

My friend's partner is cheating on her – should I tell her?

Kant • Bentham

You really are facing a dilemma here. Your friend is blissfully unaware of her partner's philandering, and you don't know whether to shatter her illusions. Of course, you'd feel terrible about telling her an outright lie, but it's just as uncomfortable for you to keep something from her. Somehow you feel a duty to be honest with her, but you know the pain that will cause, and you can't be sure how she'll react. It seems you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't – and whatever you decide, you want her to know that you did it with the best of intentions.

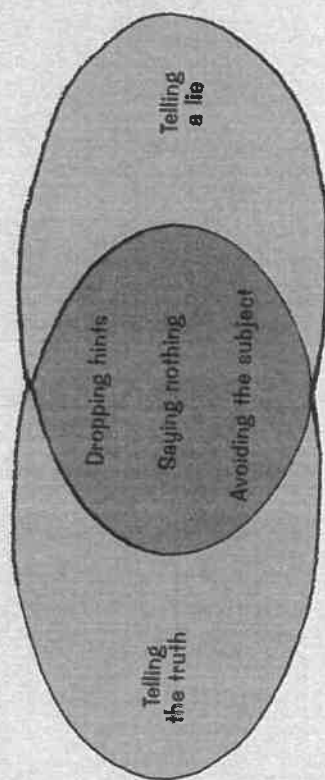
Looking for guidance on this from the philosophers takes us into some very deep waters, to the fundamental questions of how we judge what is morally right or wrong. So don't expect any easy answers.

You've probably been brought up, like most people, to believe that lying is wrong, plain and simple. You should always tell the

truth. It couldn't be clearer than that, could it? This is the view known in philosophy as *deontology*, that there are moral rules that are absolute, and we have a duty to follow them. If you break the rule, your action is morally wrong. The best-known advocate of this approach to morality was **Immanuel Kant**

(1724–1804), who summed the idea up in

Are there degrees of honesty?



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what he called the “categorical imperative”:

act only in accordance with a maxim that you can at the same time will to become a universal law. Which means that if you think something, lying for example, is generally wrong, then it is always wrong, without exception, no matter what.

This black and white approach seems pretty straightforward, but aren't there perhaps some grey areas too? If your friend asks you outright if her partner is cheating, you have a moral duty to tell her the truth.

But if she doesn't...you're not actually lying, but not actually telling the truth either. Or maybe the moral law is that it's wrong to hide the truth, or that you should always tell everybody everything. What, even things that are completely irrelevant to them?

Truth and consequences

Following moral rules is not necessarily the simple solution to this dilemma that it seems, so you might want to consider a completely different approach, *consequentialism*, which judges the moral rightness or wrongness of an action by its outcomes. It's the basis of much of moral philosophy since the Renaissance, in contrast to the especially religious “commandments” of what is right or wrong. Particularly relevant to the

Basic philosophical question

Do we have a moral duty to always tell the truth, or is it sometimes morally justifiable to leave it unsaid, conceal it or even tell a lie?

problem of to tell or not to tell is **Jeremy Bentham's** (1748–1832) idea of assessing the “utility” of an action, weighing up the amount of happiness or harm it creates. In your case, you would consider all the possible outcomes of telling your friend, or not telling her, and base your decision on how much good or harm it will cause, both immediately and in the long term. You might then decide to withhold the information, or even tell a “white lie”, to protect her, and still feel justified in tearing up the moral rulebook; or, rather than see her live a lie, to be the bearer of hurtful tidings, but ultimately in her best interests.

And here, you'll start to see that we're thinking not just about outcomes, but also about your own intentions and motives

“The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth”

From the oath or affirmation of a witness in court to give sworn testimony

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"I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law"

Immanuel Kant

for what you do. This is part of the area of philosophy known as *virtue ethics*, which, like consequentialism, considers morality on a case-by-case basis, but, instead of concentrating on individual actions, examines the "virtue" of the person taking them. So, rather than saying that it is morally right or wrong to do something, we look at the reasons for making that decision, whether the person making the decision is acting in their own interests or those of others, for instance, and this is dependent on their own inner sense of morality. So, if you do something because you honestly believe it is the right thing to do in the circumstances, you are acting morally, even if you tell a lie, and even if it all goes horribly wrong. The mere fact that you agonize over what to do, whatever you eventually decide, is a mark of your personal morality.

Making a decision

You may think, like Kant, that you have a duty to be honest with your friend, even if it is painful. But then, are you being entirely honest if you just avoid telling her? Bentham urges you to look at the likely consequences of telling her, or not telling her. Perhaps she would prefer to know what's going on.

How do I mend a broken heart?

Boethius • de Beauvoir • Epicurus • Zeno of Citium • Buddha • Schopenhauer • Nietzsche

You're in a bad place right now. The person you cared about more than anything else in the world has left you. Of course, the world hasn't come to an end – it just seems that way. Nothing else matters. You don't want to feel so down, but you can't see an end to the misery, or any point in trying to get over it. To be honest, you can't see the point in anything at the moment. How are you supposed to get on with your life when your whole world has been shattered? And what's the point of all the pain you're going through right now?

Well, this is a serious problem. Not a matter of life or death, maybe, especially when looked at from the outside, but for the person going through it, it can seem that way. It's a universal experience too, so you'd expect most philosophers to have some good advice on the subject. The Roman thinker **Boethius** (c.480–524) wrote a book titled *The Consolation of Philosophy*, giving us hope that philosophers might have some pointers, but it turns out he just recommends turning your mind to higher things. And, just as they do on almost every other subject,

philosophers have some widely differing opinions on dealing with a broken heart. These can be divided into three main camps: the "snap out of it and get on with life", the "grin and bear it" and the "this will make you a better person".

A good person to turn to for guidance, particularly if you're a woman, might be the French philosopher **Simone de Beauvoir** (1908–86). As well as being a straightforward, no-nonsense feminist, and a down-to-earth *existentialist*, she had plenty of personal experience in matters of the heart, or at least the bedroom. Unusually for a woman of her time, the mid-20th century, she had the "love 'em and leave 'em" attitude more common among macho men, and would probably tell you that there are plenty more fish in the sea. Not that that helps at all when you're wallowing in self-pity, of course. But she wouldn't leave it at that. Long before the slogan "the personal is political" became the rallying cry of second-wave feminism, de Beauvoir was preaching the message and living the life. What's sauce for the gander, she said, is sauce for the goose: why should

Basic philosophical question

What is the point of suffering?
How can suffering be good for us?

I'm fed up with people telling me what to think.

Hume • Socrates • Nietzsche • Foucault

Ever since you were a kid, there's been someone telling you how you should behave. Parents, teachers, the local preacher – they've all laid down the law about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and how to tell the difference between good and bad. You would think that you'd know by now, wouldn't you? But it doesn't stop when you reach adulthood. Every time you turn on the TV, look in the newspaper or even get into a conversation with your friends, somebody gives you the benefit of their superior knowledge and tells you what's right.

Given that you've had enough of being told what you should think, it seems a bit strange that you should be turning to anyone for advice. Yet it does seem that you want something more than just to vent your anger, or maybe to get some affirmation of your feelings; a bit of constructive advice perhaps, rather than a dogmatic opinion? Well, you've come to the right place, then, because although philosophers often have strong opinions, they won't share them unless

Basic philosophical question

Can there be any rational justification for ethical rules?
Can we have morality without religion?

they can back them up with arguments. And they'll be more likely to tell you how to think, than what you should think.

Anyway, let's look at your complaint. What you're really saying is that you're fed up with people telling you what they think, and telling you that what you think is wrong. Of course, they can give you their opinion, but you don't have to agree with them. That's fine if they can justify their position with sound, reasoned arguments, and convince you that they're right (or that you're wrong). The problem comes when they start using words such as "must", "should" or "ought to". That's when they cross the line from facts, the stuff of rational argument, to values and opinions. In short, they're telling what they think is good and bad, what is morally right or wrong – and by implication they're telling you what you ought to think, and how you ought to behave.

That, **David Hume** says, is just not on. How can anybody justify moving from an "is" to an "ought"? It's a big leap from

"Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?"

Socrates, quoted by Plato

explaining how things are to saying how they ought to be, from a descriptive statement to a prescriptive statement. And making that jump is not a rational, logical step, but involves a value judgement rather than facts. You simply can't derive an "ought" from an "is".

Is and ought

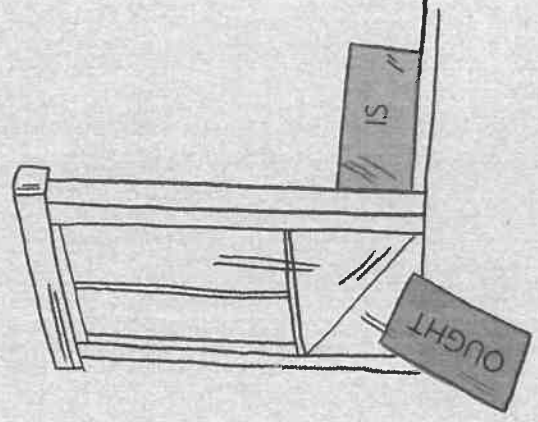
Hume would tell you to be careful when anybody is talking about morality or politics, because they'll slip from descriptive to prescriptive statements almost imperceptibly. One minute they'll say that such and such

is the case, the next that this ought to be the case. Don't be fooled. Using "Hume's guillotine", the imaginary blade that cuts the world of facts from the world of values, you can see when they're talking sense, or when they're just saying how they'd like things to be.

The sort of things that people are telling you to think, issues of morality or politics, for example, almost always entail that shift from descriptive to prescriptive. And while you can't deny facts, or a sound rational argument, you don't have to accept value judgements. What are they, anyway? Just matters of opinion, and an emotional reaction; in the end, all morality is derived from what Hume calls the "passions", not facts or reason. So when someone says that something ought to be, because it is good, all they are saying is that they approve of it. And implicit in this is the idea "This is good: you should do it" or "This is bad: you shouldn't do it".

Just like a politician giving a speech, they are implicitly looking for confirmation of their opinion. "We should aim for full employment", for example, is just another way of saying, "I think full employment is a good thing", and then expecting a standing ovation. A shorthand version of this would be "Full employment – Hoorah!", or "Unemployment – Boo!", which shows it up as a less than rational way of presenting an argument, no better than saying, "I like

Hume's guillotine





One of the arguments in favour of religion is that it provides a moral framework, but atheists would dispute that they are somehow immoral simply because they have no religious belief.

... spinach," (Hoorah!) "so should you!"

The people trying to convince you of their ideas of morality would dispute that, of course. Notions of good and bad, right and wrong, aren't just matters of opinion but come with some sort of authority. Religion, for example, is a source of many of the "shoulds" and "should nots", and you can't get a much higher authority than God. It's often argued that religion is necessary, because without it there would be no morality.

But **Socrates** dared to challenge that idea, not by saying it was wrong, but in his usual way by questioning the premise of the argument: the gods love what is

good. Are the good things good because the gods love them, then? Or do the gods love them because they're good? In other words, do the gods determine what is good? If they do, then by doing good we're just blindly obeying arbitrary rules whose only justification is the approval of the gods, and the gods could be commanding us to do all sorts of dubious things. But if the gods love things because they're good, then those things are good independently of the gods – so we could discover what is good without referring to the gods.

If the gods' authority is questionable on questions of morality, then so is the authority of the priests. And teachers, and politicians...

and in fact anybody who is telling you what you should think. If they're telling you to do or think something because it's right, they're irrelevant to its rightness, and you could work that out for yourself. And if it's only right because they say it is, it would be a mistake to follow them blindly without some better evidence. Either way, Socrates is suggesting very strongly that it's better to come to your own conclusions about what's morally right or wrong.

Slaves and masters

That's very much the conclusion **Friedrich Nietzsche** came to. He was brought up in a very religious family, to the strict moral standards imposed by his father's Lutheran protestantism. When he had a crisis of faith as a young man, and realized that "God is dead", he recognized that nearly all our ideas of morality come from religion, and without it we are free to make our own ethical code.

Unfortunately, the majority of people can't get away from the ethics they've been brought up with, and the annoying habit of preaching the same old misguided nonsense about good and evil. Even in secular societies, the pervasive influence of religious morals lingers on, and by instilling fear and guilt into everybody stops them from discovering for themselves what is right and wrong.

Worse than that, though, Nietzsche would add, the morals that are being foisted on us by religion, and these days governments too, don't come from God, but from the religious leaders. And they were designed to keep ordinary people like you in their place. By telling you that qualities such as meekness, pacifism and even poverty are "good" (Hoorah!), the leaders of society retain control of a submissive populace. Meanwhile the suckers who swallow that line, what Nietzsche refers to as "slave morality", keep turning the other cheek and perpetuating the myths. So long as this persists, Nietzsche would say, there will always be people who will tell you what to think, and how to behave, but you can choose not to listen and follow your own path.

It's not that simple, however, according to **Michel Foucault**. It's not just a ruling class imposing a system of ethics on us in order to hold on to power. It's subtler and more insidious than that. OK, it's true that authority figures, such as parents, teachers, religious leaders and politicians can enforce their moral codes on us by a system of punishments and rewards in order to exert their power, but who is pulling their strings? And anyway, do we just behave the way we do out of fear, or in the hope that we will be rewarded?

"Morality is herd instinct in the individual"

Friedrich Nietzsche

Why can't I decide who to vote for?

Plato • Aristotle • Hobbes

No, Foucault says, power is being exercised everywhere in society, not just by rulers over their subjects. Instead of real morality, we have cultural and societal norms that are constantly being reinforced by the way everybody in society behaves. We don't have to be explicitly told what to think, because we're constantly being shown what is and isn't acceptable.

Once a particular behaviour or idea becomes the norm, by implication it must be a "good" thing, and any deviation from that norm is wrong. You don't have to be told what to think, because any "deviant" thinking is taboo, and literally unthinkable. Rulers, even in repressive regimes, aren't so much imposing their ideas on others, as being given that power by the prevailing standards of morality; they are symptoms rather than

causes. Although they might say, for example, that homosexuality is a punishable offence, this is only a reflection of that society's taboos, and for most of its citizens it would be impossible to imagine otherwise. And because it's so deeply ingrained in the thinking of that society, it's difficult not to be persuaded to think the same – without any obvious pressure being put on you.

If you believe you're constantly being told what to think, Foucault would say, lucky for you! Most people don't even know how their thoughts and actions are being manipulated, let alone who is really controlling the agenda. So don't get mad, get active. You've obviously got a mind of your own, so use it to challenge the ubiquitous power of received wisdom.

Making a decision

If you're wary of people who tell you what you should do, say or think, you'd find a staunch ally in Hume. It's one thing, he says, to say how things are, and quite another to say how they should be. Socrates could also provide ammunition for attacking the people who rely on religious authority to tell you how to think. And if you want support for the idea that you can decide for yourself what to think, you need look no further than Nietzsche and Foucault.

It's election time again, and you are bombarded with information about the candidates standing, and the parties they represent. How do you choose which one is best for the job? Each one of them has more or less convincing arguments about their policies – how they'll run the economy, defend the country and look after our well-being. You want someone who'll run the country properly, or at least protect your interests. But politicians are all the same, aren't they? They'll promise anything to get elected, and then just look after themselves and their cronies...

Most countries in the world today are, to a greater or lesser extent, democratic. That is, the majority of adults have a say in who governs them, and voting in elections is generally recognized as a fundamental human

right. It has not always been like that, though, and the right to vote has often been hard fought for. Choosing who to give your vote to is quite a responsibility, then, but often not an easy decision to make.

The roots of western democracy lie in classical Athens, when a tyrannical ruler was overthrown in 510 BCE, and the people of the city decided, unusually, to choose how they should be governed. Plato saw this as an opportunity to organize society along rational lines, rather than let it be dictated by some hereditary ruler or whoever had the strongest army, and set out his ideas in *The Republic*. While he was happy to be rid of tyranny, he wasn't really a fan of democracy. In his opinion, government should be to enable the citizens to live a "good life". But the only people who understand the

Basic philosophical question

In a social contract, what kind of government do we decide to give power to?

"The office of the sovereign, be it a monarch or an assembly, consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of the safety of the people"

Thomas Hobbes