



Object Lessons in Journalistic Ethics

I recently had a rather shocking experience. Irresponsible reporting on Twitter and a blog accused me of lying to deceive Catholics. The reports linked to a brief part of an interview I had done on EWTN's Pro-Life Weekly program almost a year ago. I said (correctly) that there was no link to abortion in the manufacture of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. (In fact, no cell lines at all are used to produce these new mRNA vaccines.) So far, so good.

The next question was about testing of vaccines using abortion-derived cell lines, and I replied this was an ethical problem. I did not, however, close the loop and remind viewers that Pfizer did use one of these cell lines to test their COVID vaccine. It was this lapse in the split seconds I had to choose words that led to all the pointless commotion. The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) has consistently pointed out the ethical problem of the use of abortion-derived cell lines in confirmatory testing for both the Pfizer and Moderna COVID vaccines.

Several people, probably thinking that the November 2020 EWTN interview had been given recently, were convinced by tweets or blog posts that we had changed course and that I was deliberately spreading misinformation about the Pfizer vaccine. They wrote to the NCBC and left phone messages saying that I was "going to burn in hell," or was a "Judas," or in the pay of Pfizer, etc. It was quite a "Twitter Storm," and most unexpected. We were attacked from the conservative side of the political spectrum for a change.

The journalists in question did not care to check if their allegations had merit or to take the time to get a clarification from us before passing them on. One claimed to have contacted us for a comment with no response, but neither I nor my staff found such a request. I have since learned that some rely on "clickbait" journalism that uses inflammatory headlines designed to get people to react emotionally and then click and share links that generate revenue. That is why I am not including links to their original accusatory tweets and posts. It would only "feed the beast," so to speak.

We sent out a tweet and emailed the main website/blog involved, setting the record straight that neither I nor the NCBC maintain that the Pfizer COVID vaccine did not utilize the HEK-293 abortion-derived cell line in testing the effectiveness of their product. EWTN kindly granted me an [interview](#) to respond to the accusations and speak to the scandals at Pfizer and the University of Pittsburgh. The Pfizer news was recently leaked [internal emails](#) showing a clear intent to hide from the general public the use of abortion-derived cell lines in testing their vaccine.

I do think there is a place for undercover investigations and reporting if the words of people are not twisted and there is no entrapment. The latter involves insistent requests or coaxing to convince an unwilling person to commit a crime or ethical offense. David Daleiden, whom I met for the first time recently at a panel to protest the aborted fetal tissue research program of the

University of Pittsburgh, is an interesting example of a reporter on the edge of what is ethical. He did deceive [Planned Parenthood employees](#) into thinking he wanted to buy fetal tissues and organs and secretly filmed them. At the same time, Planned Parenthood employees said remarkably revealing and incriminating things about charging for fetal body parts or changing abortion procedures to enable procurement of intact organs. Daleiden responded to charges of “heavily edited” videos by posting the full uncut versions to show that there was no entrapment or distortion of what the people said.

If you are dealing with persons who deliberately lie and act immorally, a certain amount of deception can be allowed. The classic ethical question in this *genre* is, do you tell the Nazis demanding an answer under threat at your door that there are Jews hiding in the basement? Many ethicists, myself included, would reply deceptively using a mental reservation as those asking the question do not have a right to the truth because of their evil intent. Some ethicists claim that one can never lie, period. I agree, strictly speaking, but think inducing a person who clearly plans to do evil to believe an untruth for proportionate reasons can be ethical. Much of the justification comes from the evil or unethical bent of those being deceived. If the persons asking the questions are honest and acting in good faith, it is much harder to ethically justify making them believe a falsehood.

We need to be very careful to avoid “the end justifies the means” reasoning that is unacceptable in the Catholic moral tradition. One has an ethical obligation to use good or neutral means in striving towards a good end. Thus, one cannot directly lie but instead would need to find creative ways to deceive evil persons with true statements that induce them into error. An example might be indignantly replying that it would be preposterous for there to be Jews in the basement! One could tell a Planned Parenthood employee that one represents a certain company that is interested in fetal tissue procurement if one actually did create such a company.

It would be unethical, however, to put out advertisements that lead young women to believe a group performs abortions with the intention of getting them to come into the office and then trying to convince them not to abort. The group might indeed save some lives, but it would be inducing mothers to go to them looking for an abortion, which is already a sin in itself.

Journalists must strive to communicate the truth and not cut corners when it comes to accurately presenting the views of others. Distortion and entrapment have no place in ethical journalism. When dealing with persons bent on doing evil, however, a certain amount of deception is morally tolerable. It cannot cross the line, though, of deliberately lying about or to another person.