

Aristotle's Theory of Friendship Tested

Syra Mehdi

Is friendship a more important value than honesty? To respond to the question, consider this scenario: two high school students, Jamie and Tyler, who have been close friends since elementary school, have been brought before the school disciplinary committee because Jamie cheated on a term paper and Tyler had known about it. Jamie lies to the committee, stating emphatically that he did not cheat on the term paper. Should Tyler lie also or tell the committee the truth?

The question of whether Tyler should lie to the school's disciplinary committee about his longstanding friend's cheating is difficult and a classic case of competing and conflicting loyalties and obligations. Much of the difficulty stems from the fact—presumably, though this is not stated explicitly in the above scenario—that Tyler did not himself cheat, and is thus being expected to report on the academic dishonesty of another student, his close friend. Given the difficult situation Tyler is thereby placed in, perhaps it would be best to unpack the central but ambiguous issue in the above statement of his dilemma—namely, *should* he lie to protect his friend.

'Should' can be understood in several ways. In the strongest sense, it is a question of moral *ought* or obligation—is Tyler morally obligated to lie on behalf of his friend? While it seems intuitively obvious that one can never have a moral obligation to act immorally, the issue may more complicated than it seems at first blush. While certain philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant,¹ insist that one must never lie under any circumstances, most people recognize extenuating circumstances under which lies may

¹ See Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals," in Mary J. Gregor (trans.), *Practical Philosophy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

be regarded as morally permissible. For example, there are ‘white lies,’ that is lie where one does not tell the truth, or the full truth, in order to spare the feelings or sensibilities of another—e.g. telling someone you like their new haircut, even if it’s awful; telling grandma you like the sweater she knitted you for Christmas. These types of lies are generally seen as permissible if they are not intended towards any manipulative or exploitative ends on the part of the person telling them, but rather are told for the (mild) benefit and good feelings of their recipient. Tyler is not himself accused of cheating, any lie on his part would only be for the benefit of his friend. Would it thereby constitute a ‘white lie’? Maybe, but maybe not. Another defining feature of ‘white lies’ besides their other-directedness is their general innocuousness; they are lies that typically concern a relatively minor and trivial matter, but also one that is morally isolated and does not itself have the potential to harm or create further moral problems. Telling a child that Santa Claus exists is a widely seen as a socially permissible ‘white lie,’ one very different from telling a child that a monster lives under their bed who will eat them in their sleep. Or, as another example, telling someone that a ridiculous outfit they love looks nice would generally be considered a ‘white lie,’ but telling them the same right before they wear it to a job interview would probably not be. The difference between these two is the issue of *harm*. Academic dishonesty is not a minor matter, and the existence of cheating harms both the value and respectability of higher education. Thus, even though Tyler’s lie would be other-directed in purpose, it would nonetheless concern a serious matter and serve to conceal a serious and overall harmful offense. It would not, therefore, be a ‘white lie.’

However, there is another class of lies that are generally seen as permissible precisely because they are other-directed and concern a serious matter. For example, if during WWII someone in occupied Europe was sheltering a family of Jews in their house and one night Gestapo agents knocked at the door and inquired if there were any Jews there, most people would not only not *fault* the person for lying, but would see lying to the Gestapo agents as morally obligatory. In this case it is precisely the seriousness of the consequences *to others* of not lying that makes all the difference. Perhaps, if his friend were to face expulsion or similar consequences which could jeopardize his entire future, Tyler might feel himself in a similar situation, especially if the paper in question was a small part of the overall grade, or if there were extenuating circumstances Jamie was dealing with, or if this was the only time he knew of Jamie cheating. Unfortunately, there seems to be a critical difference between these two scenarios. In the first, the Jews hiding are entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, while those inquiring about them are Nazis wishing to kill them for no other reason than their religion and ethnic identity. In the second case, Jamie is guilty of wrongdoing, while those inquiring into his wrongdoing are themselves on the side of right. (A more appropriate analogy would be an escaped—and guilty—fugitive hiding from law enforcement.) Though Jamie may face serious consequences, if his own immoral actions have themselves raised the threat of such consequences, the scenarios are therefore quite different, and Tyler cannot and should not regard himself as under any moral obligation to lie for his friend, regardless of what those consequences may be.

Another way to approach the issue would be from the perspective of Jamie rather than Tyler. That is to say: does Jamie have the *right* to ask or demand that his friend lie on his behalf? The answer to this seems more straightforward: no one has the ‘right’ to demand someone do something wrong for their own benefit, or to act against the dictates of their own conscience. Indeed, even in the extreme case mentioned above, not even the Jews in hiding would have the right to demand a lie on the part of their protector. Even though their protector might be morally obligated to lie, ‘right to’ and ‘obligation by’ are not ultimately the same thing.

What the foregoing considerations clarify is precisely what is at stake in the question of whether Tyler *should* lie to protect his friend from negative consequences. Because Jamie’s own actions have raised the possibility of such consequences, Tyler is under no moral obligation to lie; it cannot be said, therefore, that *ought* to lie. Moreover, as Jamie’s offense was a serious breach of conduct with serious implications, any lie on Tyler’s part would not be a harmless ‘white lie’ without moral implications. The question then, the ‘should’ under consideration, is: *should* Tyler’s loyalty to his friend outweigh these moral implications?

While it would be easy to answer flatly in the negative, to say that, ‘One should never act immorally regardless of friendship,’ if the friendship and the bonds of friendship are a central and defining human value, one that gives life much of its meaning, perhaps the question is more difficult than that. This principle, or at least a variation thereof, is even recognized in American jurisprudence: while the State can compel truthful testimony against defendants on trial, it cannot compel spouses to testify

against each other. True, testimony can be compelled against friends, but the point is that even the State, which has the power to conscript and send thousands of people to their deaths if it sees fit, recognizes certain human bonds as presenting a limit on its power, on its ability to demand the truth.

But are the bonds of *friendship* to be given priority over telling the truth?

Perhaps some clarity can be gained from Aristotle, who was the first philosopher to offer a philosophical theory of friendship. Aristotle distinguished between three different objects of love: the “good, pleasant, or useful,” which correspond to “three kinds of friendship”—friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure, and friendships of the good.² This division raises a significant question: “Do men love...*the* good, or what is good for *them*?”³ The answer, for Aristotle, is *both*, and this can be seen in the different types of friendship themselves:

...those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other. So too with those who love for the sake of pleasure; it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them pleasant. Therefore those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to *themselves*, and not in so far as the other is the

² *NE* 1156a7

³ *NE* 1155b21

person loved but in so far as he is useful or pleasant. And these friendships are only incidental.⁴

That is to say, these first two types of friendship are self-interested in motivation: one or both parties of the friendship are in the friendship because of what they themselves get out of it. Clearly, if this the nature of Tyler and Jamie's friendship, then Tyler not only should not but *would not* lie on behalf of his friend, insofar as he would receive no benefit from doing so and would potentially expose himself to consequences for doing so. Indeed, Aristotle notes that young people like Tyler and Jamie often have friendships based on pleasure, and thus fall in and out of them easily, as their pleasures change.⁵ However, Tyler and Jamie have been friends for a long time, and thus their friendship might fall under Aristotle's third category: friendship of the good. As Aristotle explains:

Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence; for these wish well alike to each other *qua* good, and they are good in themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of their own nature and not incidentally; therefor their friendship lasts as long as they are good.⁶

In defining the nature of true friendship in this way, Aristotle also answers the central question of Tyler's conundrum. True friendship is a bond between to people whole like

⁴ *NE* 1156a10-17

⁵ *NE* 1156a31-1156b6

⁶ *NE* 1156b8-12

each other “*qua* good”—that is, *out of* and *for* the goodness of their respective characters. Insofar as Jamie cheated on his paper but Tyler did not, they are not “alike in excellence.” Moreover, as Aristotle notes, this perfect type of friendship can last only so long as *both* friends are themselves good. Insofar as Jamie cheated on his paper, he is not good, and thus cannot be a ‘true friend’ to Tyler.

Let us return, in conclusion, to the original questions: *Should* Tyler lie to protect his friend Jamie? Insofar as this would not be a ‘white lie,’ and insofar as Jamie is the party in the wrong, it would not be a morally obligated lie, the only justification for Tyler lying would be on the basis of his friendship with Jamie. However, he cannot lie out of any ‘true friendship’ with Jamie since Jamie is not good, and hence not capable of such friendship to begin with. Perhaps Tyler finds Jamie to be pleasant or useful as a friend, and feels that he should lie to safeguard that aspect of their relationship. However, in doing so, Tyler would no longer be good himself, and thus would inherently deprive himself of the ability to enjoy Aristotle’s ‘true friendship’ with *anyone at all*. Insofar as goodness is the *basis* of friendship, friendship cannot possibly be held as a more important value than honesty, since honesty is *good*. Therefore, Tyler *should not* lie for his friend; at best he could refuse to answer the committee’s questions and suffer whatever consequences that refusal to cooperate entails. But regardless of what he chooses, because of Jamie’s actions, he and Tyler can no longer be true friends.