

Is it Morally Permissible to Bear False Witness?

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It is never permissible to bear false witness. In today's society, this claim is extremely controversial. Nevertheless, in my own dealings with this concept, I have always found myself having a natural draw toward it. There are many philosophies that reach this conclusion, but most individuals choose to avoid confronting this claim. Kantian Deontology, Divine Command Theory, and even Utilitarianism are each capable of making this claim without contradiction. I am going to begin by laying out the Divine Command Theory, Utilitarian, and Kantian Arguments for why lying is always wrong and discuss their strengths, weaknesses, and opposition. Finally I will point to the Kantian Argument for never lying as the strongest argument in my opinion and explain why I accept it.

The first philosophy whose argument I will evaluate is Divine Command Theory(DCT). The nature of DCT is that morality is fully dependent on the revelation of a higher being/God. Thus assuming the Christian Variant of DCT, we can refer to the Scripture which claims boldly in the 10 commandments “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

<sup>1</sup> The 10 commandments, assuming the validity of scripture, are one of the most directly sourced from God list of orders to follow, perhaps besides the word of Jesus in say the Beatitudes. And they do not contradict, at least in this question. So, since there is a direct call from God to not bear false witness, it hence follows that it is immoral to bear false witness. This is taken even a step further by Dr Audi claiming that “for deontological views (as for at least Christianity among world religions), an act of lying—and presumably even forming an intention to lie—can degrade the worth of the agent quite apart from any consequences.”<sup>2</sup> This argument seems pretty simple on its face, and it did compel me initially, and perhaps still would if I spent time sorting through

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:16 NIV

<sup>2</sup> Audi, Robert. “Divine Command Morality And The Autonomy Of Ethics.” *Faith and Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (April 2007): 121–43. <https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200724224>.

the weeds of the dirty details. That is because it becomes far more difficult to sort out the objections people have raised against this argument. The first objection which is definitely the stronger of the two is the case presented in the bible “In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?”<sup>3</sup>. This seems to bring a level of uncertainty of how far the limits of the command from God go, was she right, did she do something wrong but still get positive recognition for it? The second is a more general, claiming that since Jesus came with new laws and new ways of thinking about what one ought to do in life. If we are no longer bound by the old laws and only what Jesus said, he never specifically said to not bear false witness, rather spoke often more about attitude and intention, and that perhaps because of this it is now permissible for one to still be following the command of God by bearing false witness if you are doing such with a good attitude and intention. I find this more shakey of an argument, because many religious scholars would claim that we are still bound to the heart of the law, and the heart of the law seems to highly value truth, and thus still would not let false witness count as permissible.

Another philosophy which typically takes the side that bearing false witness is occasionally permissible, is Utilitarianism. Dr. Peterson makes a Utilitarian argument that claims still that “It is deceit that still threatens us, most profoundly, today”<sup>4</sup>. This pairs with his point that “The truth springs forth ever anew from the most profound wellsprings of Being.”<sup>5</sup> The claim goes that the best result can and will always be found following the set of choices where

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<sup>3</sup> James 2:25 NIV

<sup>4</sup> Peterson, Jordan B., and Norman Doidge. *12 Rules for Life: an Antidote to Chaos*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Peterson, 12 Rules

one never lies, which is a type of Rule Utilitarianism. This claim refers to some studies which Peterson helped with, showing that self-deception is bad, claiming that “These findings support a model of self-deception as ignoring evidence of error and reinforce the argument that self-deception may be maladaptive.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, assuming the best outcome always follows the path of truth, and bearing false witness by definition is a choice which involves lying, it is then never permissible to bear false witness, as it can never successfully maximize utility/happiness.

The Kantian Argument then is probably what I would consider to be the best of all these arguments. It is one of the most complicated as it relies upon some of the fundamental core beliefs of Kantian Deontology, such that one ought to follow their duty for the sake of duty itself, and that an action is correct if the maxim guiding it can both simultaneously be conceived and willed to be a universal law. These come together to say that one's duty is to never bear false witness and that you can not conceive of a world where people always lie when they believe it will bring about the best outcome. This is certainly the weakest aspect of this argument as some might posit that it can be both conceived or willed to be so without contradiction.

The arguments I find most compelling for the permissibility of bearing false witness is the modification of the Divine Command Theory or Kant. I find the Utilitarian argument for it completely repulsive, as I can never buy that the most important factor in moral questions is happiness/utility. So why do I still not believe in the Divine Command Theory modification? I find that there is not enough biblical reasoning to believe that God didn't actually mean it when

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<sup>6</sup> Peterson, Jordan B., Colin G. Deyoung, Erin Driver-Linn, Jean R. Séguin, Daniel M. Higgins, Louise Arseneault, and Richard E. Tremblay. “Self-Deception and Failure to Modulate Responses despite Accruing Evidence of Error.” *Journal of Research in Personality* 37, no. 3 (2003): 205–23. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0092-6566\(02\)00569-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0092-6566(02)00569-x).

he commanded us to not bear false witness, and Jesus never seemed to want to change the understanding of that law or intentionally break it to show a new understanding.

What about the modified understanding of Kant? In this case I understand the desire to be able to modify the Kantian framework so out in ways more aligned with how people want to act, but I think if you follow Kant's reasoning alone you come to realize this is a mis-aligned goal, as you ought to seek your duty for the sake of your duty, not make your duty what you want for the sake of yourself. Also I find that if you enlarge the conceptualization of a maxim to allow such specific claims that make it possible to squeeze through the test based on specificity, and allow certain things which on a broad scale are not approved of, it starts to fall apart. However, In his journal's opening against Kant's points on lying, Sedgwick admits "The key to making sense of the lysing essay, he tells us, lies in distinguishing the different kinds of exceptions that can be made to them."<sup>7</sup> Kant's whole premise rests on the assumption of rational beings, and Rational beings by nature are Rational, which means they seek to find and understand the truth. To allow and even encourage lying goes against this fundamental aspect of all rational beings, and one might go as far as to say if you're ok with allowing rational beings to intentionally speak non-truths, then you have allowed a contradiction. Hence I choose not to accept either of these modifications to Kant or DCT, and continue to disapprove of the Utilitarian argument. So this is why I have chosen to accept Kant's arguments for why it is never permissible to Lie.

Let me now say if someone wanted to convince me otherwise what she may want to pursue in said endeavour. One route would be to come up with a better biblical reason for why God's command is void and not always be something of precedence to follow as a Divine

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<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick, Sally. "On Lying and the Role of Content in Kant's Ethics." *Kant-Studien* 82, no. 1 (1991). <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.1991.82.1.42>.

Command Theorist. Given that the Bible has been around for so long, and has not changed significantly for a while, I don't see this being a very likely situation. Another option she may choose to pursue would be to explain how changing the structure and details of a maxim to be more specific proves to be not only more useful but more accurate to our genuine duty. If that could be shown then I may be willing to believe that if following that new structure leads to the bearing of a false witness, then perhaps it is indeed something one ought to do.

I find that the most compelling argument is Kant's, as it's accused flaws seem to mostly revolve around it's intuitive appeal, that it is too restrictive. And while that may be a reason for people not to adopt it as their own belief, If it appeals well enough to my intuition, as it does, I have no issue with believing it, and those criticisms hold no weight to me. They in no way begin to convince me that I am holding a false or incorrect position. So I hold to my claim that because of the consistency of Kant's deontological reasoning, I would agree that it is never permissible to lie.

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