expert at accurately hitting targets from a distance. Given these considerations, there is no doubt at all that I may shoot Alpha in the ear; and my doing so will surely not constitute an instance of disrespect for life. Nor need the justification be tied to a crass utilitarian calculus: better that one innocent life should die than two such lives. For my killing here would be no less permissible if, instead of two children, there is only one child who Alpha will kill. But what if I miss? Not only that, what if the bullet ricochets off the wall and shatters the huge window next to Alpha causing a large piece of plate glass to fall upon and kill a person who just so happens to be passing by? This entire scenario is woefully improbable. Still, it is certainly possible. Yet, no one would think for a moment that this mere miniscule possibility militates against my attempting to stop Alpha by shooting him (especially in view of my skills in accurately hitting a target).

Together, these two cases make it clear that under very special circumstances killing another person, including an innocent individual, is compatible with having respect for life. In neither case is killing done as a matter of convenience or in order to profit at the expense of another or in order to hide a wrongdoing of any sort. Respect for life and its importance to our social reality is compatible with killing. It is not, however, compatible with arbitrarily killing others or killing others merely in order to advance one's self-interest. Surely, this holds *mutatis mutandis* with regard to respect for truth.

When innocent life is threatened by a person's activities, then respect for human life is compatible with killing that individual if that is the only way one can prevent the person from taking innocent life. Needless to say, the point of telling the truth is not to

---

Defense of Permissible Killing: A Response to Two Critics," *Law and Philosophy* 19 (2000): 627-633. I am particularly indebted to George P. Fletcher, "Punishment and Self-Defense," *Law and Philosophy* 8 (1989): 201-215.

provide people with information whereby they can harm others. Rather, it is to foster and underwrite trust in social interaction. And there are contexts in which lying is compatible with precisely that aim, as I shall endeavor to show in the following section.

### III. For the Good of the Other

As is generally acknowledged, people lie for reasons that are quite obnoxious morally. Most people lie with the intent of harming another or profiting from another's ignorance. A multitude of configurations are possible here. A person may lie in order to gain access to a person's resources in a wrongful manner. Or a person may lie out of jealousy. Or a person may lie to get even.

Fortunately, though, it is not a logical feature of prevaricating that the intention of the lie itself need be to harm the person to whom the lie is told. Significantly, we may lie about ourselves for the good of another, where this is not paternalistic.<sup>7</sup> I shall illustrate this in what follow by starting with the simple case of withholding the truth.

Suppose that Gabriel learns some very bad news regarding his health just three days prior to the wedding of Jeffrey, his very dearest friend. Gabriel learns that he has terminal cancer, with no more than 8 months to live. Normally, Jeffrey would have been the first person to find out. But not this time. Gabriel flies in for the wedding and serves as Jeffrey's best man, as had been planned. A few months later, Jeffrey learns the truth and is very upset that Gabriel had not breathed a word about this to him. Gabriel's response, of course, is simple enough: "I was not about to ruin your wedding. And your knowing would not have changed a thing". Without lying, Gabriel withheld information from Jeffrey; and this he did for the good of Jeffrey. Yet, this hardly seems wrong. Quite the contrary, it seems to have been the ever so decent thing to do. Moreover, although Jeffrey is upset, the reason why he is upset is not that he thinks that he has been wronged by Gabriel. Quite the contrary, it is simply that he would much rather have been there to help his friend cope with the devastating news.

Of course, there was no lie told. But we can easily imagine that this happens. Modifying the example, things proceed as follows: Gabriel flies in for the wedding and serves as Jeffrey's best man, as had been planned. Jeffrey notes that Gabriel is looking a little pale and inquires as to why. Gabriel lies, though, and claims that he is just getting over a bout of influenza. When Jeffrey finds out the truth a few months later, he is very upset. Alas, Gabriel remarks: "I was not about to ruin your wedding and the starting of your new life. Your knowing about my illness would not have changed a thing". Given the lie, does Jeffrey now have more of a reason to be upset than in the preceding case? Does the lie reveal Gabriel to be more devious or malicious in some way? Does the lie

---

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent discussion of the subject of paternalism, see Gerald Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

taint his moral character in any way at all? Absolutely not. We do not have a remarkably decent person in the first scenario who is willing to keep his tragic pain to himself for the sake of a dear friend's most precious moment in life, but a fallen angel, as it were, in the second one; for the lie adds nothing whatsoever that is negative to Gabriel's motives.

In both scenarios, information was withheld. But, of course, no one would argue that in the first scenario Jeffrey had a right to the information that Gabriel withheld. Had Gabriel waited until his final moments of life to speak to Jeffrey about the matter, this would have been odd. Perhaps disturbingly so. Still, no right would have been violated; no wrong would have been done.

With the modified scenario, there is the obvious difference that Jeffrey has been lied to. But it seems that we can admit that and ask: Has Jeffrey been wronged? For what we get with Gabriel's lie is not a quite extraordinary coincidence where a lie turns out to be beneficial, but much more. Notice that no one could have blamed Sebastain or called him self-centered had he lost all composure upon learning that he has terminal cancer. But what Gabriel in fact did is saintly, showing at once both a level of selflessness and a level of integrity that is rare among human beings. And the lie that he told was pressed in the service of the realization of these virtues. Anything but the lie would have been the undoing of Jeffrey's wedding; and Gabriel simply was not having that.

The second scenario with Gabriel reveals the seminal point that in lying a person can actually exhibit behavior that rightfully elicits our moral admiration precisely because it reveals the kind of deep and extraordinary character whereby a person is willing to make a considerable sacrifice for the good of another. The idea, then, that all lying is crass and morally base is simply mistaken. Far from revealing a weakness, Gabriel's lie evinces remarkable self-command. To be sure, Gabriel did not jump upon a hand grenade in order to save a friend's life, but in terms of motivational structure what he in fact did is ever so parallel to that sort of sacrifice. The lie in this instance, far from destroying trust, profoundly underwrites it. In Gabriel, Jeffrey has one extraordinary friend. The example also brings out that we can make the case for lying without supposing that the person to whom the lie is told is not owed the truth.<sup>8</sup>

At its best, respect for the truth is not just about telling the truth, but about showing respect for the other. This is why it matters not just that we tell the truth but how and when we tell it. For as was observed at the outset, the truth can be told in a mean and hurtful manner or in a thoughtful and considerate manner; and one does not show respect for another by telling the truth to her or him in a mean and hurtful manner. This is the reason why there are lots of truths that we simply do not say. In fact, we

---

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," *op. cit.*

sometimes refrain from saying things that are obviously true about ourselves precisely because we come across as arrogant or mean-spirited in doing so. Everyone knows, for instance, that University X is better than University Y. Yet, it is very rare for a professor at University X to say “The institution at which I am a faculty member is vastly superior in terms of academic excellence to the one at which you are a faculty member”. Generally, doing so would be seen as a form of crass arrogance. We can easily think of numerous other examples of this sort. It may, for instance, be manifestly obvious that Zephyr is vastly more attractive than Adalon. Everyone knows this, including Zephyr and Adalon. Just so, there are very few scenarios, if any, where Zephyr could say this to Adalon without coming across as mean-spirited. Differentials in body weight provide us with another example of this sort.

It goes without saying that we cannot respect a person by lying to the individual for no other reason than to advance our own interest or to harm the person. Nor can we respect a person by withholding information from the individual that she needs in order to make decisions about her very own life. This is why paternalism in medicine is seen as so objectionable. Nor, again, can we respect a person by presenting a false picture of the kind of person that we are in terms of our character, personality, or station in life; for this is tantamount to a vicious form of manipulation. Yet, from none of this does it follow that lying to a person necessarily entails failing to have the proper moral respect for that individual, as a lie need not violate any of the moral precepts just articulated. And one way to see this is to notice, as the remarks of the preceding paragraph make abundantly clear, that genuine respect for the truth is utterly incompatible with being unscrupulous about what truths we tell and when we tell them or how we tell them.

This section brings out that the moral opprobrium that we attach to lying has much more to do with motives than is generally acknowledged. It is very rare that anyone prevaricates for the reasons that moved Gabriel (in the second scenario) to do so. And this tells us what we already know, namely that it is quite rare for a person to have morally legitimate motives for lying. The same also holds for killing an innocent person.

#### IV. Morally Appropriate Lying

I have taken it to be obvious that we have a case of morally admirable lying in the second scenario with Gabriel. Thus, his lying was not just excusable. Nor, again, was it merely morally appropriate, as lots of things are morally appropriate without being admirable. For example, a professor does what is morally appropriate, but not morally admirable, in accepting as an excuse for a late paper the fact that the student had just lost both of his parents. With a morally admirable lie, (i) the person lies at considerable cost to himself in order to a good for someone else, where the (ii) the individual is not in any way masking a wrong that she or he has done and (iii) no other person is any way harmed or wronged. The point of significance here is that if we can have a morally admirable lie,

then it would seem that we can have a morally appropriate lie. Clearly, it is (i) that secures the view that Gabriel's lie is morally admirable. The very idea that a lie may stem from utterly selfless motives is extremely important. This suggests that condition (i) would not obtain in the case of a lie that is morally appropriate, but not morally admirable. Needless to say, constraints (ii) and (iii) must continue to hold. This, in turn, is in keeping with the truth that with morality in general there is much that it is morally appropriate to do, where the behavior in question is not considered a form of selflessness. This can be so even when the morally appropriate behavior is an inconvenience to the agent. If, for instance, a doctoral student lost her parents a day prior to when her Ph.D. defense was to take place, then the committee morally ought to re-arrange the date of her defense even if this inconveniences every committee member. Yet, in the absence of rather unusual circumstances, it would be ludicrous for the members of the committee to think of themselves as having exhibited selfless behavior in this instance.

Suppose, then, that at the outset there is a strong moral obligation not to tell a particular truth, where the basis for this moral obligation is not owing to having made a promise. It is easy enough to think of cases of this sort. Certainly, if one knows the whereabouts of the black slave during American slavery who is seeking freedom or the Jew during Nazi Germany who is hiding from the Nazis, one has an independent and strong moral obligation not to disclose that information to anyone whom one has reason to believe would kill either individual. The same holds for a woman whom one sees fleeing her would-be-murderer. In either case, this strong obligation has nothing at all to do with having promised anything to anyone. Rather, the obligation stems from the very constraints of moral decency, hence we also have the rationale for the claim that the obligation is also independent. Now, in the typical case of lying to save a life, we can reasonably assume that lie would satisfy conditions (ii) and (iii) but not condition (i); for moral theory does not require that we put ourselves out risk in order to save the life of another.

So the question is this? *If a person has an independent and strong moral obligation not to volunteer the truth*, where conditions (ii) and (iii) obtain (but not condition (i)), is that obligation ipso facto overridden merely in virtue of someone managing to ask her or him just the right question, given that following conditions also obtain: (a) there is no way to declare the question outside of the bounds of propriety without making matters worse; (b) there is no way to avoid answering the question by giving a clever non-prevaricating evasive response; and (c) the truthful answer will cause nothing but considerable if not irreparable harm. Let us refer to a question asked under these conditions as an egregious morally infelicitous (EMI-) question.

It goes saying that I believe that a lie is morally acceptable in the face of what I have called an EMI question. The preponderance of reason favors this view. I shall just

mention a few considerations in favor of lying given this backdrop. First of all, the continuum of the good characteristically admits of a multitude of gradations between the good and the bad. Indeed, no one thinks for a moment that all lies are equally objectionable on moral grounds. There is simply no comparison in terms of moral reprehensibility between the lies told by Nazis to deceive Jews and, say, the lie told by a parent to her child that she has never smoked cigarettes, when in fact she had done so for a year just before deciding to become pregnant. Perhaps this latter lie constitutes what is typically characterized as a white lie. In any case, *if* a lie can in fact be admirable, as I maintain that we have with Gabriel in the second scenario, then it stands to reason that a lie can also be only morally appropriate: less than admirable but not thereby morally inappropriate.

In this regard, it is easy enough to imagine that some morally appropriate lies are vastly more morally appropriate than the truth. For as we all know, the remark “I merely told the truth” has been used to excuse, if not justify, making extraordinarily malicious remarks about a person. Consider the case of someone who reveals an unpleasant and damaging truth—say that Smith had been suspected of cheating in college—to the media on the grounds that the truth is always permissible.<sup>9</sup> That Smith was eventually cleared of it all by a 5 to 4 decision of the college judicial board is conveniently ignored. One would be hard pressed to make the case that either Joachim or the parents of Miriam have committed the greater wrong on account of their lie than the person who leaked this information about Smith to the media. It is simply a mistake, then, to suppose that the truth is inherently more virtuous than lying.

Second, as we have already seen in Section §2, with the discussion of self-defense and killing to protect an innocent life: if killing an innocent life does not necessarily constitute disrespect for humanity, then it is woefully untenable to suppose that telling a lie necessarily does. It goes without saying that respect for truth and life is necessary if human beings are to have any chance at all of living well. What does not follow from this truth, however, is that any instance of killing or prevaricating constitutes a lack of respect for truth or life respectively.

Third, it is ludicrous to think that a strong and independent moral obligation not to volunteer the truth is defeated merely in virtue of someone managing to ask the right question, regardless of her or his manifestly malicious motives. Such a view makes a mockery of what it means to have this obligation, to say nothing of affording evil a power that it should not have, namely the power of entrapment.<sup>10</sup> Recall the example in Section §1, where the would-be-murderer first asks whether the woman went east or west, and

---

<sup>9</sup> I owe this line of thought to Paul M. Huges’s excellent essay “The Logic of Temptation,” *Philosophia* 29 (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Sherman makes this point in *Making a Necessity of Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), as does Korsgaard in “The Right to Lie,” *op. cit.*

then upon seeing that I do not operate with those coordinates, asks me if she went left or right.

In her seminal essay “Moral Beliefs,”<sup>11</sup> Philippa Foot noted that if a just person can be too easily tempted to do what is unjust, then this suggests that the individual is not just after all. Accordingly, we can analogously say that if an obligation not to volunteer a truth can be too easily defeated, then it is not clear that we had such an obligation in the first place. It makes no sense whatsoever to say that we have a strong and independent obligation not to volunteer a truth if that obligation can be defeated by the right question being asked by a person who will clearly do what is manifestly evil upon obtaining that truth.

To be sure, it is possible that we are mistaken about a person’s intentions. It is, for instance, possible that a serial killer has had a conversion experience since his last victim. But a would-be-victim would be a fool to believe this; for mere possibility alone tells us nothing at all about actual likelihood. An outcome is not highly probable merely in virtue of the fact that is possible. Although it is possible that I shall win the lottery tomorrow, the probability that I shall is, as we all know, very, very low. Whatever is true, then, it is simply not the case that a strong and independent obligation to not volunteer the truth is defeated by the mere possibility that one can be mistaken in one’s assessment that a person has utterly malicious motives in inquiring as to the whereabouts of an innocent person.

Bearing in mind the third consideration, it would seem that most discussions regarding whether telling a lie is morally permissible do not consider the case where, from the outset, there is a strong independent moral obligation not to volunteer the truth. Roughly put, the thought seems to be that inquiries naturally create a *prima facie* obligation to tell the truth. Let us assume that this is the case. But what follows from this assumption? In particular, does it follow that the obligation to tell the truth that is created by an inquiry defeats any and all existing obligations not to volunteer the truth, given that one cannot simply declare question out of bounds or that there is no vague non-prevaricating evasive answer that will pass? Needless to say, an affirmative answer would require an extraordinarily powerful argument. However, no such argument has been made. The closest argument in this regard is the one pertaining to respect; and we have already seen that, just as respect for life does not entail that it is always wrong to kill an innocent person, respect for truth cannot possibly entail that it is always wrong to tell a lie.

Following Aristotle’s remarks about being good, there are many ways to tell the truth; accordingly, the trust is not simply that we will tell the truth but that we will tell it

---

<sup>11</sup> Reprinted in her collection *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

in the right way and at the right time. This point, however, entails a precept, call it the precept of moral uptake in truth telling, that is independent of truth telling and that guides us regarding when and how a truth should be uttered. What might devastate a person on Tuesday may very well be accepted with enormous equanimity on Thursday. The precept of moral uptake requires that we be mindful of these matters. While it sounds ad hoc to invoke an independent moral precept regarding truth telling, that there is such a precept follows from the view that how and when we tell the truth is itself a matter of considerable excellence.

Trust between friends and loved ones, for example, is inextricably tied to the application of this independent precept of moral uptake. It is not at all uncommon for friends and loved ones to speak about observations (strengths or weaknesses) each had made about the other but about which nothing was said. And to the question “Why didn’t you say something?” there are various quite acceptable responses: “Had I told you then, you would have been devastated?”, “I understood that you needed to make the discovery for yourself”, or “You were too angry to accept any observations about that—even from me”. And so on. When the relationship is as it should be and the precept has been properly applied, the other acknowledges the validity of the response, characteristically expressing gratitude for the exercise of restraint on our part. Friendships and loves could not survive in the absence of the judicious application of this independent precept regarding the moral uptake in truth telling. Moving beyond friends and loved ones, it is often the case that we do not say things, though we know that our silence might be seen as, at the very least, the absence of disapproval because we correctly grasp that we do more harm by saying something.

It is incontrovertible that truths should be uttered at the right time. What seems quite doubtful, though, is the thesis that for every truth there will always be a right time to utter it. What is more, even if that thesis should turn out to be true, what is surely false is that a person ipso facto creates the right time to tell a truth simply in virtue of asking someone a question which can be answered correctly only by uttering the truth in question, where it is not possible to declare the answer out of bounds or offer an evasive response. What I have called the precept of the moral uptake in truth telling acknowledges this reality.

Between even the best of male friends, there is for all practical purposes never a right time for one friend to tell the other that he was spontaneously aroused sexually by the beauty of the other’s spouse, even though the question should be asked. Invariably, the moral uptake in truth telling is always horrendous. For a child whose parents were going to abort her, the moral uptake for a 9 year old, who should not be told the truth when she asks whether she was wanted from the moment of conception, is quite different from what the moral uptake would be, should the question be asked 11 years later, when

the child is 20 years old. The moral uptake is horrific in the first instance, but not in the second one.

Crass indifference to the moral uptake in truth telling turns honesty or, at any rate, truth telling into vice.

## V. Conclusion

It is held by many that Kant was simply mistaken in thinking that one could not be morally justified in lying in order to save the life of an innocent person.<sup>12</sup> No doubt the sentiment is animated by the thought that the loss of life constitutes an irreplaceable harm. Moreover, there is typically enormous clarity as to when life itself is at stake. Obviously, there is no gainsaying these points. But many who might disagree with Kant on the issue of lying when doing so will save a life, think that otherwise it is wrong to lie. I have argued otherwise in this essay. We know that the truth can cause irreparable damage to a person's psychological well-being. To be sure, we do not always have clarity when this is so. All the same, the reality is that things are more than clear enough in a great many cases. The depth of psychological damage is ever so real and the exceptions prove the rule. This is why we marvel at a Frederick Douglass or an Elie Wiesel. Each went on to flourish notwithstanding the fact that each passed through the very bowels of evil.

Looking at cases that have nothing to do with life being at stake, I have in this essay focused upon those truths that a person nonetheless already has a strong and independent moral obligation not to volunteer and then I have argued that this obligation is not defeated simply in virtue of a person's asking what I have called in Section §4 an egregious morally infelicitous question; hence, it is morally appropriate to lie. It is owing to the horrendous moral uptake of the truths in question that a person has such a strong and independent obligation not to volunteer the truth; and an exacting question does not suffice to diffuse or alter in any significant way the horrendous moral uptake of the question.

The hope is that I have provided a well-defined framework for when it might be morally permissible to tell a lie, although a person's life is not at stake. This case I have given is when an individual is faced with an egregious morally infelicitous question, where such a question is understood to entail that an independent and strong moral obligation to volunteer the truth is in place, no wrong has been done, the truth would cause enormous if not irreparable harm, and no evasive non-prevaricating response is possible. I do not claim that this the only case in which a lie might be morally permissible. We should bear in mind that even within a well-defined framework, there

---

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent discussion in this regard, see Robert J. Benton, "Political Expediency and Lying: Kant vs Benjamin Constant," *op. cit.*

can be matters of considerable debate. Thus, while just about everyone thinks that self-defense is justified, it can be a matter of considerable debate over whether or not a person has killed in self-defense. Joyce Hawthorne, the first battered woman to be acquitted on a plea of self-defense, shot her husband 9 times. Commenting on this, Ms. Walker explained that “a woman’s reasonable perception of danger may differ from a man’s, and *she may not be able to assess the amount of force required to subdue an attacker*” (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> The general adequacy of a framework is not defeated simply by fact that there is some disagreement regarding its applicability.

It might be objected that the moral permissibility to lie allows for too much discretion because there are many variables to take into account. In this respect, so the argument might continue, lying is unlike killing in self-defense which relatively speaking is much more well-defined. Alas, while it is true that options can overwhelm us, it is also the case that moral excellence at its best consists not in making the right choice when there is only one alternative to choose from in the first place. Quite contrary, the wherewithal to choose well and correctly amidst an array of alternatives evinces, at once, depth of judgment and self-command. Thus, the discretion that is a liability at one end is an opportunity for unqualified moral excellence at the other end. Precisely what makes friendships and romantic loves at their best such extraordinary excellences is just that fact that each party choose well amid a vast multitude of options.

This essay reflects the simple truth that, even when life is not at all at stake, it can be quite morally inappropriate to tell truth. Thus, I have argued that in the face of having been asked an egregious morally infelicitous question, honesty is a vice.

---

<sup>13</sup> I am referring to the phenomenon known as battered women syndrome. The quote is from “The Final Self-Defense”, *The New York Times* (31 December 1989). For a discussion of the battered women syndrome in legal theory, see, e.g., Joshua Dressler, “Battered Women and Sleeping Abusers: Some Reflections,” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 3 (2006) and Joan Krause, “Distorted Reflections of Battered Women Who Kill: A Response to John Dressler,” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 4 (2007).