Honesty Distinguishes Lying From Misleading

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 3rd Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 8th – Saturday 10th January 2015.

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Ethical virtues are usually described as dispositions manifested in the agent's thoughts, feelings, and actions. But it would be a mistake to assume that each ethical virtue can be identified with a simple disposition towards a single kind of outcome. The honest person, for example, is someone who thinks, feels, and acts in the right ways about opportunities to deceive or to steal and in response to cases where others deceive or steal. In this short paper, I argue that the ideally honest person firmly holds the attitude that outright lies are generally morally worse than attempts to mislead without lying. This component of honesty is itself a disposition, but is clearly not the whole of that virtue.

My argument rests on the linguistic difference between lying and misleading. Lying is the attempt to deceive by making a false assertion, or perhaps merely an assertion that one believes to be false. There are various ways to deceive without lying, many of which can aptly be described as ways of misleading people. But to keep matters simple we will focus on one of these. One can intentionally mislead by making true assertions that carry conversational implicatures that one believes to be false. Conversational implicatures are meanings that an utterance carries as a result of its place in a particular conversation. They are generated by assertions in tandem with the assumption that the partners in the conversation are cooperating in pursuing the purpose of that conversation.

Where the conversation is intended to be an exchange of information, such as when one partner asks the other a factual question, this assumption of cooperation grounds the assumption that each partner is being informative. This is usually why the questioner assumes that the answer given is true. It also entitles the questioner to assume that the answer given provides the relevant information. To give an answer that is true but which omits some obviously important information is therefore to violate this assumption. But because partners in the conversation are required to make this assumption in order for conversation to work at all, such a violation is likely to lead the other partner into a false belief.

For example, if you are asked whether you know who smashed the window, you might answer with the true assertion 'I was not there at the time' even though you do know who did it. Because it would be more informative to have answered 'yes', the answer 'I was not there at the time' has violated the assumption that you are cooperating in furthering the ends of the conversation. As a result, the person who asked the question could, quite naturally and without explicitly thinking about the entailments and implicatures of your assertion, come away from that exchange with the false belief that you do not know who broke the window. Indeed, unless they have reason to be suspicious that you might violate the assumption of cooperation, this is the belief they should form. You would then have misled them without having told a lie.

Is there any moral difference between attempting to mislead someone in this way and outright lying? It is not obvious that a single answer to this question should cover all possible cases. In some contexts, special considerations are in play that might determine the relative moral status of lying or of misleading. Having sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth would seem to be one of those contexts. But we can still ask the question generally: in the absence of special considerations, is there any moral difference between misleading and lying?

Jennifer Saul (2012) has argued that there is not, on the grounds that these two forms of deception need not differ in intention, in outcome, or even significantly in the means used. In both forms of deception, the deceiver uses the standard rules of conversation to bring about a false belief in the deceived. Clea Rees (2014) has argued that misleading is generally worse than lying. Because the hearer is required to trust the assertions and the implicatures of the speaker, the misleader exploits their victim's willingness to meet both of these obligations whereas the liar exploits only their victim's willingness to meet one of them.

My own view is that we should generally treat lying as morally worse than misleading. More precisely, in the absence of any special considerations, we ought to respond to cases of lying with greater moral opprobrium than cases of misleading and when we think we need to deceive we should prefer to mislead than to lie (Webber 2013: §§ 1-3). The moral concern with deception, on my view, is grounded ultimately in our pervasive need to be able to rely on one another for information. This requires that we each maintain our credibility as informants. What is wrong with deception is that it can damage that credibility. Of course, the degree to which it does so depends on the importance in that context of the information withheld. But that is not the only way in which acts of deception can differ from one another in their impact on credibility.

For credibility itself is not unified, but composite. One can retain credibility in one's assertions even if one has damaged the credibility of one's implicatures. Violating the assumption that one is being cooperative is not the same as violating the assumption that one is only saying things one believes

to be true. One can continue to be committed to making only true assertions even when one is no longer being cooperative. This is why someone who is trying to mislead can usefully be confronted with a straight question that can only be answered with the truth they were trying to conceal or with a lie. Faced with the answer 'I was not there at the time', the suspicious questioner can reply 'but do you know who did it?'.

If one has abandoned the commitment to making only true assertions, one is thereby no longer being cooperative. One cannot be cooperating in providing information when one is telling lies. This is why one cannot retain the credibility of one's conversational implicatures unless one also retains the credibility of one's assertions. Lying therefore damages credibility more comprehensively than misleading does, except in special circumstances that alter the extent of this damage. Since we need one another to retain credibility in general, we ought to discourage deception in general. But since people will sometimes feel the need to deceive, we need a way of limiting the damage done by those acts of deception. So we should generally treat lying with greater moral opprobrium than misleading. And since we each need other people to believe us, we should deceive only when we really need to and should prefer to do so by misleading rather than lying.

My argument has been characterised as the direct consequentialist claim that misleading is preferable because it leaves the hearer with an option for discovering the truth that is not available where the speaker is willing to lie. Such a claim would indeed be vulnerable to the objection that this consequence occurs only in cases where the hearer of the misleading assertion suspects an attempt to deceive and is in a position to challenge that attempt (Rees 2014: 62-3). However, this characterisation mistakes my argument for one whose immediate conclusion is that lying is generally morally worse than misleading. The intended structure of my argument is rather that the importance of maintaining the credibility of oneself and of other people requires that we hold the attitude that in the absence of special circumstances, lying is morally worse than misleading. Anyone holding that attitude would claim that lying is generally morally worse than misleading. But the considerations concerning credibility are not intended to support that claim itself.

For this reason, my position stands in the tradition of virtue ethics. The conclusion of my argument is not a moral assessment of certain kinds of actions, but rather that a particular attitude towards those kinds of actions is required. The judgment that lying is generally worse than misleading is correct only because it expresses an attitude that a virtuous person must have. The claim that a virtuous person must have this attitude is grounded in naturalistic considerations concerning the conditions required for us to live the kind of life that humans characteristically live. Our kind of life requires that we can rely on one another as informants, which requires that we protect credibility as best we can, which requires that we have the attitude that lying is generally worse than misleading.

Indeed, implicit in my argument is the point that it is not enough merely to assent to the claim that lying is generally worse than misleading. We need to ensure that this attitude informs our judgments of cases of deception and our own decisions about whether and how to deceive, however rapidly and unreflectively those judgments and decisions are made. In the language of the empirical psychology of attitudes, we need our attitude towards these forms of deception to be 'strong'. Unless this attitude is sufficiently firmly embedded in our cognition, that is to say, our judgments and decisions about this aspect of cases of linguistic deception will vary with details of the situation that do not rationally justify the difference they are making to our judgment (see Webber 2015).

If my argument is right, then the ideally honest person is disposed to reject the arguments of both Saul and Rees on the relative moral values of lying and misleading. The virtue of honesty requires that acts of linguistic deception are judged according to the firmly held attitude that in the absence of special considerations lying is worse than misleading, despite the close similarities between these two types of deception and despite any difference in the ways they exploit their immediate victims.

There is, of course, more to the virtue of honesty than firm possession of this attitude. The honest person also has the right understanding of the conditions under which deception is justified, for example. Nevertheless, since we ought to instil in ourselves this attitude towards the difference between lying and misleading as a disposition that governs our thoughts, feelings, and actions with regard to acts of deception, it is a component of the virtue of honesty. Although it is generally dishonest to deceive, it is generally more honest to mislead than to lie.

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