FirstRand

Ethical lies

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Lying is wrong, except when it isn't, and morality is not as black and white as we sometimes like to believe. Scientifically.

One of my earliest memories is when my mother, to her embarrassment, forgot about a doctor's appointment. Calling the doctor to reschedule, she made up an excuse supported by fictitious car troubles. Confronted by my innocent question from the back of a perfectly functioning car, "Wasn't that a lie?", I was introduced to the concept of a white lie.
In the years since this incident, I would like to believe that I have not abused the concept, but I would be lying if I said I had never used it. Sometimes tactfully, sometimes not. However, the lessons instilled in me by my parents and educators, that lying is wrong, still dominate my moral compass – a view most likely shared by the majority of people throughout the ages.
It is not hard to rationalise why lying is universally condemned. Any community in which lying was the norm, or where adherence to the truth was optional, would have a hard time functioning. Trust would be non-existent, social cohesion would be difficult, and any type of long-term planning or cooperation would be futile. The evolutionary imperative to be trustworthy, and truthful, is strong.

Despite this intuitive truth, people seem to have a hard time applying it consistently. Psychologist, Bella DePaulo, found that it is not unusual for people to rack up a few lies throughout the day. These lies can be any combination of my mother's white lie, a reaffirmation to a partner that their "bum does not look big in those jeans", or a full-blown lie like "I did not have sexual relations with that woman".

The reasoning behind dishonesty has been studied extensively in behavioural science. Two themes, unnecessary harm and consequences, seem to influence dishonest behaviour significantly. These themes often act as some form of justification or extenuating circumstance that consolidate and make consistent one's 'need' to lie and the associated guilt of betraying one's moral code.

Emma Levine, a professor of behavioural science at Chicago University, studies deception through field experiments. Levine concludes that a typical lie is often well reasoned, intentional, and justified by the deceiver when telling the truth would have little or no instrumental value, or when the truth would harm someone unnecessarily.

To understand how people define 'unnecessary harm' Levine ran an experiment in which she asked some research participants to explain when they would prefer being lied to and asked others when they would consider lying to be ethical. Seven community standards, across three dimensions for when a lie is justified, were established (the person lying, the person being lied to and the context of the lie).

Generally, people find it acceptable to lie when the deceived person is emotionally fragile, does not have the capacity to understand the context of the lie, or is at the end of their life. Being dishonest is also seen to be justified when the information is trivial, where the information cannot be controlled, or when being honest would disrupt the deceived person's life or embarrass them in front of others. A common thread is that people will lie where unnecessary harm can be avoided. In these circumstances, people consider deception to be more ethical than honesty and people prefer being lied to over being told the truth.

People also justify dishonest behaviour when the consequences of deception are aligned to their moral code. Dan Ariely, a behavioural scientist from Duke university, describes a dishonesty experiment which sheds some light on this theme.
The experiment is fairly simple. Research participants roll a standard six-sided die, and before the die is rolled, they are asked to silently choose whether the top or bottom number of the die will be higher. After the die is rolled, the research

participant tells the experimenter which side of the die they chose, and are then paid a small amount of money based on the number on that side of the die. If the side they chose was the higher number they receive a larger pay-out.

A perfectly honest participant, who chooses a side before rolling the die, and then faithfully reports their choice no matter the outcome of the roll, should end up choosing the more favourable side of the die (with a higher payoff) about half of the time. Conversely, a completely dishonest person will always report the side of the die that is higher, regardless of the choice before rolling.

Unsurprisingly, Ariely reports that people tend to cheat at least some of the time. Research participants choose the more favourable side of the die at a rate higher than what would be expected by chance.

In a twist to this experiment, Ariely attached a lie detector to research participants while playing the game. Ariely found that, generally, the lie detector could detect when participants were choosing a side of the die dishonestly. But then Ariely introduced an additional measure to the game that aimed to highlight how doing something 'good' could impair an individual's honesty.

Instead of winning money for themselves, participants were told that the money that they earned would go to a charity of their choice. In this version of the experiment, research participants lied more often to get a larger financial reward. However, interestingly, the lie detector was no longer able to reliably establish when participants were being dishonest.

Ariely offers an explanation for these results; "The lie detector detects tension 'I want more money, but I think it's wrong'. But, if it's not wrong, why would you worry? If it's for a good cause, you can still think you're a good person". This notion highlights the importance of consequences in any decision to be dishonest. Being dishonest as an act of altruism is not considered wrong and is morally justified by participants.

The black-and-white lies that we like to draw when we concern ourselves with questions about morality and honesty are not as clear as we sometimes like to believe. To be human is to consistently operate in uncertain and complex environments, where our only real source of truth is our own judgment. Lying is wrong, except when it isn't.