

Is it Ever Right to Lie? How Ethical Questions Bring us to Philosophy of Mind

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Abstract

Moral and ethical agreements require sufficiently shared values, or at least some common ground. We might think of this in terms of a shared ‘form of life’, ‘*lebensform*’, as Wittgenstein describes it in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Yet it is not clear what will be *sufficient*, nor how to bridge gaps when disagreement occurs, for instance on whether it is ever right to lie. Ethical and moral theories offer some guidance, but there is no guide for which theory one ought to follow. Whether you favour *eudaimonist* (flourishing, well-being), *deontological* (duty), or *utilitarian* (consequentialist) principles, the selection of a philosophy says much about who you are (preferences, judgements, beliefs) and your context (social, political, cultural). More than this it can indicate certain psychological and personal dispositions, whether defined as brain states, mental states, or personalities. In this article I outline some arguments for why ethics might need a philosophy of mind, and why this poses problems for ethical and moral theory building.

Ethical/Moral Theory and Dilemma

I often start an ethics or moral philosophy class with the question: is it ever right to lie? It has proven a useful approach, and I believe it to be a common one. It is especially helpful to illustrate some well-known philosophical arguments and positions. For instance, you may already know that Aristotle asks us to think about the good life (*eudaimonia*), Kant encourages us to consider our duties to others (deontology), while Mill emphasizes consequences (utilitarianism), especially as measured against actions. So when we ask whether it is ever right to lie, we can develop or assess answers according to these approaches, and in relation to some core reasons and arguments.

As we puzzle through our answer to the question, rationality is key. Indeed, Kant takes rationality to be an essential component of what it is to be a person. Mill, meanwhile, gives some consideration to emotions, particularly passions, as an account for at least some of our motivations, though the extent to which these drive us remains uncertain. So the answer to the question of *rightness* with regard to lying can be answered by reference to theory, consequences or duties, and according to reasons and feeling. *It might be right in this context, or because of these outcomes*, says one person, *but then you show by example that lying is OK and how will we ever build trust*, says another.

The question about lying also helps to illustrate what I consider a more pressing question:



why do you think that way? What makes one set of principles or theories more or less convincing, one answer more or less acceptable? And what might this tell us about motivations, tendencies, dispositions, and so on? Could we even answer such questions with certainty anyway? In short: do you know *why* you think the way you do about lying, and do you think that way because of reason and/or emotion, or *do you just think that way*?

It seems reasonable to assert that when we talk about ethics and morality, we therefore also partly engage with epistemology (philosophy of knowledge), and to some extent also with philosophy of mind. After all, moral and ethical theories include expectations about ourselves and others, including beliefs about what someone might think or value, feel and believe, and what they expect, know and understand, including about themselves. From this it would seem that moral

and ethical theories require at least some presuppositions about people, and more than this, some (sufficient) commonality between people. This includes, for instance, that a person's wants, needs, vulnerabilities and commitments are sufficiently intelligible to the other, and indeed that they are meaningful.

In the case where there is disagreement, for instance about the question of lying, the possibility to give reasons can be very important. *Why does it matter to you whether I'm lying*, a person may ask. They might already have an answer, or if their reasons are unknown or uncertain, they might reply *It just does matter*. Even then, reasons are *possible* and that is important. I may not know what your needs or values are, but I can at least suppose (a) that you have some, whether you know what they are or not, (b) that they will not be entirely alien from my own, and (c) that while I suppose all of this you may be

supposing likewise about me and mine, such that there is scope for mutual intelligibility and understanding. You may not know exactly why one person considers lying to be terrible, while another thinks context is what matters most, but you can expect the possibility for reasons.

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Our capacity and willingness to understand each other seem therefore an important feature of ethical and moral theory building. If, for instance, I am keen for you to understand my point of view, such as about lying, I may ask you to look at things from my position, to consider my situation, or to *walk in my shoes*, and in return you may ask the same of me. Whether we can each do this may depend on many factors, including a person’s capacity to imagine, to feel, to understand, or the strength of their empathy and sympathy. It could also depend on their wish or desire to behave or to act in a certain way, or to be seen to do so. In short: I may wish for you to see something, and you may want or be able to do so, and the motivations for each may be complicated and uncertain.

To understand the other, therefore, may be an intellectual or imaginative exercise, or one of feeling, or some combination of these. Ethical dilemmas and thought experiments try to tease this out. Consider for instance, those that require a difficult decision with extreme ethical consequences. Some such scenarios feature

(nameless) sadistic guards who seek to torture you by making you choose between killing one person or another, or between one and many, and often these examples feature judgements about a person’s value (by virtue of age, health, ‘goodness’, etc.). Other examples feature boats or balloons without enough space for everyone, or runaway trolleys that will kill one or many. Always you have to choose, and often someone is fated to die. *What would you do*, the experimenter asks. In turn, you are expected to consider the question by imaginatively engaging with the scenario, or to put yourselves in the shoes of the person in this dilemma. But how much does this help to show someone’s motivations or what matters to them, and can this answer the question of *why* they think as they do?

Motivations are complicated, and it is not always easy to project oneself beyond one’s concrete experience. This applies even to one’s future life, let alone to very different lives or far-fetched scenarios like those about sadistic guards. If I ask what you will want to eat on a given day next month, you may struggle to answer: it depends on context, you might reply, and that would be a reasonable response. To know *exactly* what one will think, want, prefer, or hope, from one day to the next would mean that much would be certain, and little would be unpredictable or surprising. We can try to explain these issues in terms of brain states, mental states, or personalities, but this defers rather than answers the question: *why* those states or personalities?

We have to consider therefore what we think a person can know about themselves in these scenarios, and to what degree. On the one hand, an ethical dilemma asks someone to speculate about what they might do at some hypothetical point in time or space, even if we cannot know how accurate their prediction may be. On the other hand, we want to allow that a person can know or understand themselves *enough*, such that they can offer some answers to even hypothetical ethical and moral questions, that is, to have a sense of *what they would do if*. To better understand this tension, we might need to adjust our initial question.

From My World to Yours

What happens if we adapt the question of lying thus: *why do you think as you do about whether it is ever right to lie?* This question takes us from ethics and moral theory to questions of psychology and minds and brains. In other words, when you prefer one ethical or moral theory over another, is this preference rational, emotional, dispositional, learnt, imposed, cultural, or some combination of these and/or other factors? To answer this question, you might think to yourself, *about* yourself, but how far will such introspection take you?

Wittgenstein was highly critical of those who try to speak confidently or *impartially* about such things, or who assume understanding about the other, as if it is easy to infer what things look like from a different point of view. Similarly, the ‘view from nowhere’ assumes the possibility to arrive at objective positions or knowledge through reason. A counter to such views is one that considers the ‘standpoint’ to be important, namely, one that takes a person’s position in time and space as an essential feature of their capacity to sense, perceive, think, and to know. This is not only a limitation, however, since specificity is also valuable. Indeed, it is the concrete reality that makes certain kinds of knowledge especially valuable, and experience is an indispensable feature: if I am a passenger in a plane, I would like it if my pilot has expertise that includes practice, including flight simulations, though I’d prefer it if they had flown an aircraft before.

Knowledge or even evidence about one’s mind (let alone those of others) is far trickier to establish. How does a person *prove* what they feel, such that another person can *know* it as they might know their own feelings (and what does it mean to know one’s own feelings anyway)? Something external to us, like the temperature of a room, might be felt subjectively while also being externally measurable. What measures can we apply to minds? And from this, how can you or I really be sure *why* one ethical theory appeals to you while another repels you? If I say that I think lying is never right, how can I be sure about why this is my position, or why you hold yours? I can give reasons, point to a theory, give an argument and defend a position, but this

may not answer the question of *why* it matters to me, though for ethics to be meaningful we have to presuppose, somehow, that it does. As Wittgenstein describes, we value the falling of a person differently from the falling of a stone.

To reach deep into an ethical question, to address the philosophy of mind that affects and motivates us to ask such ethical questions in the first place, leads us to run against a limit: to knowledge, to words, to understanding, including about minds and motivations. To theorize about ethics thus necessitates a theory of mind that is also impossible. I need to *believe* there is sufficient symmetry between you and me in order to take your wants, needs, and vulnerabilities into account (in ways that I may not bother to do for my coffee cup). But this does not count as knowledge in the way that an ethical question might expect or even demand.

There are some general claims we can make about human experience that are useful for recognizing what we share and how this plays out in terms of needs and vulnerabilities. We all need food, water, sleep, and some kind of shelter, for instance. We can see this in the overlap between cultures, even where norms may be very different. Yet even here the differences are clear. Perhaps you consider a tent as sufficient shelter, perhaps I feel happier in a hotel room. Our tastes and appetites will differ, even if our need for sustenance remains. We can use the principles of similarity to care for each other, to share resources, and to build moral theories about reciprocity, care, harms, values, responsibility, and even contracts, among other concerns. But in so doing we need to take great care not to erase the specificity of the individual. Teasing out motivations and tendencies in ethical positions can help to make this clear, but the uncertainty may not be so easily resolved.

I feel quite sure that I cannot really know what it is like to walk in your shoes, nor you in mine. My experiences are not yours, and what is shared is not identical. The possibility for overlap is clear and indeed essential for the further possibility of understanding and agreement. We share the same *forms of life*, and in our living our kinship is apparent. I know what it is like to wear shoes, and to walk the same roads you may have walked, but I will never do this in the way that you have,

and you will likewise never know what it has been to walk my path. If I want to say that lying is never right, I express more than a philosophical commitment to something akin to a deontological position, in the same way that if you say context matters I should not simply consider yours a consequentialist position. Our statements also express a way of viewing the world that is concrete and complicated, which eludes even the most sophisticated of thought experiments. To capture what a person *means* and why goes beyond the ethical statements we express, and towards the qualia of *what it is to be* someone who, in that moment commits to an ethical position.

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Wittgenstein’s idea of a *language-game* tries to capture the shifting, complex, context specific, yet necessarily shared nature of meaning, understanding and use. More than this, it points to the fact that these possibilities are tied to one’s involvement in the game, whether playing or

watching. This is the foundation for shared understanding, and it is why you can understand the words that I write here, even if you will not know the motivations that led me to write them. It is also clear that shared meaning does not mean we will always understand each other, especially when we talk of emotion and feeling, which ethics and moral theory cannot avoid. Sharing one’s pain, sadness, fear, shame and grief sometimes requires much more than theories capture. Much may be missed, not all can be shared, and we may look to art and the metaphysical to *show* meaning. That we may do these things in similar ways means I can expect *some* understanding from you on what I point to here, but the specificity or standpoint of you as a concrete other cannot, ought not, to be assumed. Our similarities offer the *possibility* for understanding, not a guarantee. The words *I do not think it is ever right to lie* carry more than can be explained by an ethical theory. They assert a way of being far more complicated than that.

A person’s capacity to understand the reasons and arguments of the other is essential to thinking about what it may be good to know and to do, or how to treat each other. Ditto for the theories we build to explain and secure these beliefs, arguments and behaviours. But we ought to take care in this that we do not claim these speculations as *knowledge* about the other. If I ask you whether you think it is ever right to lie, I may be asking which moral theory speaks to you, but I may also want to understand how you see the world, and that also requires a philosophy of mind. Your speculation or mine in response to that question, or whatever it is that a thought experiment shows, does not amount to *knowledge*, whether of ethics or of the minds that think about them. It seems to me that they cannot, and we ought to take this very seriously.

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