

On when to tell the truth, and when not

Truth-telling and its pendant, lying, provide a telling vignette to illustrate the vagaries of ethics and rules. The default position is that the truth is told for the sake of the coherence of language and community. Not a few thinkers (including Kant) have held that one should always tell the truth, no matter what; or at least that lying should be reserved for only very extreme cases. Most people have recourse to the device of the white lie: whereas one should always tell the truth, a white lie is not only allowed, but imperative (to avoid an insult, a betrayal, or misleading with a subtlety the listener is ill-equipped to comprehend). But when is a potential lie indeed white? The habitual or occasional liar will be adept at the art of whitewash.

One might, for illustrative purposes, develop a list of examples, perhaps broken down by category, of seriously white lies. I propose a different approach. Focussing on the literal truthfulness or falsity of what is said directs our attention fatally away from the wider context, most importantly, from the recipient of the truth or the falsehood. (Advocates of resolute truth-telling, by contrast, like to focus not on the recipient, but on the integrity of the speaker, and any supposed harm to the speaker's character or reputation.) The issue, I submit, is what claim a person may have to receive a truth. A distinction may be drawn between whether they are being presented with an unsolicited untruth or whether they have posed (explicitly or implicitly) a question in expectation of a truthful answer.

The default position must be that a person should not be led astray by novel disinformation. The situation is already quite different when someone demands to know something. In the world of diplomacy and public relations, one response to an indiscreet question is of the sort "We never comment on this sort of matter". More commonly, the responses to an indiscreet question are a lie, a half-truth, an evasion or a redescription of the matter being enquired about. "Three questions, and give me a straight answer, if you will. Have you finally stopped masturbating? Is it true that your bank is in financial difficulties? And what do you really think of me anyway?" (The best weapon in polemics remains satire.)

I propose two principles for judging whether or the extent to which the truth should be told in a given situation.

1. Does the recipient of the truth or the untruth have a claim to be truthfully informed?
2. What respect does the speaker owe the specific person or group being addressed?

Note that you may be so respectful of another as to withhold the truth (the classic white lie: Auntie does not deserve to be told that, no, you didn't appreciate her home-made cakes); or you may justly have too little respect (e.g. when a criminal tries to coerce you into providing information to aid and abet his larceny).

The issue in (1) of the claim or right of someone to be truthfully informed is a function of the relationship. Perhaps a spouse does have an entitlement to know about your possible masturbation. The finance minister may have a duty to enquire – and a right to be informed of the truth – regarding your bank's financial health, but not an ordinary investor or a journalist.

In the case of the third mock question, "What do you really think of me anyway?" merely asking let alone answering it is likely to alter fundamentally the nature of the relationship. This last scenario points to another aspect of the matter in hand, namely the subjective nature of much that is enquired about or proffered in relation to truth-telling. A person who is not much given to introspection or self-doubt will have less difficulty with speaking sincerely than a scrupulously honest introvert. It is also a matter of social practice. The person who qualifies – or is hesitant about – their response to an indiscreet question is likely to find their account discounted or discredited ("if he already admits this weakness, then the truth will be much worse") whereas another kind of character is so adept at self-deception, or has so little depth, that they will hardly register how blatantly false their reply is.

My advice here is to err on the side of simplification. Anyone who has read this far is likely already to take these matters much more thoughtfully and seriously than those they have dealings with. To arrive at substantial truth, a lengthy process of acquaintance and attention to detail is needed, and those unwilling to be so patient are also unworthy of knowing the exact circumstances of the matter in question. There is also the issue of collateral casualties. I may have to lie to one person who is undeserving of the lie in order to avoid revealing what must remain concealed from others. And remember this: In life it is futile to move too far from common practice. You can only be as truthful (or good) as the environment allows. You may try to change the environment, but that will require subtlety. Or you can move to another environment where you are more at ease or better accepted.