

Truth and Lying Assembly

Let's talk about lying. Truth and lies matter. We often behave in ways that are guaranteed to make us unhappy – and if you lie, deceive or mislead you are on a surefire path to misery. In the full spirit of honesty, my thoughts here are influenced by an essay of Sam Harris' and an article in Psychology Today.

Everyone in the Fourths and above has studied the ideas of the philosopher Immanuel Kant in RS lessons. Kant wrote in the 18th Century; he wanted to create a sort of science of ethics, in the same way that the world was then being understood in a new way by scientists and physicists. Using reason alone, he employed a method called the Categorical Imperative to determine if an action is right or wrong. This is not the time to go into the details of the process, but Kant showed, to at least his own satisfaction, that lying is always, in every case, absolutely wrong. He even gave the example of an axe murderer visiting your house, hoping to kill your friend. Kant says that you cannot lie about the whereabouts of your friend, even to a would-be murderer.

I don't think I have ever met a pupil who was persuaded by Kant – but this morning I'm going to make that case that he is actually right about lying.

Since I am trying to persuade you to never tell a lie, I had better begin by making it clear what a lie is. I am going to define lying as 'intentional deception when others expect honesty'. But, you might object, what if someone meets you with the words 'How do you do?' Do you have to reply with a list of the things that are upsetting or irritating you? No. It's not a lie to say 'I'm fine' or fail to tell the whole truth. When they asked the question they did not expect you to answer honestly. The person greeting you is just being polite – it's polite to speak back to them on the same terms. In the same way, I do not denounce all magicians as liars. We expect them to use trickery to startle and amaze us – as with politeness, we are at least complicit in any deception going on. It is only 'intentional deception when others expect honesty' that I object to.

We should also get rid of that silly Kantian example of the murderer at the door – let's face it, that is not going to happen.

No murderer is going to ring your doorbell. It is not helpful to determine the best way to live a normal life with such an extreme example.

Having agreed what a lie is, we now need to establish what truth is. To speak truthfully is to accurately represent one's beliefs. However, there is no certainty that those accurately represented beliefs are correct. Someone can be absolutely truthful, whilst being completely wrong. Lots of people have laid down their life for mistaken beliefs. Nor does truthfulness require the *whole* truth – that's impossible. There's just too much to say - life isn't long enough for everything to be said. So, truthfulness is honestly communicating what you believe to be true and relevant.

Telling the truth gives more than just a warm feeling of virtue – if things are truly represented, you are more likely to act successfully. For example, my car would not start in the morning if our science and engineering are wrong. As such, truth improves your life. But truth is also important in itself.

Given the choice between a life of limitless pleasure as a brain in a vat and a genuine human life along with all its pain and suffering, most people opt for the human life. We instinctively know it is better to live an uncomfortable truth than a comfortable lie.

So truth is useful, improves lives and can be reliably identified. Why, then, do people lie? People lie for many reasons: to escape embarrassment, exaggerate achievements, hide wrong-doing. We can make promises that we don't truly mean. We all want to spare the feelings of others. All these lies involve believing one thing, whilst intending to communicate something else. A lie is a lie, and, as Kant says, every lie is both wrong and harmful.

This is applied ethics. I doubt we have any murderers in the room, but we are all liars. Studies show that 10% of communication between husbands and wives is lies; 38% of conversation between university students involves at least some deception. Well, stop it. Stop lying.

What happens if you tell the truth? You are immediately unusual and memorable. You don't have to remember what story you told others. Others can trust you and value what you say.

I once set a homework to an RS class. I asked them, without hurting anyone's feelings, to tell nothing but the truth for 24 hours. That was a very hard homework.

Truthfulness means giving others the correct information you would want if you were in their shoes. Remember, tact and silence are not lies. Nor is a refusal to offer an opinion. You don't have to tell the whole truth, just not intentionally deceive.

Over many different assemblies, I have recommended that you aim to live a life of integrity – integrity is avoidance of behaviour that leads to shame or remorse. If you do bad things you will make yourself unhappy. Further, you will inevitably be drawn into a web of lies to separate that behaviour from the rest of your life. Wrong-doing inevitably leads to lying and is sustained by it.

Even if the intent of the liar is to protect the other, every lie involves an element of betrayal. Let's address an obvious objection: what about white lies? They are also unacceptable. They might be intended to protect others, but they are still corrosive of our integrity and sincerity. They also deny truth to others. Is the dinner badly cooked? Better to tell the chef so they can improve. Someone asks if they look good in this piece of clothing – give them the opportunity to find a better one. When you lie to someone you have decided to take control of how much they should understand their own life. What presumption.

Lying is a refusal to co-operate with others. It is a deliberate disengagement with trust and shared understanding. It is a refusal to allow another an insight into your heart and your beliefs. You hide yourself, and in doing so prevent another from fully understanding the world they are in. The lie will breed other lies and spread further, perhaps to other people. Powerful people lie and shake confidence in the government or institutions – they corrode society and create cynicism. Conspiracy theorists' lies can build shadow worlds where vaccines are distrusted or whole peoples are hated. 'Fake news' is nothing new, but in our internet age it has spread like a disease, swinging elections,

fomenting social unrest, undermining institutions, and diverting political capital away from health, education, and good government.

There is a great quotation from C S Lewis on friendship: “Friendship is born at the moment when one man says to another “What! You too? I thought that no-one but myself...” The opportunity for this deep, truthful mutual understanding is lost when we lie.

What might happen if you never told another lie? Would you be a better or worse person? Would your relationships be stronger or weaker? According to John the Apostle, Jesus once said: ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’

Go on, set yourself free.

There is a General Election taking place in the country – we will have our own Merchant Taylors’ version of it. Look out for the chance to hear the candidates speak at a hustings and vote later this week.