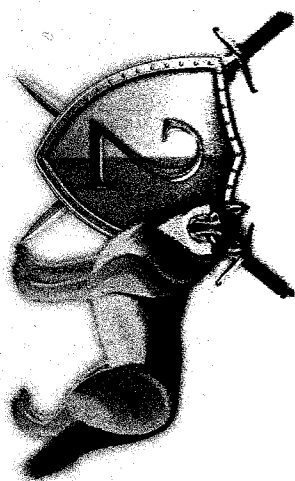


never to be violated are all very well, but these principles must always be weighed against the consequences our actions will have for human lives. Our most fundamental need as humans is not justice; our most fundamental need as humans is avoiding a greatsword inserted up our noses as citizens of Western democracies with the duty to vote. Our leaders, we are all in a way, required to play the game of thrones, in our own names and across the world. When we forget the cost of our principles in terms of human suffering, to ourselves, or to those who fight for us, or even those we fight for and those we fight against, then we are in danger of doing more harm with our good intentions than any Targaryen tyrant ever inflicted with his.

NOTES

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 253.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), p. 100.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
5. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 620.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 796.
7. George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 796.
8. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 687.
9. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 122.
10. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 44.
11. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 147.
12. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 636.
- 13.



IT IS A GREAT CRIME TO LIE TO A KING

Don Fallis

"It is one thing to deceive a king, and quite another to hide from the cricket in the rushes and the little bird in the chimney."

—Lord Varys¹

Despite King Robert Baratheon's warning that "it is a great crime to lie to a king," Prince Joffrey lies to him.² He claims that Arya Stark and the butcher boy, Mycah, attacked him and "beat him with clubs," when, in fact, Joffrey was the instigator of the conflict. His lie costs the innocent lives of the butcher boy and Sansa's direwolf, Lady. Although Joffrey is never punished for it, the vast majority of moral philosophers would agree that he has committed a serious crime here. But is Joffrey's crime morally worse because his lie is addressed to *the king* rather than to someone else? And is it morally worse because he explicitly *lies* instead of merely trying to deceive the king in some other way?

Lying and Deceiving in Westeros

While deception is the order of the day in *Game of Thrones*, the citizens of Westeros usually try to adopt more subtle means of deceit than simply lying like Joffrey does. For instance, Robb Stark fools the Lannisters by sneakily splitting the forces of the North, and as a result, he is able to capture the Kingslayer and break the siege on Riverrun. Mīrri Maz Duur leads Daenerys Targaryen to believe that her bloodmagick will return Khal Drogo to health, but all that she explicitly claims is that she can keep him alive.³ Lord Varys, the master of whisperers, often moves about the Red Keep in disguise. And most notably, Queen Cersei tricks almost everyone, including the king, into believing that Prince Joffrey is the true heir to the Iron Throne, without having to actually say so. Are such deceivers morally better off for having avoided outright lies?

First of all, though, what is the difference between lying and deceiving in general? Almost all philosophers (from Saint Augustine [354–430] in his *De Mendacio* to Bernard Williams [1929–2003] in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*) think that you lie if you *intend* to deceive someone into believing *what you say*.⁴ Lying is not just saying something false. For instance, even though Tyrion Lannister, the Imp, is innocent, Catelyn Stark is not lying when she claims that he “conspired to murder my son.”⁵ She actually believes that Tyrion is guilty. (She has been told that Tyrion won the knife used by the assassin in a bet with Littlefinger at “the tourney on Prince Joffrey’s name day.”⁶) Thus, when Catelyn accuses Tyrion, she is not trying to deceive anyone at the inn by the crossroads. If they were to find out that Tyrion was innocent, Ser Willis Wode, Marillion the singer, and the others who were present that night *might* say that there is a sense in which she “lied” to them. But accusing someone of “lying” when she just inadvertently says something false is a loose way of speaking.

Of course, Prince Joffrey is not the only liar in the Seven Kingdoms. There is actually quite a bit of lying in Westeros.

According to Lady Lysa Arryn, at least, “The Lannisters are all liars.”⁷ In addition, Tyrion seems to be correct when he claims that “lying comes as easily as breathing to a man like Littlefinger.”⁸ Lord Petyr Baelish, master of coin, certainly lies to Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell and Hand of the King, when he says, “I will go to Janos Slynt this very hour and make certain that the City Watch is yours.”⁹ (When the gold cloaks turn against Eddard at the crucial moment, Littlefinger says to him, “I *did* warn you not to trust me, you know.”¹⁰) In fact, after she takes Tyrion hostage, Catelyn herself is lying when she tells everyone “often and loudly” that she is taking him to Winterfell.¹¹ She knows that they will be heading for the Eyrie instead. But she wants everyone to believe otherwise so that the Lannisters will go the wrong way if and when they try to follow.

Lord Stark’s Lies

Even Eddard Stark, who is renowned for his honesty, lies. King Robert tells him, “You never could lie for love nor honor, Ned Stark,”¹² but Eddard actually lies on several occasions. For instance, he tells Ser Jaime Lannister that “your brother has been taken at my command, to answer for his crimes.”¹³ Of course, his wife was acting on her own initiative and took advantage of the opportunity to capture Tyrion at the inn. In fact, in an attempt to protect his wife, Eddard even lies directly to the king about this when he says, “My lady wife is blameless, Your Grace. All she did she did at my command.”¹⁴ But most notably, at the Great Sept of Baelor the Beloved, Eddard proclaims falsely to the people of King’s Landing that “I plotted to depose and murder Robert’s son and seize the throne for myself.”¹⁵

Some philosophers might claim, though, that Eddard’s false confession is not really a lie. As Paul Grice (1913–1988) pointed out in his *Studies in the Way of Words*, saying something—at least in the sense required for lying—demands more than simply uttering some words. In particular, the speaker has to make

a certain sort of "commitment" to those words. For instance, when Catelyn finally gets Tyrion to the Eyrie, Lady Lysa accuses him of murdering her husband, Jon Arryn, the previous Hand of the King, in addition to attempting to murder Catelyn's son, Bran. In response to this second false accusation, Tyrion sarcastically utters the words, "I wonder when I found the time to do all this slaying and murdering."¹⁶ Even though he is not really wondering about this, he is not lying because (given the sarcasm) he has not committed himself to the literal meaning of his words.

It could be argued that Eddard is not really *saying* that he is a traitor, not because his utterance is not serious like Tyrion's, but because his utterance is coerced. In *How to Do Things with Words*, the philosopher J. L. Austin (1911–1960) suggested that one does not actually *say* something if one utters the words "under duress." So, the idea is that Eddard was not really lying because he had no choice but to give a false confession. In fact, though, he did have a choice.¹⁷ After all, Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) was under just as much pressure as Eddard to say something that he believed to be false, that King Henry VIII had absolute authority over the Church of England. More, however, chose *not* to lie, and he accepted the consequences of his refusing to do so.¹⁸ It seems that, unlike Tyrion, Eddard has committed himself to the literal meaning of his words. In fact, this is precisely what the queen is counting on. So, while the coercion may make him less blameworthy for lying, it does not mean that he is not lying.

Note also that Eddard sometimes thinks that he's lying when he really isn't. When Robert is on his deathbed, Eddard decides not to tell the king what he has learned about Joffrey's parentage. ("*Joffrey is not your son*," he wanted to say, but the words would not come."¹⁹) It is pretty clear that Eddard thinks that he is lying to the king by keeping his mouth shut. ("The deceit made him feel soiled. *The lies we tell for love*, he thought. *May the gods forgive me.*") But Eddard is not lying to the king in

this case because he does not *say* something that he believes to be false. Admittedly, there is a sense in which we might say of anyone who is trying to deceive that he is "lying." For instance, the American humorist and pundit Mark Twain (1835–1910) claimed that "almost all lies are acts, and speech has no part in them."²⁰ But again, this is just a loose way of speaking.

One might go even further and argue that Eddard isn't attempting to *deceive* the king, but is just trying to *keep him in the dark*. Indeed, it is true that simply withholding information does not necessarily count as deception. In particular, it is not deception if your goal is simply to keep someone ignorant of something rather than to make sure that he has a false belief.²¹ However, as contemporary philosopher Thomas Carson points out, "withholding information can constitute deception if there is a clear expectation, promise, and/or professional obligation that such information will be provided."²² As the Hand of the King, Eddard clearly has such an obligation to reveal to the king information that is critical to the governance of the realm. In fact, the queen presumably has the same obligation. Thus, both of them *are* deceiving the king by keeping the identity of Joffrey's father secret.

Is Lying Worse than Deceiving?

Some cases of deception are clearly morally worse than some lies. For instance, in comparison with the deceptions perpetrated by the queen to gain control of the Iron Throne, Eddard's confession of treason (in order to save the lives of his daughters and to preserve the king's peace) is actually quite commendable. However, several prominent philosophers, including Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Roderick Chisholm (1916–1999), have claimed that, *all other things being equal*, lying to someone's face is worse than deceiving him in some other way.²³ Indeed, most people seem to have the intuition that if you are going to deceive someone about something, it is morally better to do it

without telling a lie, like Queen Cersei, who simply keeps her affair with her brother secret and lets people draw their own conclusions about the identity of Joffrey's father. Many philosophers, like Kant and Chisholm, agree that if she had tried to promote the same false belief by explicitly assuring people that Joffrey is Robert Baratheon's son, she would have done something (at least somewhat) worse.

Almost all moral philosophers think that the main reason it is wrong to lie is that lying involves intentionally deceiving someone. But while Kant and Chisholm think that there is something extra wrong with lying, other prominent philosophers disagree (including Bernard Williams, mentioned above, and T. M. Scanlon in his book *What We Owe to Each Other*). While they grant that there are differences between lying and other forms of deception, they claim that these differences do not show that lying is morally worse. In other words, they essentially agree with the English poet William Blake (1757–1827) that “a truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent.”

Betraying Trust and Shifting Responsibility

Perhaps the extra thing wrong with lying is that liars *invite us to trust* them and they *betray* that trust. As Roderick Chisholm and Thomas Feehan put it, “Lying, unlike other types of intended deception, is essentially a breach of faith.”²⁴ For instance, Eddard explicitly invites the people of King's Landing to believe (falsely) that he is a traitor. By contrast, Robb does not invite Lord Tywin Lannister to trust him that *all* of his troops are marching south down the kingsroad. So, he does not betray any trust when he leads “nine tenths of their horse”²⁵ across the Green Fork at the Twins.

But even if we assume that inviting trust makes deception worse, it will not explain why lying is morally worse than *all*

other forms of deception. It is possible for a deceiver to invite trust and to betray that trust without telling an outright lie. For instance, Mirri Maz Duur implies that she can return Khal Drogo to health. Also, when she merely says that “only death may pay for life,”²⁶ she leads Daenerys to believe that the price will be the life of Drogo's great red stallion rather than that of her unborn child. But despite not having actually lied, it still seems that she invites Daenerys to trust her and that she betrays her trust. (Daenerys, of course, pays the *maegi* back for that betrayal by binding her to Drogo's funeral pyre.)

Many philosophers claim that it is better to deceive without lying because you bear less of the *responsibility* for your audience's being deceived. If you lie to them outright, you are solely responsible for their being deceived. Your audience really has no choice but to take you at your word. (Of course, if someone is sufficiently skeptical, she could question your sincerity. But because it's such a serious allegation, most people are loath to call someone a liar unless they are absolutely sure.)

By contrast, if you deceive them in some other way, your audience has to draw an inference on their own in order to end up with a false belief. In other words, your audience makes a choice about what to believe, and people are clearly responsible for the choices that they make. For instance, although the *maegi* does not specify which life will pay for Drogo's life, Daenerys jumps to the conclusion that it will be the life of Drogo's horse. Thus, Daenerys seems to bear some responsibility for being deceived about the outcome of the bloodmagic. When Daenerys says, “You warned me that only death could pay for life. I thought you meant the horse,” Mirri Maz Duur plausibly replies, “No. That was a lie you told yourself. You knew the price.”²⁷

Of course, Daenerys concludes that the death of the horse will restore Drogo to health only because Mirri Maz Duur intends her to reach this conclusion and says just the right things to lead her to it. So, does the fact that Daenerys deceives

herself lessen the *maegi's* moral responsibility for the deception? Consider the following analogy inspired by an example from contemporary philosopher Jennifer Saul.²⁸ Suppose that you walk around Flea Bottom showing off your expensive dagger with its Valyrian steel blade and its dragonbone hilt instead of keeping it hidden under your cloak. When your dagger is finally stolen, there is a sense in which you are partly to blame. The theft would have been much less likely if you had been more careful. But does this diminish the thief's responsibility? Presumably, he deserves to be sent to the king's dungeons—or to the Wall—as much as a thief who steals from more cautious citizens.

It might be better to deceive without lying because *even if* the responsibility that your audience bears does not lessen yours, you have at least preserved more of their autonomy.²⁹ A person is *autonomous* if she can freely make her own choices about what to do; and the more choices she has, the more autonomous she is. Both Kant in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the British philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) in his *On Liberty* have emphasized the important moral value of autonomy.

As noted, if you lie to them, your audience has few options. For instance, they can believe what you say (or at least pretend to do so), or they can directly question your sincerity. Thus, they have very little autonomy. By contrast, if you simply imply something that you believe to be false, your audience has additional options and somewhat greater autonomy. For instance, without having to question the *maegi's* sincerity, Daenerys could have easily clarified matters by asking, “Do you really mean that you can return Drogo to health and that only his horse will have to die?”

But do the victims of other forms of deception always have more options than the victims of lies? For instance, after he was “savaged by a boar whilst hunting in the kingswood,” Robert asks Eddard to take care of his children when he dies.³⁰

The words twisted in Ned's belly like a knife. For a moment he was at a loss. He could not bring himself to lie. Then he remembered the bastards: little Barra at her mother's breast, Mya in the Vale, Gendry at his forge, and all the others. “I shall . . . guard your children as if they were my own,” he said slowly.³¹

In this case, while Eddard intends to convey something that he believes to be false, he believes what he actually says. So, he is not lying. But is Robert really going to think to ask, “Okay, but are we in agreement as to who my children are?” In other words, does the king really have more options than he would have had if Eddard had lied? In fact, since Robert has no choice but to believe that Eddard is going to take care of Joffrey, Myrcella, and Tommen, does he really bear any of the responsibility for having been deceived?

The Ruses of War

Whether or not deceiving is just as bad as lying, is it worse to lie to (or to deceive) *the king* than to lie to someone else? And Joffrey's lie is not our only motivation for addressing this important issue. As noted, many people in the “game of thrones,” including Eddard and the queen, lie to the king or try to deceive him in other ways.

There are, of course, certain situations in which it is clearly acceptable to try to deceive a king. For instance, it is okay to bluff when you play poker with a king. Also, you can try to trick him on the battlefield when you are at war with him. As the Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) wrote, “the general sense of mankind is that deceiving an enemy is both just and lawful.”³² So, for instance, it is okay for Robb Stark to try to fool the Lannisters by splitting his forces. (Of course, according to Barristan the Bold, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, “there is small honor in tricks.”³³ So perhaps it would have been more honorable for Robb to follow the

Dothraki practice and braid his hair with "bells so his enemies would hear him coming and grow weak with fear."³⁴)

But poker games and battles are special situations where deception is an accepted part of the strategy, in which even a king essentially gives people permission to lie to him. By contrast, in most situations, no such permission is granted. In fact, in many situations, such as when the king holds court—which is where Joffrey tells his lie—it is made quite explicit that lying will not be tolerated. Then again, maybe the king tacitly gives people permission to lie to him simply by virtue of playing the *game* of thrones?

By the way, I do not want to leave the impression that "*all* is fair in love and war." Some types of deception are morally unjustified even in battle. For instance, in our world, the Geneva Conventions condemn "the feigning of civilian, non-combatant status." Similarly, it is questionable practice for Ser Gregor Clegane, bannerman of House Lannister, to destroy villages in the Trident while masquerading as an outlaw raider. And while he definitely overreacts, Ser Gregor himself has some reason to be upset when Ser Loras Tyrell rides a mare in heat to distract the Mountain's horse during the Hand's tourney. Such ruses are not the accepted norm whether in battle and or in jousts.

Bad Consequences and Broken Oaths

Outside of poker games and battles, it is probably not morally acceptable to try to deceive the king. But is it worse to try to deceive *the king* rather than someone else? Traditional ethical theories provide some potential explanations for why this might be the case.

According to *consequentialism*, when deciding what to do, we should consider what the consequences of our actions are likely to be. And we should not do things that are likely to have bad consequences. Now, the consequences of misleading a person

as powerful as the king can be extremely dire. For instance, King Robert Baratheon orders the deaths of an innocent person and an innocent animal as a result of Joffrey's lie. The queen's deception of the king arguably leads to the dissolution of the realm. So we will usually have more reason to avoid lying to the king than we have to avoid lying to the smallfolk.

However, consequentialist considerations do not show that it is *always* worse to lie to a king. For instance, Eddard deceives Robert about Joffrey's parentage only when Robert is already on his deathbed. Since he is about to die, there is little opportunity for Robert to take any further unwise actions as a result of his false belief. Knowing the truth would just cause him additional pain. ("The agony was written too plainly across Robert's face; he could not hurt him more."³⁵) So it seems that the benefits of deceiving Robert in this case were likely to outweigh the costs.³⁶

But we might also try to appeal to *nonconsequentialist* considerations to show that it is worse to lie to a king. Many philosophers, including Kant, think that we have an obligation to behave in certain ways—and an obligation *not* to behave in other ways—regardless of what the consequences might be. In particular, in *The Right and the Good*, W. D. Ross (1877–1971) claims that we have a duty of *fidelity* or *truthfulness*. In other words, we are obliged not to lie or to deceive people in other ways. Of course, this is a duty that we owe to everyone and not just to kings. However, subjects arguably have a special obligation not to deceive their king. Doing so would break an "oath of fealty" taken before the old and/or new gods.³⁷

Unfortunately, not everyone in Westeros has explicitly sworn an oath to the king. The lords and the knights certainly have, but the smallfolk probably have not. In addition, it is not clear that Joffrey—being only twelve years old—had yet sworn such an oath to Robert Baratheon. And in any event, as Lord Varys points out, "we all know what a Lannister's oath is worth."³⁸

But we might nevertheless argue that all subjects have this special obligation to their king by appealing to the doctrine of the "divine right of kings." The idea is that a king has god-given authority over his subjects just like the authority that parents have over their children. And it would clearly be especially bad to try to deceive someone who legitimately has this sort of authority over you.

Admittedly, Robert Baratheon seized the Iron Throne in battle rather than inheriting it from his father. But this does not mean that he does not have the backing of the gods. In a similar vein, Tyrion is presumably found innocent in his "trial by combat" at the Eyrie—championed by the sellsword Bronn—because the gods really control the outcome.³⁹

But while the divine right of kings would explain why it is worse to lie to a king, it is by no means clear that there really is a divine right of kings. The English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) gave an influential argument against this doctrine in his *Two Treatises of Government*. As Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) wrote in the Declaration of Independence—which is cribbed from Locke—"all men are created equal" and political authority derives only from the "consent of the governed." Or as a peasant in another medieval fantasy famously put it, "strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony."⁴⁰ Thus, nonconsequentialist considerations may not show that it is invariably worse to lie to a king either. So, while you may very well receive greater punishment for lying to the king than for lying to someone else, it is not clear that you have necessarily done something morally worse.⁴¹

NOTES

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), pp. 241–242.
2. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 155. Plato (429–347 BCE) claimed in *The Republic* that it is morally permissible for "philosopher

kings" to tell "noble lies" to their subjects for the good of society. But according to King Robert, the opposite does not hold.

3. Strictly speaking, this *maegi* is not a citizen of Westeros. She resides across the narrow sea from the Sunset Kingdoms.

4. Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 96. I actually don't think that this definition is exactly right. See my essay "The Mendacity Bifurcation" in *The Big Bang Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Dean Kowalski (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, forthcoming). But my objections won't matter for our purposes here.

5. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 292.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 514.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 529.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 382.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 428.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 725.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

17. By contrast, when the Jedi master Obi-Wan Kenobi (from another fantasy world that you are probably familiar with) causes an Imperial Stormtrooper to utter the words "These aren't the droids we're looking for," the Stormtrooper really has no choice.

18. Of course, despite making different choices, Eddard and Sir Thomas both end up getting their heads chopped off.

19. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 504.

20. Mark Twain, "My First Lie, and How I Got Out of It," in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 168.

21. Thomas Carson, *Lying and Deception* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 53–54.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

23. Kant would never lie to his king because he thought that lying is always wrong. But interestingly, he did try to deceive his king on at least one occasion. See James Mahon's "Kant on Lies, Candour and Reticence," *Kantian Review* 7 (2003), 102–133.

24. Roderick Chisholm and Thomas Feehan, "The Intent to Deceive," *Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1977), pp. 143–159.

25. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 651.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 710.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 757.

28. Jennifer Saul, *Lying, Misleading, and What Is Said* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).