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Lying to Children and the Cultivation of Epistemic Virtue

Kira Tomsons

Abstract: This paper argues that, regardless of the type of lies involved, lying to children is not morally justified. The argument is grounded in the need to treat children as members of the moral community who are becoming moral and epistemic agents. The paper first sets out the boundaries of the dishonest behaviour concerned and examines the reasons parents and scholars have given for thinking that lying to children is sometimes justifiable.

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As a parent of two young children, over the last eight years I have observed a strange hypocrisy among a large number of parents with respect to the notion of lying. On the one hand, lying is thought to be very wrong for children to do, yet on the other hand, many parents see little wrong with telling lies to their children. Some of these lies are fanciful, such as telling children that Santa, the tooth fairy, or the Easter bunny exists. Other lies, however, such as parents lying about whether they are biologically related to their children in cases of gamete donation or adoption, seem less frivolous. I shall argue that both kinds of lies are morally wrong, all other things being equal, and that parents should be honest with their children in these matters. To do so, I will first set out the boundaries of dishonest behavior with which I am concerned. I will then examine the reasons parents and scholars have given for thinking such lies are justified. I will then show why such lies are not morally justified, grounding my argument in the need to treat children as members of the moral community who are becoming moral and epistemic agents.

A great deal of philosophical ink has been spilled on the nature of lies and deceit.¹ I have no intention of getting bogged down on conceptual issues of what counts as a lie, versus say, an omission, or some other sort of deceit. Suffice it to say that my target here includes typical lies, where a person makes a claim that is false, with the intention of having the audience believe it to

be true, and deception, either through action or omission, where people act in ways which induce the audience to believe in a falsehood, even if they do not make any explicitly false claims.

The deception I am concerned with here is what I am going to call “ontological lies.” These are lies which concern themselves with the foundational makeup of our worldview. That is, when we tell an ontological lie, we are attempting to induce a false belief in the audience about foundational aspects of their world view, such that the audience would base a significant amount of other beliefs upon that falsehood.

For example, in establishing the claim that Santa exists, other beliefs are generated, or are likely to be generated in the audience about the nature of Christmas, how presents are delivered, who gives presents, and so on. It is not merely the presence of Santa as an entity in the world that is now given as a reality, but an entire set of beliefs about how the world works and also moral values, for example, that naughty children do not receive presents. In omitting the truth about who one’s biological father or mother is, a parent creates a view of the world in their children in terms of familial relations and genetic history and the nature of what is considered ‘legitimate’ family structures. This, in turn, can affect how they understand their own bodies and decisions they make in the future regarding their health and social relations (Ethics Committee, 602).

What I am not concerned with in this paper is what I am going to call “white lies for children.” These are the sort of lies that parents make which are often grounded in pragmatic consequentialist justifications. An example would be, “No, I can’t buy ice cream, I have no money,” when I know I have my debit card and could easily use it to purchase ice cream. My reasoning is likely based on a desire to get the kids moving so we can go home with the least amount of fuss. What sets this lie apart from the Santa or adoption lies, is that the child is less

likely to depend on this statement as a core element of their world view. While I think such lies might be morally problematic, my purpose is to focus on the deeper lies.²

The kinds of deceit that I am going to focus on, therefore, are the ones which encourage or sustain false views that form the basis of other significant beliefs. As previously stated, I am going to call these ontological lies. Of these, the kinds which are usually found out and dispelled by age I shall call “trivial” (such as Santa and the Easter Bunny). The other kinds I shall call “serious” ontological lies, as their existence is less likely to be found out by the simple act of growing up.

Having laid the groundwork for the boundaries of my concern, I now turn to how people have tried to justify both trivial and serious ontological lies. The justifications for deceiving children generally lie on solid consequentialist grounds; that is, people make arguments based on how the deceit has some sort of effect on the world, either the children themselves or people related to the children. I have identified three general grounds on which ontological deception is based: 1) for the benefit of children, 2) paternalism, that is, to protect children, and 3) the benefit of the deceiver or other adults in relation to the children.

When one lies from beneficent motives, one is driven by a concern for the wellbeing of the target of the deceit. In some cases, this may be justified. The notion here is that there is a good being done, which outweighs the moral wrongdoing of the lie. It is probably not true that lying is always wrong. Rather, deceit is justified in cases where we are trying to prevent harm or do well for the person we are deceiving.

When justifying lies about Santa, for example, many parents argue that the belief in Santa is one that provides children with fun and enjoyment. Psychologists chime in with headline-friendly claims that lying to children can help them develop imaginative and fantasy play.³ Similarly, when justifying deceit about gamete donation, parents often justify it within the context

of not wanting to harm the relations between child and parents. There is a concern that children would be hurt by the knowledge that one of their parents is not genetically linked to them; that they would feel they are not their ‘real’ parents (Norqvist and Smart, 2014).

Paternalistic deceit is linked to the beneficence argument, although it is more rooted in an assessment of the capacity of children to understand things. That is, paternalism is when we limit the freedom/autonomy of children because they lack fundamental capacities to understand what is going on or make decisions that are in their best interest. Parents use this form of justification when they claim that children are too young to understand gamete donation, or are too young to discuss how babies are made, thus justifying the continued deceit regarding their genetic heritage (Norqvist and Smart, 2014). While this cannot function as a reason for creating the deception about Santa’s existence, it could function as a reason for lying to your kids about why other parents lie about Santa to *their* children. For example, when my oldest son was five and in kindergarten, I was so impressed he did not spoil the game for the other kids, because he was very adamant that Santa was not real. Unbeknownst to me, however, my wife had told him that Santa was a game that parents and kids played and the first person to say Santa was not real lost the game. Our son was competitive enough to want to win, or at least not lose, so that he kept mum about it throughout the holiday season. In this case, he could not understand why people would lie to their kids, and was not old enough to restrain himself without motivation, so the lie he was told could arguably be justified based on paternalistic grounds.

Finally, the self-interest justifications come into play when parents deceive their children because it is in their own self-interest to do so. Parents report enjoying Christmas more when their kids believe in Santa (Anderson and Prentice). Those who do not disclose gamete donors to their kids often do so because they are worried about how they will be affected by the revelation,

are concerned about family privacy, or simply do not want to have to engage in conversation about it, seeing it as a non-issue that is strictly private and personal for the parents and thus irrelevant to the interests of the children. The deception is often driven by a desire not to be rejected as a ‘real parent’ (Norqvist and Smart, 2014, Readings, Black, Casey, et al, 2011, Freeman, Zadeh, Smith and Golombok, 2016).

The problem with these kinds of justifications is that they make two central mistakes. First, they wrongly assume that all the consequences are beneficial. Second, they ignore non-consequentialist reasons for thinking that lying to children about these matters is wrong. A fair bit has been written regarding the negative effects of lying to children, which is where I shall start.

There seems to be ample evidence that ontological lies end up being more harmful than beneficial. In his article decrying the Santa lie, David Johnson puts forward a number of reasons for thinking parents are doing something wrong when they encourage belief in Santa. (Johnson, 2010). He points out that when children find out about Santa, this can damage the trustworthiness of the parent and can be harmful to the relationship between parent and child. While it is certainly not a guaranteed outcome, there are many who do report that they felt betrayed by their parents when they learned they had been deceived.

Johnson also notes that teaching children about Santa can actually “encourage credulity and ill-motivated behavior” (Johnson, 2010). What he means by this is that children will change their behavior in order to receive presents, motivated by greed rather than any sort of moral virtue. If the only reason one wants to behave nicely to others is that they are worried they will be put on the naughty list, or they are afraid that an elf will report back to Santa about their negative behavior, such behavior is not grounded in a genuine desire to be a good person. Furthermore, studies have

been done which seem to show that children are also less likely to tell the truth when they themselves have been victims of lying (Maslen, 2014).

Johnson furthermore observes that we are currently not in a position to be teaching our children to be more gullible and less questioning of strange claims about the world. In a world of fake news, the need to be discerning about what is real and what is not is a critical skill. The lengths people take to convince their children that Santa exists, for example, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, is quite extraordinary. They show children ‘documentaries’ claiming that Santa exists, they track Santa through NORAD, and tell their children that kids who say Santa doesn’t exist are on Santa’s naughty list, just to name a few (Johnson, 2010).

Johnson seems on pretty stable ground, then, when he claims that the impact of such deception with respect to Santa is enough to merit calling the deception “immoral”. This argument carries over into other ontological lies such as gamete donation. The evidence is also quite strong that not telling children about their biological history can come with a hefty price. There is a common refrain among children who are conceived by donor gametes that they feel betrayed and that they experience distress at not being told about their origins. Many report that finding out their assumptions about their biological parents were false caused them great psychological distress and felt betrayed by their social parents. In contrast, children who were told when they were very young about this matter report that they mostly felt curious about their donor.

Now it must be noted that studies on children who were not told about the nature of their conception and *did not find out* about the deception, show that these children generally are doing as well as those who were not lied to about their histories (Ethics Committee, 602). From a purely consequentialist perspective, then, one could argue that as long as the children never find out about it, then no harm is done. Perhaps that is true, but it is very difficult to ensure. Donor conceived

children report finding out about having a donor when learning about blood types in high school. The increased prevalence of people learning about their genetic histories through DNA registries means that it is more and more likely that, as they get older, donor-conceived children will find out. While the deception surrounding gamete donation does not have the guaranteed harmful consequences of the Santa lie, it is increasingly more difficult to hold the position that one is morally justified in lying about genetics due to the lack of awareness on the part of the person deceived.

One could stop here and say that the consequentialist story is all we need. However, I think a richer story can be told about why such lies are morally problematic, which captures more of our moral lives than the mere consequences of our actions. Rather than emphasizing the harm that may befall children, I want to argue that even if children are never emotionally betrayed, psychologically scarred, or harmed in some way, it is still wrong to deceive them about their ontological realities. I ground this position within a recognition of children as members of the moral community and the need for the cultivation of epistemic virtue.

Children are members of the moral community, and we have responsibilities to them as moral subjects to treat them with respect. While this has Kantian overtones to it, I am not strongly committed to a Kantian framework, given that Kant is really only interested in moral agents, i.e., humans with reason. Suffice it to say that children do not fit the normal Kantian model of moral agents in that they are not fully rational, although they may have the capacity for it at times. More importantly, they are often not yet capable of moral decision making in a way that we would say adults are. By identifying children as “members of the moral community,” I simply mean that they belong within the realm of beings to which we owe moral responsibilities. These responsibilities include caring for their physical, emotional and intellectual well-being, capturing the

consequentialist idea that we should not be engaged in activities that harm them, and that we should be striving to help children flourish.

Our responsibilities go beyond merely fulfilling such basic needs, however. To treat children as members of the moral community requires that we recognize their capacity as the moral agents they will become. It is to recognize that when we deliberately undermine their ability to be moral agents, we lessen their standing in the moral community, irrespective of any other harm that may befall them. Children are wronged by such deceit, even if they are not harmed.

What exactly is the wrong? I posit that the wrong lies in two connected areas: first, in the fractured trust that is now present in the relations between moral beings and second, in the epistemic realm, where children who have been deceived must reposition themselves with respect to their foundational beliefs. Children place a great deal of trust in their parents as sources of knowledge about the world. Furthermore, children are by nature inquisitive. They ask questions, they want to know what is real and what is not. At the very time when they are building their views about the nature of the world, ontological lies come to the foreground. Children take these deceptions and understandings of the world and infer new things, building up a conceptual framework of how the world works and how their relationships are structured. We commit a moral wrong to children when we deliberately allow them to form false foundational understandings of the world around us that we know to be false. In doing so, we violate the trusting relationship they place in our hands.

In addition, it seems that the moral wrongdoing can be couched within terms that do not even connect with a wrong to the child, but with wronging ourselves. We fail to practice epistemic virtue when we encourage children to believe false things and deliberately try to keep them from finding out the truth. As adults, we are not cultivating epistemic virtues for ourselves, that is, the

pursuit of wisdom and truth as a grounding for our moral and epistemic beliefs. Not only are we hindering the cultivation of wisdom in others but we fail to practice it in ourselves.

Not everyone might be so convinced however. One such philosopher is Era Gavrielides. Gavrielides argues that there is nothing morally wrong with lying about Santa by appealing to virtue theory. He argues that lies about Santa are justified not by their consequences, but that “Stories about Santa fit more naturally within a plan of character education rather than a plan the end goal of which is the production of kinds of action” (Gavrielides, 172), and thus concludes that a virtue-based account is better able to show why parents are not morally wrong in deceiving their children.

He first argues that Plato accepts lying to children in the telling of stories, which he concludes shows that the Santa lies are not morally wrong because they are stories and are helpful, just like medicine is helpful (Gavreilides, 174). He then points to the ways in which belief in Santa can help children develop their character, such as by being exposed to charity, kindness, and fairness, and making such traits desirable. Gavrielides argues that this is similar to how Plato encourages the development of the proper desires and character in children (174). The practice of children writing to Santa also requires that they develop self-reflection skills, encouraging them to think about their behavior and how they can improve themselves.

Finally, he argues that the fact that the lies about Santa are self-destructive shows that it is not morally worrying. By this, he means that eventually children stop believing in Santa because they develop the critical skills needed to realize that elements of the Christmas story simply cannot be true. He writes: “Not only do Santa stories have the beneficial effects in terms of developing a good character, [but] the story has a mechanism which makes it the case that the lie which it involves is unlikely to be self-perpetuating” (Gavrielides ,176).

Gavrielides' argument is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it is not clear that Plato would actually support the telling of ontological lies to children. The passage that Gavrielides cites from *The Republic* is as follows:

What about falsehood in words? When and to whom is it useful and not deserving of hatred? Isn't it useful against one's enemies? And when any of our so-called friends are attempting through madness or ignorance to do something bad, isn't it a useful drug for preventing them? It is also useful in the case of those stories we were just talking about, the ones we tell because we don't know the truth about those ancient events involving the gods. By making a falsehood as much like the truth as we can, don't we also make it useful? (Plato, 382c-e)

The kind of lies that Plato is referencing here seem to be of two sorts: the first is the kind of lies we tell to prevent harm and the second is the kind which we tell when we actually do not know what the truth is. Neither of these describes the sort of lies I am addressing, which are not really lies to prevent harm to the recipient nor instances where we don't know the truth.

Plato was very much concerned about making sure that children were properly educated, and to that end, he does claim that we need to be careful about the stories that children are told because they are very malleable. However, he also argues in favour of the 'noble' lie, in which all people are lied to about how they came to be and that people have inherent positions in society due to whether they have gold, silver or bronze in them (414d-415a-c). Furthermore, Plato later claims: "Isn't being deceived about the truth a bad thing, while possessing the truth is good?" (*Republic*, 413a) So perhaps we should not be taking guidance about how to deal with ontological lies from someone who has stated very contradictory things about telling falsehoods.

It is also important to note that Gavrielides' argument does not carry over to other ontological lies, such as those about gamete donation or adoption. They are not self-destructive and do not involve the same notion of education and self-development with which Gavrielides

imbues the Santa story. One cannot couch deception of this sort in terms of character building for the child. Teaching children to be virtuous by lying to them is inherently contradictory.

Some parents may object to my position, however, claiming that beliefs about Santa have the same status as religious/cultural beliefs, which may differ from person to person. Some parents claim, for example, that while it is fine for other parents not to celebrate Christmas with Santa as a real person, those other parents should not let their children spoil it for the rest of them.⁴ I respond by simply pointing out that there is a significant difference between beliefs about Santa and religious beliefs: if a person has a religious belief, that one believes it to be actually true. Although I do not believe personally in a God, I would not claim that other parents who teach such a belief to their children are lying about it. However, that is exactly what is happening with the Santa lie. Furthermore, any argument to the effect that belief in Santa helps fuel children's imagination misses the point: when children are engaged in fantasy play, they know it is not real. That is what makes it fantasy play. By perpetuating the myth of Santa, one is not helping children engage in play, but rather is encouraging the building of a worldview that is explicitly false.

Parents who have used gamete donation to conceive may respond with three kinds of objections. First, they may say that they should not have to disclose as it falls within the purview of parental liberty. Second, they may argue that disclosing to children risks the privacy of their lives, and they want to protect their family from intrusion into matters that are not other people's concern. Last, they may argue that the stigma around gamete donation is such that they need to protect their children and their spouses from any backlash.

My argument is purely a moral argument at this point, and has very little to say about social policy. I am not concluding that parents should be forced to disclose. Rather, I think that parents should think very carefully about the reasons why they would not disclose and weigh them against

the moral obligations they have to tell their children the truth. In many ways, we cannot force people to engage in moral decisions that are within the private realm, and gamete donation certainly is within that area. This does not mean that the choices people make to deceive their children in the private realm are devoid of moral import, however.

It is true that when one tells a child something, this does open the risk to the child of then disclosing it to the world at large. Many a parent has been in a situation when children reveal information they would prefer remained within the family. However, concern about children revealing the truth to outsiders ties in very closely with the problem of the stigma of gamete donation. In response, I argue that the decision whether or not to tell children the truth can be helpfully informed by the experiences of those within the gay and lesbian community.

Many gay and lesbian couples have children through the use of donation and surrogacy. When it comes to the disclosure of that to children, it is not so much a question of whether one discloses, so much as when the couple discloses. Once children find out how babies are made, then inevitably lesbian and gay couples are confronted with the question, "How was I made, then?" Disclosure within the gay and lesbian community is not really optional. By all measures, children are not harmed by such disclosures, contrary to the fears often found in heterosexual couples' rationales for not disclosing. In the case of heterosexual couples, it is evident that stigma still exists for not being the genetic parent. The same can be said for not lying about Santa. The response of other parents is often harsh and vitriolic, and it can be hard to be "that parent" whose kid spoils it for the rest of the class.

However, this does not lessen the moral importance of disclosure. Rather, it highlights two aspects of moral life. First, as long as people remain silent about the issue, very little will change by way of social attitudes. Second, doing the morally right thing often requires the courage to face

the responses of others. Doing the right thing is not always easy, but cultivating a desire for truth and treating children as growing moral beings is in itself worthy of the risks.

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Endnotes

¹ The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article, “The Definition of Lying and Deception,” has over 100 entries in its bibliography alone: <https://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/lying-defintion/>

² I do not necessarily think such lies are morally justified either, but I think they require separate treatment as the goals of such lies are different.

³ See Vanessa Lobue and Melinda Wenner Moyer. Wenner Moyer, for example, says, “What Kris Kingle does is feed the imagination.” <https://www.slate.com/human-interest/2012/12/the-santa-lie-is-the-big-thing-huring-our-kids.html>

⁴ This is a common refrain on mother/parenting message boards and internet communities. For an example, see: <https://www.community.babycenter.com/post/a64901218/child-in-class-telling-other-kids-santa-isnt-real>