

C.E. Harris' Commentary on "Using Company Resources"

Commentary On
Using Company Resources

Lying is not always wrong. If a deranged person wielding a knife asks me where Johnny is, indicating his intention to kill Johnny, I have every right (even an obligation) to lie to the deranged person. Lying to protect an innocent person is often morally permissible. The present case, however, is not a paradigm case of lying to protect the innocent, because the motive of self-interest is present. Furthermore, there might be a value to the company and an intrinsic moral value in setting an example of one who is willing to publicly take the responsibility for preventing the continuation of an action that seems clearly wrong. There is a virtue in publicly facing up to wrongdoing.

Many companies have established procedures for reporting wrongdoing that allow the reporter to remain anonymous. If Michael's company had such a system and he had used it, he might have still felt that he should have had the courage to confront Al, but he probably would have felt much more comfortable about remaining anonymous. This is because anonymity would have been accepted as a legitimate aspect of reporting wrongdoing. However, Michael would still have been forced to lie to preserve his anonymity.

We have two basic approaches, then, to resolving the dilemma that Michael faces. One approach is to report Al's wrongdoing but to remain anonymous, even at the cost of lying. This solution of the problem has the virtue of both stopping the wrongdoing and protecting an innocent person, namely himself, from unjust retribution. The disadvantage is that this approach involves telling a lie. The other approach, confronting Al openly, has the advantage of avoiding the lie and exhibiting the virtue of open confrontation of wrongdoing, but the disadvantage of jeopardizing Michael's position in the company.

There are at least four crucial factual questions in this problem. First, Michael should attempt to assess just how severe Al's retribution against him might be. Would

Michael lose his job or forego any further advancement? Could Michael get assurance that he will be protected against Al's recrimination? Second, Michael should attempt to assess how much sense of guilt or self-recrimination he would undergo if he lies to Al. He might feel that he has been cowardly in not confronting Al "like a man," even if he can justify the action morally. Third, Michael should attempt to assess the likelihood of Al's finding out that Michael informed the Contract Procurement Agent of his wrongdoing. If Al is likely to find out about Michael's action anyhow, then Michael might as well inform Al himself. The answers to these factual questions would probably be decisive in determining which of the two alternatives outlined above is most desirable.