



The Whole Truth: What Do We Owe Our Friends?

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Everyone would probably agree that in general truthfulness between close friends is necessary to sustain the relationship that these individuals have with one another. Certainly any relationship that is characterized by a persistent pattern of deception will not last very long. And this is all the more true in the case of friendship, where trust is so essential. Does this mean, however, that friends can never misrepresent the truth to one another? We have all been in situations where we know that if we tell the truth to a friend it will cause him or her to experience extreme pain. For example, a close friend of yours who is “generously proportioned” has been trying to lose weight for several months with only modest success. When she sees you she asks if you can tell that she has lost weight. You, however, don’t notice any difference at all in her girth. Should you, in this circumstance, be perfectly honest with your friend, and tell her that she looks exactly the same to you? Or in this particular case might it not be acceptable for the sake of your friend’s psychological well-being to misrepresent the truth just a little bit?

There are those who would maintain that lying to anyone under any circumstances is completely wrong. St. Augustine, for example, argues that, since God’s law expressly forbids intentional deception, lying for any reason—even if one’s intentions are benevolent—must be considered a sin:

...every liar says the opposite of what he thinks in his heart, with purpose to deceive. Now it is evident that speech was given to man, not that man might therewith deceive one another, but that one man might make known his thoughts to another. To use speech, then, for the purpose of deception, and not for its appointed end, is a sin.¹

To illustrate his point, Augustine uses the example of a man whose son has just died. He asks a friend who is visiting him how his son is doing. The friend knows that the man’s son has just died in an accident, but realizes that, if he tells the man the truth, the shock might kill him. The question is: what is the right thing to do in this kind of situation? Although Augustine naturally expresses great sympathy for the individual who has to decide whether to lie or not in this circumstance, he is adamant in his conviction that lying even in a situation with consequences as grave as this one is still wrong. Once we start to lie to protect someone from the harsh truth, he says, we will eventually get caught up in a web of lies from which it becomes extremely difficult to extricate ourselves. Inevitably the truth will become known, and its impact will hurt the person that I am trying to protect much more grievously than the truth would have.²

While Augustine’s rigid defense of truthfulness is certainly admirable, his position makes no distinction between lies told to friends and those told to strangers or even enemies. Indeed his argument makes sense only in a religious context, where human beings are viewed as being children of God and therefore deserving of the complete truth at all times. And yet at this point in our virtue ethics, I do not believe that we need to take such a radical position with respect to the truth. We have already seen that in developing an ethics of care, it is indeed permissible to make distinctions in our moral outlook between those who are near to us (family,

friends, sexual partners) and those who are not. In keeping with this distinction we need to ask two important questions: (1) what is the intention of the person telling the lie and (2) what is his relationship to the person being told the lie.

Take, for example, Augustine's own example of the man whose son has just died. If you were this man's close friend what would you do: lie to him to protect him from the truth or be completely honest to him about his son's death? If you chose to lie to your friend, your intention clearly would be benevolent, since your aim would be to protect him from the grave harm that you believe would result from him hearing the truth about his son's death. I would agree with Augustine, however, that even in such a difficult situation, we ought to tell the truth to someone whom we regard as an close friend. The justification for this has already been established: friendship is founded upon trust and trust cannot exist without complete honesty. As Cierco puts it, "without honesty the word 'friendship' has no meaning. For the essence of friendship consists in the fact that many souls, so to speak, become one, and how can that take place if even in the one individual the soul is not single and forever the same, but various, changeable, kaleidoscopic?"³

This in no way means that helpful lies are always wrong. The classic example that is often raised is that of the potential murderer pursuing his victim, who is hiding in my house, and who asks me if I know where he is. Although Augustine and Kant after him would demand the truth in both these cases regardless of the consequences, most sensible people would accept that lying in this case is completely proper. The reason why the truth is not owed in this case, whereas I maintain that it is in the prior one, is that potential murderer has no relationship to me, and I am under no obligation to be truthful to him even if his intentions were not quite so malicious. From the perspective of the virtue of care viewed separately from any civic or religious framework, my obligation to strangers, as we have already discussed, are very limited: Common decency simply demands that I not cause them any *unnecessary* harm. I am under no obligation, however, to promote the well-being of any stranger, and therefore I am under no obligation to be completely truthful to them. The vicious stranger with criminal intent is owed even less from me than an innocent stranger, but he certainly has no right to expect the truth from me.

This principle can also be applied to two other sorts of lies that are much more innocuous than those that we have previously examined—the all too common white lie and the more subtle misrepresentation of the truth. A white lie is an intentional untruth, but its import is so insignificant that it does little or no harm to the one being lied to. One example of this type of lie would be giving a false excuse so as not to hurt someone's feelings: someone invites you to a party, and you dread having to deal with the bores that she usually invites to her gathering, so you make up some kind of excuse that will get you out of having to go. Or you tell a friend who is wearing a dress that you find rather old-fashioned that it looks wonderful on her. In both these cases our aim is to smooth over social discourse and certainly not to harm anyone. And is it really so terrible to tell a little white lie on occasion if doing so will prevent someone's feelings from being hurt? Sissela Bok, in her work, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* seems not to think so. "In the eyes of man," she writes, "such white lies do no harm, provide needed support and cheer and help dispel gloom and boredom. They preserve the equilibrium and often humaneness of social relationships, and are usually accepted as excusable so long as they do not become excessive."⁴ Far from being wrongful, then, white lies can be viewed as a beneficial means of facilitating human interaction.

Even more acceptable would seem to be what I would refer to as "a misrepresentation of the truth." If I misrepresent the truth to someone I am technically not telling a lie, but my statement intentionally leads him to the wrong conclusion. For example a telemarketer calls and asks if Mr. Russo is home. If I respond, "Mr. Russo is not available right now," I am technically not telling a lie, because what I specifically mean is, "I am not available right now to listen to your annoying sales pitch." The telemarketer, however, is clearly under the impression that I am not home, so, in fact, I am still engaged in a deception of sort, albeit one of the most innocent kinds imaginable.

In keeping with what has been established already, I would argue that there is nothing wrong with engaging either in white lies or misrepresentations of the truth with strangers or mere acquaintances. These types of insignificant forms of deception can indeed serve to “smooth discourse” among individuals who don’t know each other very well but who are still concerned with avoiding possible offense. If I was determined to be perfectly honest I might tell the acquaintance who invites me to her party that I have better things to do than to waste my time mixing with such odious company; I probably also would inform the telemarketer that he is violating my privacy and his call is therefore completely unwelcome. The complete unfettered truth in such circumstances does little more than demonstrate to others that I am a completely callous individual. My commitment to absolute honesty even in such insignificant situations will serve only to alienate others and prevent possible friendships from developing over time with them.

Whereas strangers are not necessarily entitled to the complete truth, we have seen that friends most certainly are. Attempting to smooth over social discourse using white lies or misrepresentations of the truth with a friend, then, is completely inappropriate. In the case of a friend who invites me to a party that I do not wish to attend or who asks me to comment on her frumpy dress, the proper response is still to be completely forthright—period! And this is true even if my honesty causes them some degree of pain. A good friend in fact will tell the truth even when he knows that the other party wants to hear anything but the truth. My friends may not want to hear that I find their parties boring or that I think they dress badly, but, provided that my relationship with them is indeed sound, they should respect my honesty. Telling the truth to a friend can lead at times to anger and bitterness, but if a friendship is strong to begin with, it will become even stronger by developing the habit of being completely forthright. If, on the other hand, a friendship falls apart because of the truth, one must wonder whether there was a real friendship that existed to begin with.

If we grant that truthfulness is necessary among friends, does this mean that we are also obligated to be completely candid with them? Or are we permitted to exercise a certain amount of reserve with even our closest friends, refraining from speaking about certain matters that will show us in an unflattering light? Do even my closest friends need to know all the sordid, ugly details of my past—details which might very well reduce their estimation of my worth? Do they really need to know all of my motivations for performing certain actions (motivations, which may in fact be much more egocentric than they appear on the surface?). Should I lay bare all of my fears, anxieties and insecurities to them, when doing so may cause them to think that I am some kind of pathetic basket-case?

Kant, for one, maintains that very often it is necessary to cultivate “reserve and concealment... that the defects of which we are full should not be too obvious.” The one thing that is absolutely necessary in our relationships with others, Kant argues, is mutual respect. If the content of one’s heart—with all its pettiness, vanity, insecurities, and vices—was laid open for others to see, one could never hope to maintain their respect. On the other hand, this respect can exist quite well if we avoid being completely candid with them.⁵

But what about the case of close friendships, where complete candor would seem to be essential? Even in the case of friendship, Kant argues, candor is still risky, and the gains from being candid are negligible at best. It is better, he maintains, to suffer from complete isolation than to “place ourselves in a friend’s hands completely, to tell him all the secrets that might detract from our welfare if he became our enemy and spread them abroad.”⁶

I would agree with Kant that some degree of reserve is appropriate in mixed company, where we rightly have concerns about preserving our reputations. If we openly admit our faults and foibles to those we don’t know very well, we run the risk of having that information used against us later or spread around to others in the form of gossip. Furthermore, to expose one’s “naked heart” to the world is both imprudent and a form of emotional exhibitionism.

On the other hand, exercising reserve with those who are supposed to be our closest friends is an indication of a lack of trust in these friends. A relationship founded upon trust necessitates a willingness on the part of both parties in the relationship to make themselves somewhat

vulnerable to the each other by disclosing personal information that they would definitely not want revealed to outsiders. In doing so, there is always the chance—however remote—that the other might betray me; I may have great confidence that he will not do so, but the possibility still remains. Without some degree of vulnerability, however, there is no trust, and without trust, friendship withers and dies. In a true friendship, on the other hand, where one has absolute faith in the good will of the other, one should be willing to reveal everything, and have confidence that a friend can be trusted with this information.

This does not mean, however, that I should pour out the entire contents of my heart all at once even with a close friend. The process of self-disclosure should occur gradually in any relationship. During an early stage in a friendship, for example, it is not necessary that I place a great deal of trust in my friend, since I cannot yet be certain that he will not abuse my trust. As my friend starts to prove his loyalty and trustworthiness, I will gradually begin to reveal more of myself to him—including some unpleasant facts about myself that I may not have revealed to anyone else. This, in turn, inspires greater candor from my friend, which encourages me to continue the process of self-disclosure. Eventually I will come to the point where I have such utter and complete confidence in my friend that I will be inspired to become utterly transparent to him.

NOTES

1. Augustine, *Enchiridion*. See also “Lying” and “Against Lying.” The absolute prohibition against lying was also held by Immanuel Kant. Since Kant attempts to divorce his position for any sort of religious conviction, his approach is even more questionable than that of Augustine. See *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Part II: “The Doctrine of Virtue.” Trans. Mary Gregor. New York: Harper and Row, 1964.)

2. Augustine. *Against Lying* 36-37.

3. Cicero, *On Friendship* 25.92.

4. Sissela Bok. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*, 58-59.

5. Immanuel Kant. *Lectures on Ethics*, 224.

6. Kant. *Lectures on Ethics*, 208.

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