The Ethics of Truth Telling to Dementia Patients

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Challenging the Assumptions

- Truth versus Loyalty
- Principle of Do No Harm
  - Never lie in the diagnosis stage
  - Therapeutic lying is acceptable if it avoids harming the patient
- What about the Principle of Do Good?
  - All of the above is about ‘loyalty’
  - What is the Truth?

What Does Moral Theory Tell Us?

- Immanuel Kant’s duty based ethics prohibits lying in all cases
  - Lying is not rational and it is not universal
    - All communication is predicated on truth telling
  - Lying does not respect the dignity of others
    - Most lying is based on some form of self-interest, even loyalty can be a form of self-interest
  - Lying is not following the moral law
    - The moral law demands truth in all cases

How Does Theory and Practice Compare?

- No lying in diagnosis stage
  - Clearly there could be harm and it could effect autonomy
  - Follows Kant’s rule about rationality and communication
  - Lying as therapeutic lying
  - Clearly seeks to avoid harm to the patient suffering dementia
  - Does not follow Kant’s rule about not lying in any case
- Is Kant just wrong here?
  - Can I violate the moral law?

What Evidence Do We Have?

- The issue may be respecting the dignity of others
  - All persons, because of their autonomy are owed the truth
  - “Betty” is owed the truth of all times
  - But “Betty” sometimes gets confused, misremembers, or is not rational
  - “Betty” as a person is always owed the truth
  - But “Betty” is not the same person as “Betty1,” so maybe the truth is different for her

Reframing the Problem

- Kant may not be wrong after all
  - Truth is owed to rational people
  - “Betty” is not rational
  - I can owe her the truth that fits “Betty1”
  - She would not understand the truth that is really for “Betty”
- I cannot violate the moral law
  - Truth is important as well as loyalty
  - The moral law is important to uphold because we don’t want to suspend it for ‘non rational’ individuals… because what else could we do to them if we do not need to respect them?
Further questions...comments?

Thank you!

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