

LYING AND ITS MORAL IMPLICATIONS

Chidiebere Obi, PhD*

Abstract

Lying is one of the moral constructs that is surrounded with controversies. These controversies are hinged on the absoluteness of the moral injunction: 'thou shall not lie', thereby, painting a picture of an impeccable humanity capable of adhering to it. But in the ideal sense, is the human nature impeccable? There are situations where lying becomes expedient, especially, when it has to do with the preservation of life. Using some selected ethical theories such as Divine command theory, Kantianism and utilitarianism, the paper questions the absoluteness of the injunction: 'thou shall not lie'. It concludes by establishing the necessity of exceptionality to this injunction given to the exigencies of the existence of man as mortal. This is because, preservation of life provides the springboard for other moral injunctions of which 'thou shall not lie' is one of them.

Keywords: *lying, expediency, Kantianism, utilitarianism, divine command theory.*

Introduction

Another issue that falls within the purview of ethics to consider is lying; this is because of the controversies surrounding telling a lie. We all are products of moral societies where there are etiquettes and moral stipulations stating what are required from us; the kind of behaviour expected from us, the knowledge of good and bad and how we should relate with one another. Societies do these with recourse to many sources such as religious authorities, constitutions, customs etc. Oftentimes, there are seem to be misconceptions in the understanding and practice of these moral stipulations and this calls for an ethical evaluation.

Lie is one of these human acts that many societies condemn and it is expected of every member of the society not to tell a lie; that is, lying is stipulated as a morally wrong act. Lying here is defined as making a statement that one knows that is false with the intent to deceive one's listener. It must be stated that a lie must not be conveyed through statements; for instance, if one who is not a priest dresses like one in order to gain another's trust, this person lied without making a statement. There are other instances like this. Most sources that condemn the act of lying are absolute in nature; that is, they abhor any form of exception and this underscores the controversies on lying. This is because, lying appears to be a phenomenon that cannot be avoided; little wonder we have different nomenclatures of lying such as: white lie, small lie, big lie, holy lie, good lie etc. These nomenclatures are different ways for justifying lying. Sometimes, a lie is told to save a bad situation; for instance: I have packets of coffee in my bag but lied to a friend who asked for one that I do not have any; I lied because I know that my friend is addicted to coffee even though his health condition does not require him taking coffee. I lied to save a friend's health. A woman who survived a fatal accident that claimed the lives of her two kids regained a little consciousness from coma and started asking her doctor the where about of her kids, though the doctor is under oath not to lie to his patients but he simply told the woman that her kids are fine, did he lie? Yes! He lied with the intent of deceiving the woman to believe that her kids are fine but he did it to save the woman's life knowing full well that telling the truth in that situation will endanger the life of the woman. There are other instances where we tell lies simply because, telling the truth will bring more harm than good and this goes a long way in questioning our adherence to that absolute moral code: 'thou shall not lie'. What are the reasons why lying is bad or good? To answer this question, a recourse will be made to some ethical theories such as the Divine Command theory, Kant's ethical theory and Utilitarianism.

The Divine Command Theory (or DCT)

This theory holds that the determinant factor for good and bad acts is God; that is, an action is good because, God has commanded it so and vice versa. This is a sub-category of moral absolutism, which holds that humanity is subject to absolute standards that determine when acts are good or bad. On the question: what is the right thing to do? Divine command theory will answer that good actions are good because God commanded it to be so, otherwise, bad. The theory asserts that good actions are

morally good as a result of their being commanded by God, and many religious believers subscribe to some form of divine command theory.¹ It is a theory which holds that all moral obligations are derived from a divine command. In other words, the good is whatever God commands. Therefore, in order to know what is good and what is bad, one must first of all know what God's commands are. The question becomes, how do we know what God has commanded?

The above question is answered by the DCT's reference to world religions and their holy books; that is, that God's commands are recorded in the holy books of the world religions such as the Christian Bible, Moslem's Koran etc. In respect of lying for instance, the Christian DCT will anchor its condemnation of lying on one of the ten Commandments, the ninth, which forbids "bearing false witness" against others. By implication, the Christian DCT would condemn my action of denying my friend the coffee he asked for and the doctor's lying to the woman about her kids as cited above. Many have criticised the Christian DCT as being obsolete because it fails to take into cognizance the peculiarities of events and situations where lying will bring about good and telling the truth would result to harm.

The major criticism against DCT is its multiplicities and lack of consistency; the multiplicities are as a result of different religions with different claims of what God's commands are; the Christian has its version of what the Commands of God are while the Islam differs in its own account, this is also applicable to other world religions. Another problem here is that DCT is only applicable to the religious adherents and not the atheists who do not subscribe to the belief in the God of religion. The problem of consistency is rooted in the discrepancies that exist in some of these holy books; for instance, in the Christian bible referred to above, lying was treated as good in some chapters of the bible. The story of Rehab in the book of Joshua for instance presents a picture of lying as an honourable act. This goes a long way to question any absolute adherence to the command: 'thou shall not lie'. Why do we have these contextual and situational difference in the bible concerning lying? Does that mean that the command against lying does accommodate exceptions? When we lie to save life just like in the cases of a friend and doctor cited above, are we justified?

Preservation of life is foundational to all moral injunctions; hence, the highest moral injunction is that 'life should be preserved'. This happens to be the basis for other moral injunctions because, there has to be a life before we can talk of any other moral injunction; for instance, 'there shall not lie' has life as its springboard, that is, people have to be alive in order to lie or not lie and to be lied to or not. If this holds, it then means that lying to save life may be a justifiable one.

The '**omnipotence argument**' of God can be advanced to counter the above point; it is said that God (the Creator) is omnipotent (Almighty/all powerful) and this qualifies Him as a being that can save every situation no matter how dicey. This nature of God makes lying to save a life a morally bad act. This is because, one who lies in order to save a life is undermining the powerful nature of God, what made the person think that God cannot save the situation if he told the truth? This argument may sound so defeatist and also points to determinism; does that mean that man will always resign to fate even when it appears clearly that he can save a situation? How does that present the existence of man? As an active being who participates actively in the matters of existence or a passive being who does nothing other than surrendering to the will of God? Does the omnipotent nature of God make man passive even in the face of situations he can handle? For instance, if my dad's life is in danger and the only means of saving his life is to tell a lie, does lying in this case undermine the omnipotent nature of God? A Christian may react to these questions by referring to the exigencies of martyrdom; that is, people that died martyrs had the opportunity of saving their lives by renouncing, recanting and even by lying in denial of hitherto taken stances but decided to surrender to the divine will. Therefore, instead of lying to save a life, it is more noble to resign to the divine will and tell the truth.

The above difficulty in justifying lying on the basis of DCT goes a long way to demonstrate the rigidity of any moral injunction that has basis on the Divine; the same applies to most ethical theories that have link to religion or God. This is because, they all abhor any form of exceptionality and demand absolute adherence. Therefore, any effort to advocate for any kind of exceptionality ends in

futility. This is because of the incomprehensible nature of God; and this makes most of things said about Him to be couched in many connotations. For instance, the case of Rehab cited above can easily be defended by a religious faithful by saying that: ‘the bible does not qualify Rehab’s act of lying as a good one’ and that even if it does, that God has reasons for everything He does.

Kant’s Ethical Theory and Lying

Kantian ethical theory as propounded by Immanuel Kant in his *Categorical Imperative* advocates the treatment of the human person with dignity or respect because they are moral agents with capacities for autonomy and reason. The theory envisages the imperativeness of treating man never as a means only but always as an end and enjoining all to always act on the maxim that all actions will become universal laws; therefore, any action that is not universalizable, is morally not permissible.²

Sequel to the above, Kantian theory would condemn any act of lying on the grounds that such does not treat the human person as an end but as a means and that lying is not a universalizable act. What if lying will help save a life and saying the truth will cause taking a life? Kantian theory is more interested in the means and the duty we owe to each other and not necessarily the utilitarian benefits of our actions; we are duty bound never to lie. When we are pushed into the situation where we have to lie to save a life, silence becomes even nobler than lying. But what if keeping silent will lead to a loss of life?

Kantian theory has been criticized on the basis that it does not help in resolving moral conflicts and also because of its rigidity. For instance, when my duties to save life and not to lie clash, Kantian ethical theory lacks solution to this conflict. Is it not arguably correct to say that lying to save a friend’s life tantamount to treating him as an end? This is because, I see it as a duty to save his life. If I told the truth and my friend dies as a result, did I not use my friend’s life as a means to fulfilling the moral injunction: ‘thou shall not lie’? Does lying worth more than saving a life? It is understandable that the reasons Kantian ethics abhors lying is because of its un-universality and its tendency of treating the human person as a mere object of means but this is overgeneralization. Is lying to save a life not a universalizable act? When lying becomes the only option to save a friend’s life, does lying in this context amount to using the human person as a means only?

For example, killing is not a universalizable act and one who kills, treats his fellow human being as a means; what about killing in self-defence? Is killing in self-defence not a universalizable act? Does killing in self-defence amount to using man as a means only? These questions indicate the loopholes in Kant’s ethical theory in the area of lying. Lying to a friend in order to borrow money when one’s intention is never to pay back is a pure act of using one as a means only and this cannot be universalized. This can also be said about killing not in self-defence. But when a life is involved, it becomes more difficult to stand by Kant’s admonition knowing that the preservation of life is the highest of all moral injunctions.

Utilitarian Ethical theory and Lying

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that is premised on utility, that is, it considers the morality of an act on the basis of the benefits accruable. A good act is the one that brings about more happiness than pain.³ Utilitarianism (more especially its act version) admonishes for the maximization of pleasure over pain. Lying that will bring about justifiable benefits is permissible by this theory. Therefore, if lying is the only option left to saving a life, utilitarianism (act version) will recommend it. Lying is only condemned when it is used to take advantage of someone, in this case, it brings more pain than pleasure to the person.

Lying to children about certain things is usually seen as a good act because it is for their own benefit that such lies are told. For instance, if a child who is suffering from diarrhea asks to be given the ice-cream from my freezer, lying to the child that there is no ice-cream in the freezer even when there is, is for the child’s good. Here, lying is considered expedient because of the utility that accrues from it. The child is too young to understand the reason he should not take the ice-cream if we should tell him the truth. If we can lie to children because of what they stand to gain, why cannot we extend this to older human beings knowing full well of what they stand to gain if lied to? Does that mean that older

ones are to be abandoned in the face of situations where lying could save the day? Is adulthood the limitation of this expediency of lying? Sidgwick captures this:... where deception is designed to benefit the person deceived, Common Sense seems to concede that it may sometimes be right: for example, most persons would not hesitate to speak falsely to an invalid, if this seemed the only way of concealing facts that might produce a dangerous shock: nor do I perceive that any one shrinks from telling fictions to children, on matters upon which it is thought well that they should not know the truth. But if the lawfulness of benevolent deception in any case be admitted, I do not see how we can decide when and how far it is admissible, except by considerations of expediency; that is, by weighing the gain of any particular deception against the imperilment of mutual confidence involved in all violation of truth.¹

The foregoing points to the fact that lying could be expedient given to some situations. This expediency must be a morally justifiable one, that is, it must be a type that the person that was lied to would appreciate if told afterwards and also the type that facilitates the saving of a life. The like of Kantian theory would object to this on the ground that lying is not universalizable and that such does not treat humanity with dignity. It will even object to lying to children because, they are part of humanity. On the other hand, it sounds repugnant to say that one should not lie even when lying is the only option to saving a life or to saving someone from danger; not telling a lie in this context goes a long way to counter the reason why lying is bad in the first place. If lying is condemnable because it is not good for the wellbeing of man, then, not lying to preserve and protect the wellbeing of man is also guilty of the wrong the first seeks to curb.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that all moral injunctions given to man as a being in the world of existence must entertain some levels of exceptions because the need for such injunctions in the first place was as a result of the perceived fallibility of man, that is, man is prone to mistakes. This is an indubitable truth because of the spatiotemporal and ontological nature of man, that is, man exists in a material world bound by time and space and he is partially composed of matter. It is a given that matter is both dynamic and changes and so is its components. Therefore, as long as man remains in this material existence, he will continue to cope with the exigencies of existence and these make any rigid and strict adherence to injunctions impossible. Any expectation of rigid and strict adherence from man is tantamount to taking man as God; this is because such an expectation is tilting towards perfection in a material existence which is not possible. Any exception to a moral injunction must also be justified within the framework of a higher moral injunction and in a situation where there is none higher, such becomes a herculean task thus, not justifiable.

***Chidiebere Obi, PhD**

Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
+2348034946931
ccy.obi@unizik.edu.ng

References

1. Wikipedia: The free Encyclopedia, *Divine Command Theory*. Access date: 29/11/2018. <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/sanjacinto-philosophy/chapter/divine-command-theory-part-2/>
2. I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of morals*, trans. By H. J. Paton, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964). pp. 1-3.
3. J. Bentham. *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In: *Quotable quotes*. Access date: 30/11/2018. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1013033-nature-has-placed-mankind-under-the-governance-of-two-sovereign>

4. Korsgaard, Christine. 1988. Two arguments against lying. *Argumentation* 2, no. 1: 27-49.
<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:3209557>