Transparency: Background Readings Related to a Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principle

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Transparency: Maintain open and truthful communications

Ethical Communications: Spinning the Truth
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Somewhere between the truth and a lie, there's "spin." We hear about politicians spinning bad news in their favor. We see journalists and pundits spin news stories to reflect a certain point of view. It's easy. You too can spin if you look at data, filter it through your biases, and preach it like gospel. The rationale is that it isn't really lying, just putting a bias on what is already true. So what's wrong with it?

Before you choose to spin yourself into trouble, understand that in the context of ethical communication, you should be clear, truthful, and honest in what comes out of your mouth.

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Spinning is like any other kind of dishonesty, it’s wrong. It makes good old fashioned lying sound clever and trendy. It can be said that stupid people lie and smart people spin.

For most of us, it’s not so much about telling the big whoppers as much as getting tangled in the exaggerations and spins that are commonplace. Adding "spin" to favor your side of the story doesn't require much premeditation. In fact it seems perfectly natural to talk fast and spin your response when your back is against the wall. Besides, it's not like a real lie because if you get caught you can always back out of it, spin some more, or stand by your spin as your personal "opinion."

Accepting ethical gray areas as "normal" is asking for trouble. Honesty is the best policy. When a customer, coworker, or friend looks you in the eye, he or she expects to hear the truth and not spin. An orderly society needs to operate on the premise of truth and honesty. Without some standard of truth, people will tend to satisfy their own interests, desires, and feelings. Who wants to live in a world where everyone sets their own behavioral standards?

Luckily, the universal expectation that people tell the truth is alive and well. Fortunately, you don't have to worry about getting ripped off every time you buy something. You trust that when you shake hands on a deal, the other person is being straightforward with you. Of course, wisdom and good judgment still mandate a healthy amount of caution, but you can go through life with a fair amount of trust in your fellow man.

What throws this precariously balanced moral trust out of whack is the gradual acceptance that a little spin is acceptable. The urge to spin the truth works its way very subtly into our lives. We start to stretch the facts. We're quick to rationalize and weasel out of jams. We look out for ourselves and shift responsibility or leave out undesirable facts. Before you know it, spin becomes a regular part of your communication with others.

Ethical communication is not only about what IS said, but what is NOT said. Rule #1 in spinning is to only tell people what they need to know. Some parts of the truth get conveniently left out. Withholding information is so easy to do without guilt or effort because all it requires is to do nothing. No fibbing, no stories, no sweat, just a closed lip and the hope that no one reads between the lines. But make no mistake, lies by omission are still lies and are still wrong. In business it may be tempting to leave out undesirable details that may hinder a deal. Don't let important things go unsaid.

It is a matter of keeping an ethical perspective and being watchful for behaviors that undermine the truth. If you aren't vigilant in watching what you say then your instinct for self-preservation will kick in and you'll start spinning. The more you spin the truth the harder it is to stop. If you continue to spin for any length of time, you will begin to believe your own lies.

Let the words that come out of your mouth be honest and devoid of spin. There should be no higher compliment than to have other people say that they can, "count on you for the truth." You will be believable, trusted, and respected. Ethical communication is an obligation. People expect it from you. In a world where the spin-doctors operate, keep yourself in good ethical health.

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**Honesty in Communications**


Honesty requires a good faith intent to convey the truth as best we know it and to avoid communicating in a way that is likely to mislead or deceive. In the language of the courtroom oath, an honest person tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There are three aspects to honest communication: truthfulness, sincerity (non-deception), and, in relationships of trust, candor.

**Truthfulness.** Honest people are truthful. They do not intentionally misrepresent facts, intentions, or opinions (we call this lying). Intent is crucial to the distinction between truthfulness and truth. We can be truthful and, therefore, ethical, even if what we say is not actually true. Being wrong is not the same thing as being a liar. An untruth told as the result of a mistake or
error in judgment is not an act of dishonesty. Of course, honest mistakes can still hurt trust to the extent they reveal deficiencies in terms of reliability and carefulness, but a person who makes a mistake is not dishonest.

An unfortunate confusion on this issue, one that has trivialized the significance of lying is the phrase, “So, I lied,” as a flip response when caught in error. Lying is an honesty issue, not a competency issue. Honest people make mistakes. Liars lie. Because lying is a moral transgression of intent, it is far more serious from a moral perspective. When we expand the domain of lying to honest mistakes we tend to increase our tolerance of lying.

Sincerity/Nondeception. Honesty requires more than truthfulness. Deception is an act (sometimes including silence) intended to cause another person to believe something that isn’t true. We can deceive and mislead without ever telling a lie, but it is just as dishonest to deceive with half-truths and tricky wording. It is as wrong to deceive as it is to lie.

An Illinois legislator was named by a local magazine as one of the ten worst lawmakers in the legislature sent out a mailer to his constituents proudly proclaiming that he had been “singled out for recognition.” Now, what he said was literally true, but he said it in a way that was clearly intended to mislead.

What about advertising claims that announce “one-third less calories” when this glorious achievement was actually accomplished by reducing the recommended portions by one-third? A particularly audacious example of advertising deception was reported by Consumer Reports. Brut spray deodorant came out with new packaging prominently featuring the words “Now More Brut.” The can was indeed bigger. Well, the cap on the can was one quarter inch bigger. What was in the can? Less product. The manufacturer defended this odiferous ploy with the argument that the amount of musk (the ingredient that gives that Brut-ish smell), had not been reduced. Therefore, it said, the proportion of the musk to the other ingredients was greater, resulting in more Brut smell. That explanation stinks. Perhaps that technical evasion could dodge a charge of lying, but there can be no question that the packagers intended to deceive consumers into thinking that they were getting more deodorant for their money.

The test to uncover deception, however subtle, is very simple: If the person communicated to comes to learn the truth concerning the facts, motivations and intentions behind the communication, does it undermine trust? Are you more or less likely to believe the state legislator once you realize his out of context reference? Do you feel the manufacturer of the deodorant was honorable in its relations with customers?

Sincerity is an important virtue because it breeds trust, just as insincerity breeds distrust. Unfortunately, people who want to be trusted but are unwilling to be trustworthy also are willing to be insincere about sincerity. Oscar Wilde, in his inimitable fashion, said that sincerity is a most important human virtue; once you can fake it, you have it made. Real sincerity precludes all acts intended to create beliefs or impressions that are untrue, misleading, or deceptive, including deliberate omissions, half-truths, and out-of-context statements.

Candor. So far, I’ve dealt with lies and deceptions resulting from statements and deliberate half-truths, but does being honest sometimes require us to volunteer information even when we are not asked? Yes.

In personal and business relationships, which create special expectations of mutual trust, honesty requires candor, the obligation to volunteer information that the other person needs or wants to know. Candor is required in our closest relationships — those between parent and child, coach and athlete, teacher and student, husband and wife, movie star and plastic surgeon. It is also required between employer and employee and between business partners.

This does not mean we have to volunteer everything we know or think — your hair looks awful, the speech was boring, my mother hates you, I hate the sweater. The moral duty of candor exists only in trust relationships and only when forthrightness is expected. That is, we don’t always expect or want others to give us their unsolicited opinions or foist upon us facts that could ruin positive feelings or assassinate other relationships.

When we ask others to trust us, we assure them that they can rely on us to act on their behalf, to protect them. That is why trust relationships

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require us to be candid, sincere, and guileless. We are obliged to reveal things that those who trust us ought to know for their own good, or want to know so that they can make informed decisions.

Suppose, for example, that your high school daughter has been suspended from school for three days. By accident, you see her in the mall on one of those days and you accuse her of cutting school. She says she isn’t cutting — because she was suspended. “Why didn’t you tell me?” is the likely response. “You never asked,” might be her answer. “Knock it off! You betrayed my trust. And you know it,” you might conclude. Her failure to be candid in this setting probably is no less damaging to your trust than if she had blatantly lied. You have a right to expect that your children will tell you about such matters. It is important and they know it is important. Similarly, an employer has a right to know that a project will not be finished on time or that the computer was broken.

Justifiable Dishonesty. Honesty is an extremely important quality, but it is not, an inviolable principle of ethics. All lies are dishonest, but not all lies are unethical. There are times when an ethical person can be dishonest. Police, for example, are morally authorized to lie in undercover operations to catch drug dealers and corrupt politicians. In such cases, society has concluded that its interest in the ethical principles of citizenship and lawfulness outweighs the suspect’s interest in being treated with honesty. If that were the only exception, however, the rule of honesty would be pretty much intact since few of us can use this excuse (even police officers can use it only under judicial supervision). There are other times when lies are morally justifiable, when the end clearly justifies the means. Lying to the Nazis to save Anne Frank or to terrorists to save the lives of innocent people makes moral sense.

The Definition of Lying and Deception

Questions central to the philosophical discussion of lying to others and other-deception (or interpersonal deceiving) may be divided into two kinds. Questions of the first kind are definitional. They include the questions of how lying is to be defined, and how deceiving is to be defined, and whether lying is a form of intended deception. Questions of the second kind are moral. They include the questions of whether lying and deceiving are (defeasibly) morally wrong, and whether, if either lying or deception, or both, are defeasibly morally wrong, they are ever morally obligatory, and not just merely morally permissible. In this entry, we only consider questions of the first kind.

1. Definition of lying

There is no universally accepted definition of lying to others (Kagan 1998). The OED definition of lying is as follows:

To lie = as to make a false statement with the intention to deceive.

There are several problems with this definition. According to it, a person who makes a statement that she believes to be true — a person who makes a truthful statement — with the intention to deceive another person, is lying, if, unbeknownst to her, the statement is false. For example, if A tells B that there is not a board meeting on Thursday, which A believes to be true, with the intention that B believe there is no board meeting this week, which A believes there is a board meeting on Wednesday, then A is lying to B, if A is mistaken, and there is a board meeting on Thursday. Also, according to this definition, conspirators who knowingly make untruthful and false statements to each other, without the intention to deceive each other, but with the intention to deceive eavesdroppers, are lying. Both of these cases are controversial, and it is not clear that we should classify either of these cases as lies.

The most commonly accepted definition of lying that manages to avoid these problems is the following: “I take a lie to be an assertion, the content of which the speaker believes to be false, which is made with the intention to deceive the hearer with respect to that content” (Williams 2002, 96); or, more formally:
To lie =df to make an assertion that is believed to be false to some audience with the intention to deceive the audience about the content of that assertion.

This definition is normally unpacked as follows: “A person lies when he asserts something to another which he believes to be false with the intention of getting the other to believe it to be true” (Kupfer 1982, 104); “[lying is] making a statement believed to be false, with the intention of getting another to accept it as true” (Primoratz 1984, 54n2). More formally:

To lie =df to make a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that that other person believe that statement to be true.

Let us call this the most common definition of lying. According to this definition, there are at least four necessary conditions for lying. First, lying requires that a person make a statement (statement condition). Second, lying requires that the person believe the statement to be false, that is, lying requires that the statement be untruthful (untruthfulness condition). Third, lying requires that the untruthful statement be made to another person (addressee condition). Fourth, lying requires that the person intend that that other person believe the untruthful statement to be true (intention to deceive addressee condition).

These four putative necessary conditions for the most common definition of lying need to be explained, before objections to this definition can be entertained, and before alternative definitions of lying can be considered.

1.1. Statement condition

According to the statement condition of the most common definition of lying, lying requires that a person make a statement. A person may be said to make a statement when a person believes that there is some expression, and some language, such that one of the standard uses of the expression in that language is that of expressing some proposition, and the person utters, writes or signs that expression with the intention that it be believed that she intended to utter (etc.) that expression with that standard use (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, 150; Newey 1997, 95). Making a statement therefore requires the use of conventional signs, as opposed to natural or causal signs (Pierce, 1955), since it requires the uttering (etc.) of an expression in a language.…

Insofar as a person is not signing (etc.) an expression in a language when, for example, she wears a wedding ring when she is not married, or wears a police uniform when she is not a police officer, it follows that a person cannot be lying by wearing a wedding ring when she is not married, or wearing a police uniform when she is not a police officer, even if she intends to deceive by these means.…

Finally, since lying requires that a person utter (etc.) an expression, it is not possible for a person to lie by omission (Mahon 2003, 2006a). That is, it is not possible for a person to lie by omitting to utter (etc.) an expression. It is possible for a person to lie by remaining ‘silent’, if the ‘silence’ is a previously agreed upon signal with others that is equivalent to uttering an expression in a language (Fried 1978, 57). However, such a lie would not be a lie of omission.

1.2. Untruthfulness condition

According to the untruthfulness condition of the most common definition of lying, lying requires that a person make an untruthful statement, which is a statement that the person believes to be false. The condition that the statement be untruthful, according to this sense of untruthful, may be true, and statements that are truthful may be false (Bok 1998). If a person who makes a statement does not believe that statement to be false, then, according to this condition, she cannot be lying, even if that statement is false, and she intends the other person to believe it to be true. If A makes the statement to B that "The enemy has weapons of mass destruction", with the intention that B believe that statement to be true, and that statement is false, then A is not lying, if A does not believe that statement to be false. According to this condition, if the person who makes the statement does not believe the statement to be false, then even if she makes that statement with the intention to deceive another person, she is not lying.…

One implication of the untruthfulness condition is that if a person makes a statement that she believes to be neither true nor false, then she
cannot be lying (Siegler 1966, 133; cf. Strawson 1952, 173). For example, if a person begging for money says “All my children need medical attention”, but believes that this proposition is neither true nor false, because he has no children, then he is not lying, even if he is attempting to deceive (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, 155-6; but see Siegler 1966, 135).

1.3. Addressee condition

According to the addressee condition of the most common definition of lying, lying requires that a person make an untruthful statement to another person. That is, lying requires that a person address another person. According to this condition, it is not possible to lie to no one or to an eavesdropper. If A pretends to be talking to another person on the phone, and makes the untruthful statement to no one, “The pick-up is tomorrow at 6:00 p.m.”, with the intention that eavesdropping B believes that statement to be true, then A is not lying, even if A is attempting to deceive. According to this condition, however, it is possible to lie to a general audience. It is possible for a person to lie by sending an untruthful e-mail to everyone on a mailing list, or by publishing an untruthful report about an event (Kant LE, 203), or by making an untruthful statement on a tax return, or by making an untruthful claim in a magazine advertisement or a television commercial.

1.4. Intention to deceive addressee condition

According to the intention to deceive addressee condition of the most common definition of lying, lying requires that a person make an untruthful statement to another person with the intention that that other person believe that statement to be true. That is, there is more to lying than being untruthful…. According to this condition, lying necessarily involves an intention to communicate with another person by means of a statement. It is not possible to lie to those whom you believe or know to be infants, insane adults, etc., or to dogs, goldfish, etc., who (or which) cannot understand statements made to them.

According to this condition, if a first person makes an untruthful statement to a second person, without the intention that the second person believe this untruthful statement to be true, but with the intention that that second person believe something else to be true, something else that the first person believes to be true, then she is not lying. For example, if A makes the untruthful statement to B, “She is not at home”, without the intention that B believe it to be true that she is not home, but with the intention that B believe it to be true that it is inconvenient for her to see B now, then according to the most common definition, A is not lying (Isenberg 1964, 473); however, for A to intend that B believe this, it must be the case that A believes that this is how B understands “She is not at home”….

According to this condition, it is also not merely the case that the person intends that the addressee believe some statement to be true that the person believes to be false; the person intends that the addressee believe the untruthful statement that is made to the addressee to be true (Williams 2002, 96)….

According to this condition, it is sufficient for lying that the person who makes the untruthful statement intends that the addressee believe the untruthful statement to be true; it is not necessary that the addressee believe the untruthful statement to be true. That is, a lie may be disbelieved. If A makes the untruthful statement to B “I didn’t get any homework today”, with the intention that B believe that statement to be true, and if B does not believe that statement to be true, then A is still lying….

1.5. Objections to the definition of lying

A number of objections have been made to the most common definition of lying. These objections are of two kinds. First, objections have been made to each of the necessary conditions being necessary conditions for lying. Second, objections have been made to the necessary conditions being jointly sufficient for lying.

Against the statement condition, it has been objected that the making of a statement is not necessary for lying. Any form of behavior, the function of which is make others form false beliefs or to deprive them of true beliefs, is lying (Vrij 2000, 6; O’Neill 2003 — see Other Internet Resources; Smith 2004, 14). This behavior can simply be a matter of withholding information, without saying anything untruthful (Ekman 1985, 28; Scott 2006, 4).

Against the untruthfulness condition, it has been objected that untruthfulness is not necessary for
lying; any statement made with an intention to deceive is a lie, including a believed-true statement that is made with an intention to deceive (Bok 1978, 13; Barnes 1994, 11; Davidson 1980, 88). It has also been objected that it is not necessary for lying that the statement that is made be believed to be false; it is only necessary that the statement that is made be believed not to be true, or be believed to be probably false, or be not believed to be true (Carson 2006, 298).

Against the addressee condition, it has been objected that it is sufficient for lying that an untruthful statement is made; it does not have to be made to anyone, not even to oneself (Shibles 1985: 33; Griffiths 2004, 31). It has also been objected that it is possible to lie to an eavesdropper (Newey 1997, 95), and that it may be possible to lie to an animal or to a “computing machine”, or to what is falsely believed to be another person — for example, an imagined burglar (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, 157-8).

Against the intention to deceive addressee condition it has been objected that no intention to deceive is required for lying (Shibles 1985, 33; Kemp and Sullivan 1993, 153; Griffiths 2004, 31 (but see Feehan 1988); Carson et al. 1982; Carson 1988, 2006; Sorensen 2007, 252). If a sworn-in witness in a trial of a violent criminal goes on the record and gives untruthful testimony, without any intention that that testimony be believed to be true by any other person (not the jury, the judge, the lawyers, the audience, etc.), in order to avoid being physically harmed by the defendant or his criminal associates, then the witness is lying (but see Jones 1986).

It has also been objected that even if an intention to deceive the addressee is required for lying, it is not necessary that it be an intention to deceive the addressee about the contents of the untruthful statement (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, 152). If A makes the untruthful statement “There are no informants in my organization” to believed informant B, without the intention that B believe that statement to be true, but with the intention that B believe it to be true that A believes that statement to be true, then A is lying.

Objections have also been made to these necessary conditions being jointly sufficient for lying. It has been objected that making an untruthful statement to another person with the intention that that other person believe that untruthful statement to be true is not sufficient for lying, because in addition it is necessary that the untruthful statement be false (falsity condition) (Coleman and Kay 1981, 28; Moore 2000; Saul 2000; Carson 2006, 284).

It has also been objected that making an untruthful statement to another person with the intention that that other person believe that statement to be true is not sufficient for lying, because it is also necessary to have the intention that that other person believe that that statement is believed to be true (believed truthfulness condition) (Chisholm and Feehan 1977, 152; Simpson 1992, 625; Frankfurt 1999, 5; Faulkner 2007, 527). If A makes the untruthful statement “I have no change in my pocket” to B, then A is only lying if, in addition to intending that B believe it to be true that A has no money in A’s pocket, A intends that B believe that A believes it to be true that A has no money in A’s pocket (Frankfurt 1988, 120)….

Bibliography


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