Pauline and Irving Tanner Dean’s Scholar Research Proposal

Christina M. Zhang

Major: Philosophy
Faculty Advisor: Michelle Kosch

Project Advisor:
Michelle Kosch
224 Goldwin Smith Hall
mak229@cornell.edu
Abstract

In his infamous 1797 essay, "On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy," Kant argues that lying is absolutely immoral, and no exceptions can be made for any of the usual counter-examples, such as telling white lies in conformity with social etiquette or lying to protect an innocent man from a murderer. This latter scenario is thoroughly elaborated by J. G. Fichte in his *System of Ethics* (1798), where Fichte takes Kant’s view to an apparently extreme extent. For many Kantians, the scenario of the murderer at the door creates interpretive work, as it flies in the face of common moral intuitions about conflicts of duty. While Kant’s argument seems to arise through the application of the categorical imperative to generate morally permissible maxims, Fichte’s account more heavily emphasizes the importance of rational agency as the foundation of ethics. He suggests that the reason why lying and dishonesty in general are so morally unacceptable is that they pose a threat to the freedom of the rational agent, and his capacity to exercise this reason.

To understand this relation between autonomy and deceit, we need a particular account of rational agency that deceit somehow disrupts or impedes. And even if we can give such a coherent account, a second step is still required to show that this disruption is morally reprehensible. My research this summer will delve into both contemporary and historical scholarship on the original problem, as well as work in contemporary normative ethics on these two questions.

Biographical Sketch

Born in Melbourne, Australia, and raised in Shanghai, China, I grew up in a bilingual and multicultural environment where I always felt deeply fascinated by questions of language and personal identity. I came to Cornell interested in studying narrativity in postmodern fiction as a means of creating empathy between readers and writers. My coursework took me in a more historical direction and I became interested in philosophy, especially Kant and ethics. Three courses in particular were responsible for the development of this research project: Kant (Fall ’12, taught by Derk Pereboom), 19th Century Philosophy (Spring ’13, Michelle Kosch), and a graduate seminar in Kant and Fichte (Fall ’13, Michelle Kosch).

I am currently in my third year at Cornell, pursuing a B.A. in philosophy and minors in history and computer science. I tutor language and writing with the Knight Institute. This summer, I hope to continue my philosophy research for my honors thesis with the support of the Tanner Dean Scholars’ Research Grant.
Statement of Purpose

Despite waning attention from fields such as psychology and criminal law, lying persists as a topic of great interest in normative ethics. Moral questions in the philosophical discussion of lying are concerned with implications not only for moral theories but also the nature of moral reasoning and rational agency. That is, beyond the problem of whether or not lying is simply immoral, lying poses challenges to the nature of grounding assumptions in ethics, and also how our moral theories should accommodate our common moral intuitions.

Many philosophers, including Kant, treat lying as a paradigmatic case of moral wrongdoing, or a most basic violation of moral duties. One common explanation of why lying is wrong is the view that, by imparting false information to another individual, I inhibit her ability to act in her own best interest, or limit her freedom. On some views of agency, this argument can go one step further and say that my lies also cause her to somehow fail in her capacity as a rational agent, and thus my lying to her might be considered even worse than if I had physically inhibited her by locking her in a room.

Strict views of this sort have been put forth by Kant and Fichte, where the explanation of lying seems to infringe on fundamental theories about what it means to be an agent, or an individual who freely acts in the world. In “The Doctrine of Virtue” and later the short essay “On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy” (both 1797), Kant argues that lying is always immoral. Two counterexamples are levied against him by Benjamin Constant, namely, that white lies may be morally permissible, and that lying to a murderer to protect his innocent victim-to-be may even be morally obligatory. Kant responds by arguing that lying remains a violation of moral duty even in the two counterexamples, suggesting that the moral thing to do is nevertheless to
tell the truth.¹

The second case, that of the murderer at the door, is particularly troubling: given the fact that the murderer has clearly nefarious intentions, why is it still unacceptable to lie to him? Moreover, if we tell the murderer the truth about where his target is hiding, aren’t we in fact furthering his unquestionably immoral end of killing an innocent person? Some Kantians, such as Allen Wood, have tried to salvage these passages by suggesting that we should read them less literally or as concerned with duties of right rather than moral duties, though it is unclear what Kant himself wants to say.

Fichte, writing only a year after Kant, reformulates the somewhat nebulous Kantian view into an unambiguously condemnatory account, with particular attention to the scenario of the murderer at the door. In a somewhat startling departure in tone from the rest of The System of Ethics, Fichte launches into a tirade about the manifold possibilities of action a reasonable agent might take before the thought of lying should even cross his mind. Why tell the murderer either a truth or a lie, he writes, when you could “advise him to abandon this intention of his own free will, and that otherwise you will take up the cause of the persecuted party and will defend him at the risk of your own life – which is, in any case, your absolute obligation?”²

This view seems at once more and less reasonable than Kant’s argument. From the standpoint of common moral intuitions, Fichte seems to be avoiding the dilemma by suggesting a plethora of third options. On the other hand, common sense tells us that the last thing one should do when confronted with a murderer is to assume we can talk him out of him, so the ethics of

lying is still very much at stake. The case of the murderer at the door motivates one of Fichte’s key arguments against lying, namely, that lying inhibits the free rational action of individuals and treats them as means instead of ends.

Two major worries emerge from such a view. First, can we give a coherent account of rational agency that lying can be said to inhibit or disrupt? Secondly, even if we grant that Fichte’s own account can, it seems that there might still be lingering concerns that this disruption is morally reprehensible to the extent that it has been argued to be. The first worry, in its most basic form, is an extremely broad problem about the structure of the will – the relationships between intentions, actions, means, and ends, and what it means to have reason to do anything. Fichte’s own picture of this will and his concept of freedom may not be sufficient to satisfy this worry, so it is worth looking into what contemporary philosophers have to say, as the idea that lying disrupts or inhibits free action does seem to be intuitive in some way. The second worry is concerned with the suggestion that lying amounts to treatment that reduces another individual to an object or a natural force.\(^3\) Whether this is inherently bad or undermines the foundation of ethics is also worth examining, especially through the divided contemporary scholarship on Kant’s Formula of Humanity, a similar prohibition against treating others as means instead of ends.

With these worries at hand, it seems that this argument does not offer enough explanatory power. In fact, the dramatic and memorable nature of this example obscures the presence of at least two other arguments Fichte brings against lying, which I believe are distinct and possibly even stricter condemnations. He suggests that, a) an endorsement of any specific case of lying is logically self-annihilating, and b) lying cannot be willed morally because it is inherently

\(^3\) Fichte, *System of Ethics*, IV.278.
contradictory. Both of these arguments have more of an analytic, Kantian flavour, suggesting that there is something wrong with lying at a much deeper level than its effect on other individuals. The moral arguments against lying, in fact, step in before a lie even reaches the level of the will. Like Kant, Fichte seems to want to root the argument for the absolute immorality of lying in some property intrinsic to it, rather than the contingents facts of an absurd and extreme example. This is of course a much more difficult argument to make, but it rests to an equal extent as the murderer example on particular concepts of agency and autonomy.

My research this summer primarily aims to better understand contemporary scholarship on agency, autonomy and the relationship to lying, which will hopefully better equip me to gain insight into the Fichteian and Kantian arguments. That the problem of lying remains highly relevant in normative ethics is clear from the sheer quantity of recent scholarship produced. The working bibliography on the following page is a selection of texts that will serve as a starting point, from where I can begin to narrow down a topic that will hopefully become the basis for my Honors Thesis next year. With the resources of the Cornell University Library, the guidance of the Sage School of Philosophy, and the support of the Tanner Dean’s Scholars’ Grant, I very much look forward to my work this summer.
Working Bibliography


------. “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy” (1797). In *Gregor, Practical Philosophy*, 605-616 [8:423-8:430].


