Paper #2: Kant and Machiavelli’s Views Marlee Yerkes

COMMENTS

Kant’s basic theory strongly advises against lying, but in some cases lying can be demanded by his theory. Kant believes some lies are permissible when told to avoid pain/harm, and not to affect one’s decision making process or degrade their humanity. On the other hand Machiavelli believes in lying and breaking promises just for convenience. Today we will be comparing Kant and Machiavelli’s views, discussing which view is more plausible, and the possibility of having lies that can be considered permissible.

Kant believes in following the categorical Imperative. Which is a set of universal laws and principles pertaining to goodwill, that tells you how to making a decision well. The categorical imperative consists of the universal law and the humanity formula. The universal law is a way of testing maxims, and says to act only on a maxim if it is said to be universal law. In other words, if everyone did the maxim, could you? The humanity formula says to always treat humanity as an end in itself, and never as a mere means. This means treating peoples humanity ‘well’ (not degrading it) even with no particular goal in mind; rather than treating people’s humanity as uninformed or withholding information (lying) so that they make a decision badly. The capacity to make a decision and doing it well involves grasping alternative courses of action, having reasons for the action, and deliberating between them to form an intention to decide on that action. When breaking promises or telling lies you break this intention and withhold information so that someone makes a decision ‘badly’ based on false or inaccurate info. Kant says this is wrong and unethical. Kant also believes that we have perfect and imperfect duties that we owe to ourselves and others in order to have good-free-will to make decisions. We have and imperfect duty to ourselves to develop our talents, and a perfect duty to ourselves to not commit suicide. We also have an imperfect duty to others to be generous, and a perfect duty to others not lie. We owe these duties to ourselves and others so that we do not degrade each others humanity, to have good-free-will, and thus, make decisions well. This is another reason why lying is wrong in Kant’s eyes because treating people humanity as a mere means, and not as an end in itself, is wrong. In some cases Kant believes you should lie if it is to prevent harm, and as long as you don’t degrade someone’s humanity. An example of this would be meeting up with your friend at a concert and she asks you how her outfit looks. You both have nowhere and no time to change clothes. You don’t want to tell her she looks horrible or else she will have a bad night. It could offend her or hurt her feelings. In this case it is permissible to lie and say that your friend looks great because you are trying not to hurt her feelings, you are not degrading her humanity. This seems to be the exception to lying for Kant. Lying is permissible if you are lying to prevent harm, and not degrade someone's humanity. Kant’s main theory of the humanity formula still applies over all. Always treat people’s humanity as an end in itself, and never for any particular mere means.

Machiavelli believes there is nothing wrong with lying, and the only reason to not lie is to not get caught. He believe you should not lie if it will stake your reputation. However, Machiavelli believes if the benefits of telling the lie or breaking the promise is greater than the cost of staking your reputation, then you should pursue it. This opens his argument that lying for convenience benefits everyone because everyone is pursue their own interest. He states people should escape whatever obligations are easy to escape for their own convenience. Machiavelli also believes that everyone should try not just becoming richer, but to becoming richer than everyone else even if it may include lying. He believes that we are all better off with this competitiveness, and that it encourages people to do/be their best. Machiavelli also believes that reputation is power that you can use to get more power and wealth. Lying should be done if beneficial to your reputation, the only reason not to lie is when the cost of telling the lie is greater than its benefits in Machiavelli’s eyes. Bluff, lie, trick, break promises all after measuring the consequences it will have on your reputation and keep a promises only to keep reputation. This is Machiavelli’s view when it comes to lying.

I believe that Kant’s view is more plausible. We can test lying as a maxim in the universal law formula. If everyone lied and broke promises all the time, then we would never be able to trust anyone on their word. We would be taking on various risks when communicating and making decisions because everyone would be lying. Making decisions well would be impossible in Machiavelli’s view because the decision would be made on false premises. If everyone degraded everyone and treated their humanity as a mere means, then there would virtually be no economic system because everyone would be lying about their worth and not following through with their promises. This sounds like a horrible world to live in to me. Kant’s view sounds much more plausible in following the categorical imperative (both the universal law and humanity formula) to ensure that we are all treating each other with no particular mere means, and so we can trust each other to make decisions well.

A permissible lie would include one that does not treat people’s humanity as a particular mere means, but as and end in itself. A lie that intends to prevent harm rather than degrade someone’s humanity is permissible. An example of a permissible lie would be a scenario where you are a victim of a home invasion. Your children are upstairs and the invaders ask if there is anyone else in the house. In this case it is permissible to lie to the robbers and say that there is no one else in the house, so that your children are safe. Because your intention is to prevent harm rather than to degrade someone’s humanity, your lie is permissible. This is the rule when is comes to permissible lies, and it helps us draw the line between lying for convenience as in Machiavelli’s view and permissible lies as in Kant’s view.