

The Basis of Ethics

Gabriel Moran

The two fundamental principles of *ethics* are:

1. Do no violence
2. Do not lie

Both of these statements are absolute imperatives. An ethical human being will try at all costs to avoid both violence and lying. Given the inner tensions of the individual and the reality of living in a world where violence and lying are common, no human being can escape ethical failures. Anyone who claims to be innocent of complicity in violence and lying is probably not looking deeply enough.

If we turn to the actual behavior of people related to institutional structures, the two fundamental *moral* principles are:

1. No society can allow indiscriminate aggression
2. No society can allow indiscriminate deception

Both principles are stated negatively. People sometimes try to rewrite codes, such as the Ten Commandments, in positive language. The result is bound to be general ideas that are not very helpful as guides to the individual or society. The fundamental moral principles are not intended to tell people what to do but to set the widest possible boundaries for the exercise of human freedom. Boundaries are there because a group, society or institution does not exist without boundaries. The moral task is to discriminate between what is allowable in relation to these boundaries and what is not.

The boundaries change over time and vary according to culture. That fact leads some people to conclude that there is no human morality, only arbitrary rules. But more

important than where the boundaries are drawn is the fact that every group draws boundary lines. There are differences between what is good, what is neutral, what is discouraged, and what is condemned. Thus we have the two moral principles that approach universality: No society could survive if indiscriminate aggression were allowed. No society could exist if anyone could deceive in any way that he or she chose, including lying.

The most available positive word for the ideal of nonviolent living is peace. Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace or peaceful can describe the individual's life and suggests a calm and balanced outlook on life. A person can live in a fairly peaceful way in the midst of violence and war. But it is practically impossible not to be contaminated by violence if one's clan or nation is at war. Peace is a wonderful and desirable aim which, it has to be acknowledged, is never fully achieved.

The corresponding ideal opposed to lying is truth. Truth is not just the absence of lying. Truth or truthful is a quality of personal life and of the relations that make up organized existence. Every lie undermines the truth on which human life resides. Truthful statements contribute to the search for a truth never fully grasped. "Let each man say what he deems truth, and let truth itself be commended unto God."ⁱ

The two fundamental principles of ethics/morality protect the integrity of the physical organism and the integrity of human speech. The two realms are distinct but not separable. Gandhi used a term *satyagraha* which can be translated as "truth force." He came to prefer this term to "passive resistance" which might convey mere passivity. Nonviolent living requires a use of force that is distinct from violence. For maintaining

that attitude, truth is indispensable. “The way of peace is the way of truth...Lying is the mother of violence.”ⁱⁱ

Violence to the body spills over to the mind. The most outrageous forms of violence, such as rape and torture, are intended to humiliate the victim. In such vicious attacks on the body, the person’s dignity is assaulted. Similarly, every lie is an attack on the power of speech to achieve nonviolent goals. A single lie may have no obvious bodily repercussions but a liar, as Buddhist tradition warns, is liable to do any evil. A nonviolent life cannot be sustained without words that articulate accurately and truthfully one’s stance in life.

Aggressive and Aggression

It would be helpful if the noun aggression were used only in reference to external behavior. Although the adjective aggressive can also be used to characterize behavior, it is most helpfully used to describe an inner drive, impulse, inclination (but not instinct). Even if one does not adopt this distinction, one should be aware that when a political writer refers to aggression, he or she is assuming connotations very different from the aggressive drive that an ethologist proposes is inherent in all humans.

It would help discussion if everyone acknowledged that behavior called aggression is always an inner/outer interaction. Aggressive can refer to the inner pole but no one thinks that an aggressive drive operates without regard to external conditions. Likewise, environment is not the complete explanation of aggression and violence. Graham Kemp rightly defends ethology against the charge that it makes violence an innate drive. However, Kemp illogically concludes that “violence is not a product of the human

biology of aggression but of human culture....Thus culture is the source of human violence.”ⁱⁱⁱ Culture is not an alternative to biological drives but a shaping of those drives.

It is certainly possible to speak of aggressive/aggression quantitatively. Some people are *more* aggressive than other people. Some actions are judged to be *very* aggressive. However, the qualitative is more important than the quantitative. *How* the aggressive drive is expressed is the key to whether its contribution is life-enhancing or destructive, nonviolent or violent. The aim should not be to reduce the quantity of aggression. Nor should there be a program to produce “unaggressive” people.

Aggressive inclinations have to be situated in relation to social tendencies that restrain or inhibit aggressiveness when that is needed, that is, when aggression can endanger another person. Aggression as behavior evolved in tandem with the means to control it. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that modern conditions are best suited to maintain this balance.^{iv} An accepting of aggressiveness would indicate that more attention should be given to conflict resolution. Conflicts within groups and between groups are inevitable but conflict need not include violence. Avoiding violence usually involves rituals that harmlessly channel aggression and which signal a resolution of conflict short of violence.

The study of nonhuman animals is especially helpful here. “Instead of treating peacemaking as a victory of reason over instinct, or as a human invention, there is now a possibility to seek continuity in this area.”^v Humans need their own rituals but ones that can incorporate some of the signals used by birds, chimps, monkeys, elephants, tigers and other animals. Human signals that have an appeasing effect and activate aid include “weeping, lowering the head, pouting and smiling in a friendly fashion.”^{vi}

There are fundamental differences in the way animals deal with conflict within their own group and conflict with outsiders. Lorenz restricts “aggression” to what is directed against members of the same species.^{vii} The reason for that is to distinguish between aggression and the “predatory behavior” that does occur between species. De Waal points out, from the example of rhesus monkeys, that aggression is particularly directed toward the socialization of the young. Aggression and affectionate behavior go together.^{viii} Love is aggressive although love is not the same as aggression.

It is often said that only humans kill their own. That is not entirely true but the killing of “conspecifics” among animals is rare, provoked by unusual circumstances. The problem of humans is that their kind is worldwide and they tend to create ethnic, racial, religious, sexual and other “sub-species” of the human. An outsider who is experienced as threatening is often judged to be less than human. The threat of an outsider can intensify the bonds of a group but fear is an unhealthy basis for long-term unity. For humans it is important to search for rituals and symbols that are trans-cultural or approach universality.

Even within a single nation or a modern city there can be a gap in understanding aggressive gestures by the stranger. A city-bred person who goes to a small town can seem impolite, rude and pushy simply by being his or her usually aggressive self. In a Buddhist or Taoist setting, the Western tourist risks having vigorous gestures of friendship misconstrued as boorish. Within the anonymous metropolis, people from uptown and downtown, inner city and suburb, can mistake the other’s aggressiveness. Violence does not follow from aggressiveness except when aggressiveness is not balanced within the individual or is caught in a cycle of social misunderstandings.

Deception in the Service of Truth

The relation between aggressiveness and violence has an almost exact parallel in the relation between deception and lying. A failure to distinguish between deception and lying has unfortunate results similar to the conflating of aggressiveness and violence. Deception is given a blanket condemnation even though everyone has a sense that it is a widespread practice that seems sometimes necessary. The failure to identify the kind of deception that should be roundly condemned leads to a justification of lies as necessary. When, for example, lying is taken to be part of the professions that are built on trust, a society is in danger of collapse. Routine lying should not be acceptable in law, medicine, business, or government.

At the center of the ethical/moral issue is a mysterious process called self-deception.^{ix} At first glance, that idea seems logically impossible. If the agent is the self, how can the same self be deceived? (A parallel though not quite so obvious quandary is the possibility of violence as self-destruction). The mystery of self-deception reveals the complexity of the human self. “I” and “me” are not just two words for a single entity. The active side of the self can spin a cover over the receptive side. Because reality is too overwhelming for anyone to completely assimilate, the human self creates layers of protection against self-knowledge. Rousseau was probably right in thinking that humans cannot accept their own mortality and therefore they retreat behind walls of illusion.^x

Self-deception, which falls somewhere between the voluntary and the involuntary, is the source of most moral ills, including the harmful deception of others. Medieval philosophy had an important category called “culpable ignorance.” The person who pleads ignorance can be legally innocent but morally culpable of not knowing what she or

he should have known. Modern ethics tended to treat human decisions as coming from reason, leaving emotions to play either a supportive or an obstructive role. The twentieth century was forced to rediscover the complexity and levels of the human mind. The individual harmfully deceives others in a never entirely successful attempt to deceive him- or herself. The deliberate use of deception in speech on occasions where it does not belong is lying, a prop to self-deception.

The value that is at stake in the tension within the self and the self's relation to others is truth. In ancient traditions that are still reflected in our language, the true is what is real, genuine, solid, what can be relied upon. A different meaning of truth is found in Greek philosophical tradition that emphasized truth as a quality of statements. The two traditions are compatible in that the real comes to expression in human speech.

A community has to do the best it can in living truthfully, that is, in accordance with what is real. Speech within a community can serve the real or truthful in many ways. Where there is trust between human interlocutors, there is no demand that each isolated statement be verified as a true statement of fact. But when trust is absent, no insistence on true statements will ever be sufficient to reach the truth of the situation.

Doubt about the reality of truth itself is a crisis that affects the contemporary world; the crisis has roots that go back at least to the eighteenth century. Hannah Arendt traces the basis of the problem to a loss in the value of community and tradition, which led to an unprecedented zeal for truthful statements.^{xi} But an obsession with scientifically accurate statements does not compensate for the loss of trust. Words that become separated from action are distrusted as the pawns of the powerful. In an 1873 essay, "What is truth?" Nietzsche heralded what was to follow in the twentieth century: "Truths are illusions

which we have forgotten are illusions, worn out metaphors now impotent to stir the senses, coins which have lost their faces and are considered now as metal rather than currency.”^{xii}

As truth became exclusively attached to statements, lying became a more serious crime. Unfortunately, lying was often taken to be any false statement. The human context was lost for judging whether a statement that is not factually the case is an attack on truth. With strong support from the past and some support from the present, I argue that lying has three conditions: 1) a statement 2) contrary to what the person thinks to be the truth 3) to a person who has some right to know.

The common omission of the third condition has the effect of gathering all sorts of harmless statements under lying and blurs the focus of what should be condemned. The phrase “some right to know” allows that there is often a legitimate debate as to what is acceptable deception and what is lying. Sometimes it is obvious that a person has a right to true statements. Sometimes it is obvious that a person has no such right. In many cases, there is room for doubt.

If one is under oath in a courtroom, one has a duty to state the truth as far as one can (One cannot actually tell “the whole truth” because no one knows that). A false statement in that situation is a serious crime. Perjury is difficult to prove but it is rightly considered to be an attack on the foundation of justice. However, the prosecutor has no right to know the truth in the area that the Fifth Amendment protects.

A parent usually has a right to know the truth from his or her child. Something is seriously wrong if the child regularly makes statements that she or he knows are false. When the child is very young, the line between what is true and what is a fanciful story

may not yet be clear. A few tall tales are not worrisome. This relation is not symmetrical; the parent has a duty to tell the truth to the extent that the child can understand it. Lying to a child is worse than lying to an adult.^{xiii}

As a child matures, it recognizes that a self-identity includes an inner self where no one, including the parent, has a right to enter without an invitation. The *ability* to lie is a sign of maturity; recognizing that lies are wrong is also a sign of maturity. A child has to try out different personas before a stable unity can be settled upon. “Hypocrisy” (many masks) at an early stage of development is more virtuous than is sincerity. Later, when an adult takes conflicting stances because he or she lacks any center, hypocrisy is rightly criticized.^{xiv}

A schoolteacher, like a parent, generally has a right to true statements from a student but only within the range of the schoolteacher’s work. When a child is in elementary school, the teacher or administrator has some parental functions; however, a college professor has no right to ask questions that intrude on a student’s privacy. Even for young children, there are questions that no schoolteacher has a right to ask and therefore the child has no obligation to answer with true statements.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes a situation in which a schoolteacher asks a child in front of his classmates whether his father comes home drunk. Bonhoeffer acknowledges that “as a simple no to the teacher’s question, the child’s answer is certainly untrue.” The untruth, however, “is more in accord with reality than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father’s weakness in front of the class....An experienced man in the same position as the child would have been able to correct his questioner’s error while at the same time avoiding a formal untruth in the answer.”^{xv}

Immanuel Kant uses a similar example which has caused a lot of unnecessary debate. Kant describes someone fleeing from a potential murderer. If the criminal asks which direction the person ran, one would be duty-bound to give a truthful answer.^{xvi} Most people think that Kant is wrong but it is important to grasp why. Philippa Foot, after noting the absolute condemnation of lying by some philosophers, writes: “I think it is ludicrous to suggest, for instance, that those fighting with the Resistance against the Nazis should not if necessary have lied through their teeth to protect themselves or their comrades.”^{xvii}

It is not ludicrous, however, to say that Nazi predators, having no right to know, were not lied to when they were given untrue statements. The distinction may seem trivial but what is at issue is how speech is related to truth and how trust is the basis of a truthful community. It is helpful to have the term lie parallel the word murder. Lies are usually not as serious as murder but there are no good murders and there are no good lies. There is a spectrum of deceptive practices, including deceptive speech, that are allowable and sometimes praiseworthy.

ⁱ Gotthold Lessing as cited in Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 31.

ⁱⁱ Mahatma Gandhi as quoted in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Graham Kemp, “Nonviolence: A Biological Perspective,” in *A Just Peace through Transformation*, ed. Chadwick Alger and Michael Stohl (Boulder: Westview, 1988), 123.

^{iv} De Waal, “Aggression as a Well-Integrated Part of Primate Social Relationships,” 52.

^v De Waal, “Aggression as a Well-Integrated Part of Primate Social Relationships.”

^{vi} Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *The Biology of Peace and War*, 92.

^{vii} Lorenz, *On Aggression*, ix, establishes that distinction on the first page: “The subject of this book is aggression, that is to say the fighting instinct in beast and man which is directed against members of the same species.”

^{viii} De Waal, “Aggression as a Well -Integrated Part of Primate Social Relationships,” 49.

^{ix} Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

^x Rousseau, *Emile*, 42.

^{xi} Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 277.

^{xii} Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 35.

^{xiii} Sissela Bok, *Lying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 217.

^{xiv} Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 252.

^{xv} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Collier Books, 1955), 367-68.

^{xvi} Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy," in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 611-15.

^{xvii} Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77-78.