

Ethics for a Non-Violent Life Gabriel Moran

There are two fundamental principles of ethics:

1. Do no violence
2. Do not lie

Both of these *ethical* principles are absolute imperatives. An ethical human being must intend to avoid both violence and lying. Given the inner tension of a human being and the reality of living in a world where violence and lying are common, no human being can completely 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 in relation to institutional structures, there are two fundamental *moral* principles:

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

These *moral* principles are stated negatively; they indicate limits. People sometimes try to rewrite moral codes, such as the Ten Commandments, in positive language. The result is general ideas (e.g. be kind to people) that are not very helpful as guides for the individual and for society. The fundamental moral principles are not intended to tell people how to act but to set the widest possible boundaries for the exercise of human freedom.

Sexual morality is an area where most societies set the boundaries narrowly because leaders have feared the force of the sexual drive in humans. Many of these boundaries need to be pushed back but they cannot be eliminated. No one knows exactly where those boundaries should be but the key to setting a boundary is violence. For their sexual teaching, Roman Catholic Church officials rely on something called “natural law,” which was a Stoic creation. It isn’t a bad idea for indicating what should not be done to a human being. The twentieth-century’s “human rights” is a product of similar thinking. Sexual assault is opposed to a human’s nature. But how a person should live sexually is not found in “natural law” (or the bible); it is what the human race is still exploring.

Boundaries are needed because a group, society or institution does not exist unless it has boundaries. The moral task is to discriminate what is allowable in relation to these boundaries and what is not. The boundaries can change over time and vary according to culture. That fact leads some people to

claim that there is no human morality, only arbitrary rules. But what is more important than where the boundaries are drawn is the fact that every group draws boundaries indicating what cannot be allowed. No society could survive if indiscriminate force were allowed. No society could exist if anyone could deceive in any way that he or she chose to do so.

The positive word for the ideal of nonviolent action is peace. Peace is not just the absence of war. Peace can describe the individual's life; it suggests a calm and balanced outlook. A person can live in a peaceful way even 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 admitted, 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 that can never be fully realized. "Let each man say what he deems truth and let truth itself be commended unto God."¹

The fundamental principles of ethics and morality protect the integrity of the physical organism and the integrity of human speech. The two realms are distinct but inseparable. Gandhi used a term *satyagraha* which is translated as "truth force," a force that is truthful and a truth that is forceful. 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 a nonviolent force in living, truth is indispensable. "The way of peace is the way of truth....Lying is the mother of violence."²

Violence to the body spills over to the mind. The most outrageous forms of violence, such as rape or 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 in its ability to achieve nonviolent goals. A single lie may seem to have no 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.

Force in the Service of a Nonviolent Life

The distinction between force and violence is necessary because force is a fact of life. An attempt to eliminate force would only result in its expression in unhealthy ways. Force means to push against things or people that are resistant to one's will. Pushing against things is what people do all the time. Force becomes problematic when used against other people but there are times when it is allowable or even necessary. To stop a child from running into oncoming traffic, force may be needed.

A peculiarity in the use of the word force is that in international discussions it is commonly used as a euphemism for violent interventions or war. For example, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill, in the joint declaration called the Atlantic Charter, said that "all nations must reject the use of force." To be a nation involves using political and economic forces but not necessarily military force. When the European Union desperately pleaded with George W. Bush not to start a war in Iraq, they wrote: "Force should be the last resort." They meant war, of course. It is absurd to think that the United States had not been using many different kinds of force in Iraq in the ten years before the war.

At the personal level it is important to recognize that being forceful is not only acceptable but is necessary for a nonviolent life. An infant's first act is to resist the forces that press in upon it from the environment. Throughout life a person has to continuously assert himself or herself against what is dangerous to human life. That includes killing some insects that threaten human existence but even that should be done without unleashing violence against the environment. If training a horse or a dog is necessary, there are ways to be forceful with the animal without using violence.

If one were to try to renounce all use of force, daily existence would become extremely complicated. Some people might be able to avoid using force against anything in the environment but it would mean being passive before political uses of violence. Without forceful contributions by moral people, violence flourishes in exchanges between groups and nations.

The Christian gospel is often cited as an unrealistic ethic. The Sermon on the Mount is described as a willingness to be passive before one's enemies. But Jesus preached a forceful life of doing good to those who hate you. Sometimes Jesus is accused of hypocrisy because he drove the money changers out of the temple. He overturned tables and in one account he used

a whip. There is no indication that there were any broken bones or bloody noses. It was a forceful but not a violent action. When in defense of Jesus, Peter cut off an ear, Jesus told him to put up his sword. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

Aggressive forcefulness is intrinsic to human life. These inclinations have to be situated in relation to social tendencies that restrain or inhibit that forcefulness when it can endanger other people. Aggressive 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. This danger suggests that more attention should be given to training people in conflict resolution. Conflicts within groups and between groups are inevitable but conflict need not include violence. Avoiding violence usually involves rituals that harmlessly channel aggressive force. That is the function of most but not all sports. Obviously, prize fighting is not a sport. These days ("American") football can hardly be defended as a nonviolent activity.

The study of nonhuman animals is helpful here. "Instead of treating peacemaking as a victory of reason over instinct, or as a human invention, there is now a possibility to see continuity in this area."³ Humans need their own rituals but they can use ones that incorporate some of the signals used by birds, chimps, elephants and other animals. Signals that have an appeasing effect and activate aid include weeping, lowering the head, pouting and smiling in a friendly fashion.

It is often said that only humans kill their own. That is not entirely true but the killing of "conspecifics" among other 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. Wars have to dehumanize the enemy before one army of human beings can be trained to kill a different army of human beings. 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 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 misconceived as boorish. Within the 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 with other qualities within the individual or is caught in a cycle of misunderstandings.

Deception in the Service of Truth

The relation between forcefulness 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 conflating force and violence. Deception is given a blanket condemnation even though everyone has a sense that it is sometimes necessary. The failure to identify the kind of deception that should be roundly condemned leads to the widespread practice of lying. In law, medicine, business, or government deception is a routine part of the professions but lying should not be acceptable.

At the center of the ethical and moral problem of lying is a mysterious process called self-deception.⁴ At first glance, the idea seems logically impossible. If the agent is the self, how can it deceive the same self? (A parallel quandary is self-destructive violence). 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 I as the active side of the self can deceive the receptive me. Because reality is too overwhelming for anyone to completely assimilate it, the human self creates layers of protection against self-knowledge. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was probably right in thinking that it is because humans cannot accept their own mortality that they retreat behind walls of illusion.⁵

Self-deception, which falls between voluntary and involuntary, is the source of most moral ills. 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 he or she could have known and should have known. Modern ethics tended to treat human decisions as coming from reason, leaving emotion 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 an always unsuccessful attempt to deceive him- or herself.

The value that is at stake in the self's internal tension and its tension in 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. Christian thinking accepted these two traditions as compatible in that the real comes to expression in human speech.

A community has to do its best to live truthfully, that is, in accordance with what is real. Speech within a community can serve the real or truthful in many ways, including by satire and fiction. Where there is trust between interlocutors, there is no demand that each isolated statement be verified as a statement of fact. In contrast, when trust is absent an insistence on true statements will never be sufficient to reveal the truth of the situation.

Doubt about the reality of truth which is common today has roots that go back to the eighteenth century. Hannah Arendt traces the problem to a loss of the value of community and tradition, which led to an unprecedented zeal for truthful statements.⁶ But an obsession with truthful statements does not compensate for the loss of trust. Words that become separated from actions are distrusted as the pawns of the powerful. In an 1873 essay entitled "What is Truth?" Friedrich 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."⁷

As truth became almost exclusively attached to statements, lying became a more serious crime. Unfortunately, lying is often taken to be any false statement. The context was lost for judging whether a statement that is not factually the case is an attack on truth. Lying has three conditions: 1. A statement 2. Contrary to what the person thinks to be true 3. Spoken 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. That blurs the focus of what should be condemned. The phrase "a person who has some right to know" allows that there may be 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. And in some 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). Realistically, the court can only insist on a person not lying. 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. The prosecutor, however, has no right to know the truth in the area that the Fifth Amendment of the Bill of Rights protects.

Parents usually have a right to know the truth from their children. Something is seriously wrong if a child regularly make statements that he or she knows to be false. When a child is very young the line between what is true and what is a fanciful story may not be clear. At that age 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.⁸

As a child matures it develops a self-identity which includes an inner self where no one – including a parent – has the right to enter without an invitation. A child has to try out different personas before a stable unity can be settled upon. At an early stage of development hypocrisy, which means many masks, is more virtuous than is sincerity. Later, if an adult takes conflicting stances because he or she lacks any center, then hypocrisy is rightly criticized.⁹ The *ability* to lie is a sign of maturity but *recognizing* that lies are wrong is a sign of greater maturity.

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 a schoolteacher has no right to ask and therefore the child has no obligation to answer with true statements.¹⁰

Immanuel Kant uses an example that has caused a lot of debate. Kant describes someone fleeing a potential murderer. If the criminal asks which direction the person ran, one would be duty bound to give a truthful answer.¹¹ 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.”¹²

It is not ludicrous, however, to say that Nazi predators, having no right to know, were not lied to when they received 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. There is a spectrum of deceptive practices, including deceptive speech, that are allowable and sometimes praiseworthy. It is helpful for the term lie to parallel the word murder. Lies are usually not as serious as murder but there are no good murders and there are no good lies. Nonviolent living requires living in truthfulness and in forceful engagement with divisions within oneself and within the surrounding world.

¹ Gotthold Lessing, as cited by Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 31.

² Mahatma Gandhi, as cited by Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 84.

³ Franz de Waal, “Aggression as a Well-Integrated Part of Primate Social Relationships,” in *Aggression and Peacefulness in Humans and Other Primates*, ed. James Silverberg and J. Patrick Gray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37-56.

⁴ Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 42.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 277.

⁷ Alasdair McIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 35.

⁸ Sissela Bok, *Lying* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 217.

⁹ Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 217.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses the example of a schoolteacher asking a child if his father comes home drunk. The child is under no obligation to give a truthful answer. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Collier Books, 1955), 367-68.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy,” in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 611-15.

¹² Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 77-78.