

Views on the Moral Permissibility of Lying

The question of what constitutes morality is often asked by philosophers. One might wonder why morality is so important, or why many of us trouble ourselves over determining which actions are moral actions. Mill has given an account of the driving force behind our questionings of morality. He calls this driving force “Conscience,” and from this “mass of feeling which must be broken through in order to do what violates our standard of right,” we have derived our concept of morality (Mill 496). Some people may practice moral thought more often than others, and some people may give no thought to morality at all. However, morality is nevertheless a possibility of human nature, and a very important one. We each have our standards of right and wrong, and through the reasoning of individuals, these standards have helped to govern and shape human interactions to what it is today. No other beings except “rational beings,” as Kant calls us, are able to support this higher capability of reason; therefore, it is important for us to consider cases in which this capability is threatened. Such a case is lying. At first, it seems that lying should not be morally permissible, but the moral theories of Kant and Mill have answered both yes and no on this issue. Furthermore, it is difficult to decide which moral theory provides a better approach to this issue. In this paper, we will first walk through the principles of each moral theory, and then we will consider an example that will explore the strengths and weaknesses of each theory.

Lying is simply an act of not telling the truth, and this definition of lying will be used in future sections of this paper. There are three groups of lies that I have developed from personal observation. A person can lie without saying anything at all, such as when a police officer comes to interview that person and, having witnessed a robber robbing a store, that person says nothing. This is because silence is not the truth, so by remaining quiet, that person is not telling the truth. A more recognizable form of lying is outright lying, such as when a student claims to be working hard on her philosophy paper when she has in fact been partying at Myrtle Beach for the last two days. Deception is yet another form of lying, because by tricking another person into believing something false, one is withholding the truth from that person. By withholding the truth, the truth is not being told, so the

deceiver must be a liar. Regardless of the form in which a lie is being presented, all lies have one thing in common. By giving others false thoughts or perceptions of an event, lies can have a strong influence on our free thinking. Therefore, they are all violations of human reason, something that many people strongly respect. As we will see shortly, the ability to reason is also considered valuable to both Mill and Kant, since it underlies both of their moral theories.

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory, as explained by the philosopher Mill. Given several choices, a utilitarian would pick the morally correct choice by using the Greatest Happiness Principle (487). By looking at whether the consequences of an action will produce the greater happiness for the greater number of people than another action would, one can conclude that this action is the morally correct action to take (487). The entire utilitarian theory rides on the Greatest Happiness Principle, and it is this principle that we will use to determine whether utilitarians think that lying is morally permissible. It turns out that the moral permissibility of lying is variable, given different situations.

Commonly, we think of lies as bad actions, so they must produce less happiness than telling the truth if we have labeled them as bad. In a case where telling the truth yields greater happiness than telling a lie, then telling the truth must be the morally correct action and lying is not morally permissible. However, if telling a lie produces more happiness than telling the truth, then for a utilitarian, the morally correct action must be to lie. This raises an interesting problem, partly documented by Williams when he mentioned a utilitarian's wish to appeal to the psychological effect when confronted with bad feelings about doing utilitarian calculus. For some reason, we feel uncomfortable when put before two choices, both of which feel like wrong actions. Surprisingly, a utilitarian has given us a good reason for why we feel this way. Mill says it is because we are facing our conscience, a "mass of feeling which must be broken through in order to do what violates our standard of right" (Mill 496). Although Williams claims that a utilitarian should view his or her bad feelings as irrational in order to remain consistent with utilitarian ideals, Mill claims that these feelings form the foundation of morality (496). Therefore, getting a bad feeling when deciding to lie is something that should not simply be dismissed as irrational, since they might be important to consider if more than one utilitarian has had these feelings. Perhaps, these feelings indicate that there is something wrong with the utilitarian theory, since if feelings form the

foundation of morality and we get bad feelings after determining a morally correct action, then perhaps the action deemed “morally correct” by utilitarianism is not morally correct at all.

On the opposite pole from utilitarianism is Kantianism. Kantianism is a moral theory that is concerned with one’s intentions to act, not the consequences of one’s actions. To Kant, a good action is one that is done from good will. A person who acts from good will is doing the right thing not because it will produce a happier outcome, as a utilitarian might anticipate. To Kant, a person acting from good will is doing the right thing simply out of respect for *duty*, and not because that action will produce beneficial results. This is where Kantianism and utilitarianism differ. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist philosophy, meaning that the outcomes of actions must be analyzed to determine whether one represents a greater happiness than another. Kantian ethics states that actions are good if they are done with the best of intentions. Therefore, if one had a good intention to testify against a burglar in court, then one’s act of testifying cannot be considered bad—even if the burglar is shown to be innocent at the end of the trial.

Kant believes that we have acted morally if we have acted from the motive of duty alone. It is not enough to simply act “in conformity with duty”; one must act solely from the “motive of duty” (Kant 530). Examples of actions that are considered duty by Kant are preserving one’s life, helping others where one can, and assuring one’s own happiness (Kant 530-531). It is important to know how to judge whether we have acted solely from the motive of duty, because only this will tell us whether we have acted morally. For this judgment, Kant introduces the idea of the categorical imperative (CI). This is a command to action that has not been “based on, and conditioned by, any further purpose to be attained by a certain line of conduct” (Kant 533). In other words, the CI is concerned not with the consequences of an action, but whether a person had a good intention to perform that action. The CI, Kant says, is the imperative of morality (Kant 533).

Kant gives three versions of the categorical imperative, two of which we have studied. The first is the Formula of Universal Law, and the second is the Formula of the End in Itself. These two formulations of the CI are supposed to have the same meaning, which must be true since morality can be defined in only one way. Essentially, if morality is to survive as a guiding principle for us, it must be unalterable and universal. Thus, it must necessarily be universalizable, meaning that it must possess the ability to be an absolute principle for everyone. This is the principle behind the Formula of Universal Law, which states, “Act only on that maxim

through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant 535). The Formula of the End in Itself is a restatement of the Formula of Universal Law. It states: “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” (Kant 538). Although this restatement can be a bit confusing, Kant assures us that both formulae are the same. If this claim is not true, then this would potentially weaken Kant’s moral theory, since his theory rests on the idea that there is only one imperative of morality.

Using the categorical imperative, Kant would claim that lying is not morally permissible. If a person proposes to lie by making a promise but intending to break it, then this action can be judged for moral permissibility by seeing whether it can be made into a universal law. The purpose of the universalization is to show whether the action is morally permissible; if the action contradicts itself when universalized, it has no moral worth. In the above case, one discovers that the action is actually not morally permissible because if everyone was allowed to lie, then no one would expect to hear the truth, and in such a situation, lying would be unnecessary. If using the Formula of the End in Itself, Kant would argue that deceiving a person is the same as using that person as a mere means (538), and since the act of deception is a lie, lying cannot be morally permissible. Using either formulation of the categorical imperative, we yield the same result. Therefore, Kant’s moral theory appears to be in good working order.

Between Kantianism and utilitarianism, I believe that Kantianism is a better approach to the question of whether lying is morally permissible. The two moral theories each give excellent justifications of why lying should or should not be morally permissible; in Kantianism, we have the Categorical Imperative, and in utilitarianism, we have the Greatest Happiness Principle. However, Kant’s moral theory appears to be more absolute; whereas a utilitarian could choose to lie depending on the situation, a Kantian can solidly believe that lying is not morally permissible, regardless of the situation or consequences, for all time. Kantianism seems to provide a more objective notion of morality, excluding the possibility of having a liar be morally right or wrong depending on the circumstances. This is especially true concerning the Greatest Happiness Principle, because it is difficult to define the scope of the population that one is applying this principle to, or the length of time that one should consider when deciding whether an action is morally permissible.

I find it necessary to put both theories to a thorough test, to see whether Kantianism is actually a better approach to determining whether lying is morally permissible. Consider this thought experiment—inspired by an episode of *The Outer Limits*, the title of which I have forgotten. Imagine that an introductory philosophy classroom, students and all, has been transported onto a spacecraft headed for a distant star. The aliens explain that they have gone to many different worlds, capturing a roomful of philosophy students on each one. Their purpose is to see whether the students can survive in captivity. If the students survive, the aliens will capture all of humankind and make them slaves on the aliens' homeworld. However, if they do not survive, then the rest of humankind will be saved. The students can willingly choose to kill themselves, and by doing so, they are lying to the aliens about their ability to survive in captivity. But, by lying and committing suicide, the rest of humankind is spared a horrible future.

I believe this to be a more extreme case than any we have studied in philosophy so far, which makes it an ideal case to test the Kantian and utilitarian theories with. Many readers in our class were troubled by Jim's dilemma in Williams' *Utilitarianism and Integrity*. Jim had to choose between personally killing one person and allowing 19 others to live, or doing nothing and watching 20 people die. However, in the example proposed above, our troubled philosophy class must choose between the lives of all humankind and their own lives. If there is any situation that would try our moral conscience to the greatest degree, it is a situation like this one.

Using this example, I have found that a strong objection can be made to Kantianism. Although Kantianism seems to handle the ambiguity of many moral situations in a way that is more appealing to us, it does not seem to work nicely in all cases. For example, if we return to the abducted philosophy class example, we see that Kantianism gives us two different morally permissible actions when only one is possible. This is because, contrary to what Kant has claimed, the different formulations of his categorical imperative do not yield exactly the same moral outcome. If we use the Formula of Universal Law, we find that the students *should not* lie to the aliens and kill themselves. They should remain alive not only because "to preserve one's life is a duty," but also because suicide is inconsistent with the categorical imperative. Kant explains why this is so in the first of his Illustrations, in which he gives an example of how suicide violates the categorical imperative (536). However, using the Formula of the End in Itself, we see that the students *should* lie to the aliens because it is their duty to help foster the ends of humanity. Kant explains why this is so in the fourth illustration of this Formula (539).

Although “humanity could no doubt subsist if everybody contributed nothing to the happiness of others but at the same time refrained from deliberately impairing their happiness,” Kant says that this would merely agree “negatively and not positively with *humanity as an end in itself* unless every one endeavors also, so far as in him lies, to further the ends of others” (539).

So, we have an apparent contradiction in the results of applying Kant’s moral theory to this example. Using one formulation of the categorical imperative, the students *should not* lie to the aliens. However, using the second formulation, we find that the students *should*. Besides pointing out a flaw in Kant’s argument, namely that his two formulations of the categorical imperative do not yield the same moral conclusion as he claims, we also end up with the same amount of moral ambiguity as utilitarianism sometimes produces. In that theory, it is morally permissible to lie if the outcome of this action will lead to the greater happiness for the greater number of people. Clearly, the abducted philosophy class should kill themselves, because there are only 15 people in that class versus 6 billion people on Earth, and the happiness of 6 billion is much more valuable than the happiness of 15. However, if a utilitarian were in our fated philosophy class, I am certain that this person would not be the first person up for suicide. Rather, this person would most likely tell the truth about his/her fitness to survive than to lie to the aliens and commit suicide. This is an example of moral ambiguity, which is the set of bad feelings one feels whenever confronted with two choices that both seem wrong. In such a situation, it is difficult to soundly act on any single action, regardless of whether one action has been deemed morally correct and the other wrong. Just as Kantianism gives two contradicting results on the morality of lying, the utilitarian approach gives a result that no one would soundly follow. Of course, suicide may be the morally correct choice to a utilitarian in this case, and perhaps, according to Williams, having bad or uncomfortable feelings about suicide is irrational and should be dismissed (514-515). But there seems to be something universally unsettling about the conclusion to our abducted philosophy class example.

A rebuttal to this objection must show why Kantian ethics is a better approach to the issue of lying than utilitarianism, despite the problem of moral ambiguity pointed out above. Kantianism and utilitarianism can be put on equal par by noting that both theories, in some cases, have a problem with moral ambiguity. However, we must also realize that there is perhaps no moral theory can be completely devoid of moral ambiguity. Human nature seems too complex to be broken down into simple rules of morality, since a situation can always arise for

which there is no action that is completely morally correct. Such a case was the abducted philosophy class example. While it is not morally correct to commit suicide, it is also not morally correct to ignore the ends of the rest of humanity. One can see that this case is much too complex to be reduced to simple rules of morality, although one may want to do so. Utilitarianism always determines a morally correct answer, even in cases such as the one above where there seems to be no morally correct answer, but Kantianism does not. Because the two formulations of the categorical imperative yield different answers as to whether lying in this case is permissible, Kant's moral theory appears to be undecided in this case. This outcome agrees with our natural moral sentiments, or "conscience" as Mill calls it; in such a case, we might rather abstain from having an answer.

Neither Kantian theory nor utilitarian theory is perfect, and therefore, there cannot be a perfect answer as to whether lying is morally permissible. In most cases, each moral theory works fine, but in a few select cases, the principles of a theory can be brought into question. We have seen this happen for Kant's two formulations of the categorical imperative. Also, we have seen that the unsettling feelings that sometimes arise as a result of utilitarian calculus might indicate that there is something wrong with utilitarianism, since a morally correct action can sometimes go against our conscience, and Mill has called conscience the foundation of morality. This is interesting, because it raises the question of whether we will ever have a moral theory that works in all cases. I believe that human nature is too complex for any consistent moral theory to be written down on a few pages. Perhaps a philosopher might come to do that someday. However for now, questions of morality such as whether lying is permissible should be answered by Kant's moral theory. In cases where Kantianism cannot supply an answer, likely there is no other moral theory that can. Some questions, under some circumstances, must sometimes remain unanswerable—whether for the greatest good or happiness, or because of our respect for duty.