

The Philosophy of Deception

The issue of honesty really must be examined in a way that distinguishes between public and private life. Perjury, by its very nature is public, and the consequences can be tremendous. In a trial, a jury's assumption that a person who lies about one thing will lie about another is perfectly justified. Sex, with a few obvious exceptions, is part of our private life. And just about everyone is less than forthright about sex. Robert C. Solomon, a professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin, notes that while lying about sex may have grave significance for people in an intimate relationship, it has nothing to do with one's public credibility. Indeed, when publicly asked a rudely inappropriate question about one's private life, it seems "not only natural but even obligatory to lie, finesse, or refuse to answer."

Solomon contends that "Not all untruths are malicious. Telling the truth can complicate or destroy social relationships." When honesty would be cruel, deception becomes not a vice, but a social virtue. In such cases systematic deception becomes an essential part of the order of the social world. In some ways, seeking the truth at all costs is an ethnocentric peculiarity that is, at least in part, a product of our strong sense of individualism, and what Solomon sees as a dangerously unsociable conception. He concludes "Deception and self deception are part and parcel of our engagements in the world, including, not least, the development and maintenance of our sense of ourselves." For public figures, lying is sometimes a way of protecting their private lives. A lie or an invitation to lie that is provoked by a breach of sacred personal boundaries is what Solomon calls "moral limbo" and in no violation of a public trust.

Source

Robert C. Solomon. "Is It Ever Right to Lie? The Philosophy of Deception". *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 27, 1998) p. 60.

Discussion Questions

Is a lie told in desperation any less wrong than a calculated, merely convenient lie? Why or why not?

Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant both believed that lying is always wrong. What's your feeling about their Absolutist stand on lying?