

Truth-Telling and Moral Responsibility: Should Truth-Telling Always Override Emotional Harm?

Zoe Zeyu Lu*

Basis International School Hangzhou, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: This paper discusses whether people should always tell the truth, even when doing so may hurt someone's feelings. It argues that people have a moral duty not to lie, but this does not mean they must disclose every truth in every situation. Drawing on Kantian ethics, the right to silence, Mill's consequentialism, and Aristotle's virtue ethics, the paper suggests that honesty should not be understood as blunt truth-telling. Instead, truthful communication should be guided by moral intention, respect for human dignity, practical wisdom, and sensitivity to context. The paper also highlights that personal beliefs are not always equal to objective truth. Therefore, before telling a potentially hurtful truth, people should reflect on whether, when, and how it should be expressed. True honesty requires not only truthfulness, but also compassion, humility, and responsibility.

Keywords: Truth-telling; Emotional harm; Moral responsibility; Virtue ethics; Human dignity

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1. Introduction

In everyday life, telling the truth is often seen as a basic moral duty^[1]. Truthfulness allows people to trust one another, make informed decisions, and build stronger relationships. Typically, there is not such a neat division between right and wrong, and moral life is not quite that straightforward. In certain cases, direct disclosure of the truth may be said to be a hardship, a violation of another person's dignity, or an act with no meaningful moral purpose. Such potential consequences may trigger skepticism about the existence of objective truth and the values of being truthful and honest in a universal sense. Within this context, it is important to discuss whether people should always tell the truth, even if it might hurt someone's feelings.

This essay argues that people have a perfect duty not to deceive, but they do not have an unconditional duty to disclose every truth. Although truthfulness is essential to moral integrity, honesty should not be simplified to blunt truth-telling. Instead, it should be practiced with rational discretion shaped by moral intention, humanity, context, and foreseeable harm. The essay builds its discussion from the perspectives

of Kantian deontology, the right to silence, Mill's consequentialism, and Aristotle's doctrine of the mean (1106a–1108b) ^[2–5]. The core meaning of honesty, as conceived by this essay, is a balanced virtue: everything being said should be the truth, yet not everything needs to be revealed. True honesty, rather, is not a hasty disclosure of all perceived truth but requires practical wisdom, involving appropriate contextual approaches and critical reflection on the declared truth based on one's own beliefs, which can be shaped by multiple factors.

2. Not lying and the limits of full disclosure

People should not deceive others, but this does not automatically mean that one should always disclose every truth, especially when the truth might hurt someone's feelings. In Kant's categorical imperative, a moral action should follow a maxim which can be universalized ^[2]; one should treat humanity, whether in oneself or in others, always as an end rather than merely as a means ^[2]. In this view, the action of lying is against moral rules as there cannot be a universal maxim to follow; otherwise, no one would believe anyone else in the world. Meanwhile, lying is not moral as it undermines humanity by using another person as a mere instrument. Therefore, it is a moral duty not to lie. However, the obligation not to lie is not equal to the obligation to disclose every truth. For Kant, the moral value of an action is determined not by its consequences, but by the maxim and motive from which it is performed ^[2]. Therefore, without evaluating its intention, an action of disclosing the truth is not automatically moral simply because it is truthful. If the intention of telling the truth is to serve one's own interests, humiliate another person, or cause unnecessary emotional harm, then such disclosure may have no moral value. Therefore, while lying violates a strict moral duty, full disclosure, with varieties in intention, should not be treated as a perfect duty in the same way. Moral truthfulness involves more than communicating facts; it also requires being respectful towards humanity and making careful judgments about when and how the truth should be best expressed.

Instead of always telling the truth, one may choose to remain silent by withholding information within a boundary. Rather than being a lack of speech, silence can be considered a basic moral entitlement, notably when speaking out may compromise dignity, privacy, and personal autonomy ^[3]. From this view, silence can also be an effective means of communication in some contexts ^[6]. Therefore, silence is not necessarily a failure to communicate. Instead, it could be a deliberate and context-sensitive choice by individuals to turn away intrusive questions, or to protect themselves or others from unnecessary harm.

3. Pure consequentialism cannot guide truth-telling

Telling the truth might hurt someone's feelings; however, this does not mean that one should decide what to do about the truth merely based on the possible consequences of the action. The moral theory of utilitarianism, advanced by John Stuart Mill, is pure consequentialism based on utility, and the prevailing principle is known as the greatest happiness principle ^[4]. From this perspective, the morality of an action is determined by whether it benefits the community maximally and by whether the act creates the highest aggregate utility. However, when moral conduct is determined exclusively by the outcomes of an action, there would be a critical problem due to subjective evaluation and judgment. A utilitarian may attempt to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages arising from the consequences before telling the truth. Such an evaluation can be unreliable or even mistaken, since it is subjectively based on knowledge, cognition,

personal experience, or short-term observation. Therefore, the actual consequence can be contradictory to the evaluation. For example, in the context of medical disclosure, consider a family that withholds a terminal diagnosis from a patient, intending to spare the patient from emotional distress. The short-term outcome of such a withholding could be beneficial as it reduces anxiety, avoids hurting the patient's feelings, and maintains the patient with hope and happiness. However, such an action may not guarantee long-term greatest happiness. In fact, it could prevent the patient from finding ways to reorganize and adapt his or her life towards more realistic goals, hopes, and aspirations. More importantly, such wellintended concealment actually treats the patient as an object, whose emotions are managed and controlled by others, rather than by himself or herself as an autonomous person capable of facing reality. From a Kantian perspective, this violates the fundamental duty to respect humanity as an end instead of a mere means: the patient is denied the opportunity to make his or her own decisions on how to exercise personal agency and how to spend his or her remaining time ^[2]. Even telling the truth may initially hurt the patient's feelings; concealing it for the sake of emotional comfort is morally problematic because it sacrifices autonomy for mere sentiment. Therefore, it is not reasonable to decide whether to tell the truth based solely on consequentialist evaluation of possible outcomes. Rather, moral factors such as dignity and autonomy should be considered when making decisions.

As discussed above, always telling the truth is not a perfect duty; meanwhile, consequences cannot serve as a stable moral rule to guide a behavior of telling the truth. When people face a dilemma between causing emotional hurt and upholding honesty, they may turn to Aristotle's virtue ethics and ask: "What would a virtuous person do?"

4. Honesty Is a virtue beyond telling the truth

Honesty in real life is a complex of wisdom beyond telling the truth. According to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, moral virtue is a balance between two extremes: excess and deficiency ^[5]. Such a balance can be understood as a "golden mean," which is a contextual approach aiming for appropriate action, measure, and timing in any given situation. Reflected from this perspective, people should not tell the truth in a blunt or immediate way, because this is an extreme of excess, especially when the truth might hurt someone's feelings. Meanwhile, people should not conceal the truth simply to avoid possible conflicts, and this is an extreme of deficiency. Instead, truthful speech shall be expressed in a balanced manner with sensitivity and proper intention. Accordingly, honesty is wisdom to practice at the right time, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way. In this sense, honesty is not compromised but guided by the "golden mean" so that it can protect both truth and relationships.

Honesty and trust lay the foundation for relationships, and true honesty shall strengthen relationships ^[7-8]. In some scenarios, even if the truth was told in a manner of "golden mean," it may still hurt someone's feelings. What to do with the emotional consequence after telling the truth has significant impacts on relationships. More expressed and perceived honesty with compassion is a necessary supplement to telling the truth, as it helps understand why the truth hurts, heals the hurt feelings, and fosters better relationships.

5. Belief is not necessarily the truth

People should value their beliefs yet remain humble about what they take to be true. There is a gap between belief and fact. A belief is a mental state in which an individual holds a proposition to be true, which can

be shaped by internal factors such as perceived knowledge, cognition, interpretation, and bias, along with external factors such as experience, education, culture, and environment ^[9–10]. A fact is a specific truth about reality that exists independently of whether people believe it or not ^[11]. One's belief may not be aligned with the actual reality of the world. Therefore, people should not always state what they believe to be the truth as if it were an absolute fact, especially when it might hurt someone's feelings.

Truth-telling should be guided not only by courage, but also by humility, reflection, and open-mindedness. Prior to disclosing what one believes to be true, it is essential to consider the nature of that truth, the manner of its disclosure, and the potential consequences of such disclosure. Furthermore, when the truth hurts someone's feelings, it would be necessary for the one who tells the truth to reflect and reevaluate the truth. Notably, people do not need to finalize the absolute truth; instead, it is necessary to stay open to ideas that challenge their beliefs. Telling the truth should be an integration of truthfulness and honesty.

6. Conclusion

Though being honest holds significant value, people should be aware not to tell the truth in a blunt way. People have a strict moral duty not to lie, but this does not mean that they should disclose the truth in every situation. Instead of always telling the truth, one can keep silent to set boundaries or avoid harm. Pure consequentialism is overly subjective and cannot provide reliable guidance on truth-telling, especially when individuals cannot always accurately ensure whether telling or concealing the truth will yield the greatest happiness in the long term. In the meantime, concealing the truth merely to spare others from discomfort undermines their autonomy and trust. According to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, truth-telling should be regarded as a virtue guided by practical wisdom, rather than a rigid rule. In addition, people ought to remain humble about what they believe to be true, as personal beliefs are typically subjective and can be shaped by both internal and external factors. Hence, the truth should be told with integrity, compassion, intellectual humility, respect for human dignity and personal autonomy, and careful consideration of both intention and context.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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