

# The Ethics of Gossiping

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**ABSTRACT:** When is gossiping morally acceptable? In order to explore and develop a principled answer to this question, I pose the problem in a simplified, abstract form: What considerations govern what it is permissible for A to say to B about C? My approach involves first constructing a decision tree out of questions that apply general moral principles to any particular case. These principles filter out talk which, under normal circumstances, would be widely regarded as impermissible, such as breaches of confidence, deliberate falsehoods, or talk likely to produce more future harm than good. They also declare talk which is not contrary to C's wishes, or which is likely to bring about some tangible further good, to be morally acceptable.

The most interesting and controversial type of case is the kind that is not resolved by any of these considerations. People who view gossip in general with suspicion would presumably hold all such talk to be objectionable. I consider and reject several arguments in support of this view. I then look at reasons, mainly utilitarian, for declaring all such talk to be morally acceptable. I argue that these are not sufficient, either individually or collectively, to establish this universal conclusion; there are too many additional variables rendering our moral deliberations irreducibly complex. But they do bring out the many positive aspects of gossip that are often overlooked.

## INTRODUCTION

Gossiping is not a subject that has ever attracted much attention from moral philosophers. One reason for this might be that it is generally viewed as insufficiently important to merit serious philosophical attention. Another reason might be that it is automatically viewed by many with disfavour; indeed, the term itself carries so many negative implications and connotations as to make a neutral appraisal of the practice virtually impossible. In my view, however, the ethical issues surrounding the practice of gossiping are well worth discussing. For while a question of the form, 'Should I tell A something I know about B?' may not usually be as momentous as questions

about such issues as euthanasia or nuclear weapons, it is, nevertheless, a moral dilemma that almost everyone confronts on a regular basis. And while the concept of gossip may be pejoratively loaded, that fact cannot be used to resolve such dilemmas.

The few contemporary thinkers who have discussed some of the moral issues surrounding gossip usually proceed either by accepting a standard definition of gossip or by trying to construct a more sophisticated definition. Both approaches involve working from something like the accepted conception of gossip, with its various and mainly negative associations—for example, of its being idle, trivial, invasive, malicious, and potentially harmful. One then asks questions such as: Are such features necessary? What positive functions may gossip serve? And to what extent are the negative aspects outweighed by the positive? Although I, too, will take up some of these questions, my approach will be rather different in that it is, to begin with, more abstract. The kind of moral dilemma I am interested in has the general form: Should I tell one person (call him Adam) something about another person (call him Jake)? Clearly, a reflective response to this problem raises the higher level question: What moral considerations should govern what I say to Adam about Jake? But to answer these questions, we do not need to have in hand a definition of gossip; rather, what we need are general normative principles that can be applied to cases of talking about people just as they can be applied to other morally problematic situations.

I do not believe there is a single general principle that by itself enables us to distinguish between permissible and impermissible talk about others. Yet any attempt to rationally justify the decisions we make has to involve some appeal to principles, even if these do not by themselves provide a complete vindication of our action. Intuitions may count for something in ethical reasoning, but the simple fact that different people have different, even conflicting, intuitive responses to particular moral dilemmas vitiates any simple appeal to intuition. I propose, therefore, to proceed, at least initially, by constructing a sort of sieve formed from generally accepted moral principles which can serve to filter out talk about others which is either clearly objectionable or clearly acceptable. We can then focus our attention more precisely on the sort of talk which, being neither, raises the most controversial and interesting questions.

Throughout, my primary concern is with the normative issue: when is talk about others morally acceptable and when is it not? Here, as with many other ethical questions, I do not believe there is a single correct answer, binding on all human beings. But within a particular culture there will be a determinate set of generally accepted tenets, shared values, acknowledged interests and respected ideals. These inform, in different ways, the alternative positions open to the participants in that culture and establish parameters of credibility within which any ethical view should fall. It would be dogmatic to assume there is *only* one coherent position available to us (or, for that matter, that there necessarily is *even* one view that satisfies these requirements while remaining internally consistent). But it is reasonable to assume that reflection

on how our judgements might be justified, by clarifying the nature of disagreements, can help to extend consensus and promote tolerance.

## **NARROWING DOWN THE DOMAIN**

Our domain is talk about other people.<sup>1</sup> You cannot gossip about animals, computers, or anything nonhuman. Nor can you gossip about yourself or about the person to whom you are talking. There can certainly be moral constraints on what one may say about oneself or one's interlocutor, but these are, for the most part, of a different sort. To keep things simple, we will assume throughout that the talk in question is about just one other person, since it makes no difference in principle whether the subject of gossip is one or many. Our first task is to narrow down this domain in order to clarify exactly what kind of talk about others might occasion moral disagreement.

### **1) Lies**

Deliberate lies about another person can be excluded straight away since they violate commonly accepted ethical rules. Lying is not, of course, the same thing as simply spreading false reports about someone. Although such talk might be slanderous, if I believe what I say to be true I am not necessarily at fault. Whether or not I am at fault, and to what extent, depends on two considerations: (i) how reasonable it is for me to believe in the truth of what I say; and (ii) how damaging what I say is to the reputation of the person I am talking about. The more damaging the gossip, the greater my obligation to be sure that it is correct. Not everyone will agree with this, but it does accord with our common moral beliefs and practices. Thus, I will surely, and rightly, have fewer epistemological scruples about telling Adam that Jake sometimes puts his shirt on inside out than about passing on a report that Jake has been accused of sexual harassment.

Someone might here offer the following casuistry. Gossip often takes the form of a mediated report, as when I say "*Eve told me* that Jake has been accused of sexual harassment." In this case, I can be virtually certain that what I say is true since, strictly speaking, I am merely reporting something I experienced myself: viz., part of my conversation with Eve. Therefore I need not concern myself with the *truth* of what Eve said. Now, this argument does reinforce the point just made. One can, so to speak, gossip responsibly or irresponsibly. There is a difference between my telling Adam what Eve told me about Jake, and my telling him (on the basis of Carol's report) that Jake has been accused of sexual harassment, as if this were an established fact. Nevertheless, in most situations I cannot use this kind of argument to escape responsibility for my decision to pass on gossip about someone. My statement may have the *form* of a report about what Eve said, but its *matter* clearly concerns Jake.<sup>2</sup>

### **2) Talk Which Violates Someone's Rights**

Like deliberate lies, talk that rests on or involves a violation of someone's generally acknowledged rights can be presumptively condemned. This would

include, for example, passing on information derived by illegal means such as phone tapping; also breaches of confidence where the right to confidentiality is institutionalized as in legal or psychiatric consultations. The concept of rights invoked here does not require any metaethical justification. What is important for our purposes is simply that it be *generally acknowledged* within our culture that a person enjoys the right in question. Most, but not all, such rights are protected by law.

### 3) Talk Which Disregards Someone's Claims

The term "claim" here means an expectation that is generally acknowledged to be normatively warranted but which lacks the institutionalized weight of a right. An example will clarify the distinction. If I am a doctor and I tell Adam about Jake's consultation with me concerning his impotence, I violate Jake's rights. The same is true if I obtained the information by secretly rifling through another doctor's confidential files. But suppose I learn about Jake's impotence through some accidental circumstance such as receiving a misdirected letter? In that case, my passing on the confidential information would not be viewed by most people as a violation of Jake's rights. Nevertheless, we all recognize that in this situation Jake has a legitimate claim on me to remain silent. By contrast, if, from browsing through old newspapers, I discover that Jake has spent time in prison, I have no *prima facie* obligation to keep this information to myself.

Since a claim is rather less than a right, it seems appropriate to speak of "disregarding" a claim rather than of "violating" it. But for our purposes the distinction between rights and claims does not need to be sharp since talk which fails to respect either is equally excluded from consideration. It should also be evident that the distinction, like the extension of the concepts themselves, is culturally relative. I have defined both rights and claims by reference to what is "generally acknowledged" within our culture. The reason for doing this is to avoid begging questions by introducing explicitly normative concepts or principles before it is necessary to do so. However, it might be objected that by appealing to received opinion in this way I am, in fact, begging questions from the outset. Some gossip may disregard someone's generally acknowledged claims yet be morally acceptable. This objection has a point. Insofar as I am endorsing popular opinion without arguing for it, I am proceeding dogmatically at this stage, just as I was when I peremptorily dismissed deliberate lies. But if, as I assume, there is general agreement on these matters, the procedure is warranted. To the critic who demurs I would say: provide a counterexample. Describe a situation in which the kind of talk I have ruled out as impermissible should in fact be deemed morally acceptable.

Of course, to anyone familiar with the ways of analytic ethicists, this challenge is easily met. Scenarios involving the usual suspects—terrorists, war criminals, racist mobs, or knife-wielding rapists—in which lies or breaches of confidence would appear justified can easily be constructed. Such examples do indeed prove that the moral proscriptions invoked above are not absolute. But they need not block the course of our argument if we specify that

we are concerned with the legitimacy of gossip in normal circumstances. Exceptions to the principles invoked can be allowed, but only in *exceptional* circumstances, to prevent some great harm, promote some great good, or right a serious wrong. Here and in what follows, then, I assume that we are operating in normal circumstances where we feel no great pressure to suspend these principles.

Before narrowing our domain further, some additional points about breaches of confidence are worth making. By excluding talk that violates rights or disregards claims we have, ipso facto, excluded all breaches of confidence. These include situations where I myself would not be directly breaking a confidence but am aware that my knowing what I know is the result of someone else doing so. Thus, if Jake tells Adam in confidence that he is looking for another job, and Adam tells me—while sheepishly admitting that Jake asked him not to tell anyone—then I am bound to not extend the chain. Were I to do so I would incriminate myself in the initial breach of confidence. Admittedly, this rule seems to be relaxed when, because the person being discussed is a public figure, the information quickly becomes public knowledge. For example, we feel little compunction about passing on media reports about the private affairs of a Michael Jackson or a Bill Clinton, as revealed by people who have worked for them, even though we know that the initial leak involved a breach of confidence. In such cases it seems that we do willingly extend the breach of confidence and feel little compunction about doing so. Exactly why this is so is an interesting question. Perhaps shared guilt is borne more lightly. Or perhaps, and more justifiably, we think that in these circumstances it is unlikely that our words will add to whatever harm the initial breach of confidence may have produced.

#### **4) Talk Which Directly Promotes More Good than Harm**

Having ruled out lies and talk which violates a person's rights or disregards their claims, it is now appropriate to introduce utilitarian considerations. The next question to ask ourselves, given that the above provisos are met, is: Is our talk likely to directly promote more good than harm? If we think it is, then it is morally justifiable. If not, then further questions need to be asked.

The criterion introduced here needs to be clarified in several ways. First, the "good" in question includes the avoidance of harm. Thus, if by telling Adam that Jake's marriage is on the rocks I prevent Adam from making an acutely embarrassing faux pas, that would count as a significant good. Second, the good in question here should not include the pleasure experienced by the people gossiping. This is not because such pleasure counts for nothing, but because to count it here would beg the question against those who, being critical of gossip, regard it as a "guilty pleasure," and so do not think such pleasures constitute a good on any score. The immediate pleasure taken in gossip will therefore only be considered later. Third, the term "directly" indicates that the causal connection between the communication and the good in question is fairly simple and clear, one that does not involve many further intermediary connections. For example, if I tell Adam that the baby-sitter he

is thinking of using has a drug abuse problem, this will lead him to use a different baby-sitter and thus lessen the likelihood of his children being put at risk. The connection between my giving him this information and his avoidance of risk is direct. Later, I will discuss some of the indirect goods that gossip promotes, such as deepening people's understanding of human nature; but these are not being considered at this point.

### **5) Talk Which Directly Promotes More Harm than Good**

If I think that passing on some information about another person is likely to directly produce more harm than good, I should not pass it on. For example, spreading the word in an intolerant community that Jake served a prison term for tax evasion many years ago, knowing that a likely consequence is that he and his entire family will be cold-shouldered by their neighbours, would be wrong for this reason.

Criteria (4) and (5) obviously hang together. Indeed, there is no principled reason for considering one before the other. This is apparent from the fact that some talk could directly produce both significant goods and significant harms.

In introducing the idea of making utilitarian calculations one can expect to encounter certain familiar objections to utilitarianism. It will be pointed out, for instance, that the consequences of one's actions are often difficult to predict accurately; also that some positive and negative consequences are incommensurable. But such objections are out of place here. All we are doing at this stage is narrowing the field of our enquiry by declaring certain kinds of talk to be fair or foul in a rough-and-ready way. Of course we cannot predict the effects of what we say with perfect accuracy; but we can (and should) make informed and reasonable judgements about probable consequences. Certainly, there will be cases where the likely goods and harms we have to consider cannot easily be weighed against one another, or where there may be reasonable disagreement over whether a certain total outcome justifies an action. But these problems for utilitarian theory need not detain us. The utilitarian considerations invoked by (4) and (5) are intended to be quite crude. If the probable total outcome of talking about someone is obviously good, then talk. If it is obviously bad, desist. If it is neither or unclear, then further reflection is required.<sup>3</sup>

### **6) Talk Not Contrary to the Wishes of the Person Being Talked About**

Most actions we deem wrong are clearly contrary to someone's wishes.<sup>4</sup> If what I say is not judged wrong according to norms already considered, and if it is reasonable for me to assume that it is not contrary to the wishes of the person being talked about, then it is hard to see what objection there could be to it. Such talk can therefore be declared morally acceptable. This declaration of innocence in fact covers the bulk of our conversation about other people. Which restaurant Jake went to last night; which college he attended; what kind of car he drives; we talk without qualms about such matters because we assume that Jake would have no objection. Before moving on to consider talk which does not pass this test, however, two qualifications are in order.

First, at this point in our deliberations we should allow the wishes of the dead to have as much weight as the wishes of the living. A person's death often lessens our concern for their wishes (although in some cases it can intensify this concern). But few of us would defend the extreme position that once a person is dead their wishes count for nothing; most of us acknowledge some obligation to respect the wishes of the dead—or at least some of the dead. Later on we can take into account the way our sense of obligation seems to diminish with the passage of time.

Second, it might be objected that there are situations in which, although the person being discussed is comfortable with what is said, some third party may not be. For example, Jake may not mind in the least my telling Adam that he is gay, or that he has converted to Catholicism, or that he has served time for knifing someone; but his father might be deeply ashamed of him on these counts. Such talk might thus be held objectionable, even though it does not contradict Jake's wishes, since it is contrary to the wishes of some other person. This objection raises some complicated issues. Possibly one would want to make exceptions to the general rule where, because one is especially close to the person whose wishes are contradicted, the claims of loyalty command silence. Putting aside the possibility of such exceptions, however, the problem can be dealt with in the following way. If the connection between Jake and the third party is very close (for example, if he is Jake's father), and if Adam knows Jake's father, then in some sense the gossip about Jake is also about the father. This would be more apparent in a less individualistic culture than our own: for example, a culture in which the reputation individuals enjoy is closely tied to the reputation of those around them. In these circumstances the gossip would be contrary to the wishes of one of its subjects and so cannot at this point be deemed acceptable. If, however, the person whose wishes are contradicted is not closely associated with Jake, or if Adam does not know that person—which is to say he does not really perceive Jake as connected to that person—then the wishes of the person in question may be ignored. To rule otherwise would be to put our conversations about people under excessive constraints. We would, for instance, be obliged to worry about the wishes of all the admirers—and detractors, for that matter—of any public figure whom we wished to discuss.

### **7) Talk Merely Contrary to the Hopes of the Person Talked About**

We have declared talk that is not contrary to another person's wishes to be unobjectionable. However, actions that are contrary to someone's wishes form a spectrum ranging from the highly objectionable to the perfectly acceptable. At the highly objectionable end are acts which violate a person's rights. Next to these come acts which disregard someone's legitimate claims. Talk which falls into either of these categories has already been ruled out. At the other end of the spectrum are acts which, while contravening a person's wishes, would be acknowledged by that person to be warranted according to generally accepted conventions. For example, hitting a home run, asking a high price for one's house, or voting for a certain candidate in an election: these

actions contravene respectively the wishes of the pitcher, the buyer, and the rival candidate. The conventions in question are rarely explicitly articulated, but their presence in many situations is apparent. Since the expression “contrary to a person’s wishes but acknowledged by that person to be justifiable according to generally accepted conventions” is a rather unmemorable mouthful, I will refer to acts which meet this description as being contrary to a person’s “hopes.”<sup>5</sup>

We can now narrow our domain one more time by asking if the talk in question, although contrary to someone’s wishes, merely goes against their hopes. Examples of such talk would be: expressing a low opinion of work that a person has presented to the public, criticizing the position of a rival candidate in an election, or writing a negative annual review of a subordinate’s job performance.<sup>6</sup> If what we say falls into this category, then it is morally acceptable. If not, then its moral acceptability remains undetermined by any of the criteria we have applied so far and is therefore likely to be a matter of controversy.

Our focus from this point on is confined to the kind of talk that is not filtered out by any of the preceding considerations: that is, talk about another person which contains no deliberate lies, does not violate anyone’s rights, does not disregard anyone’s legitimate claims, cannot be either justified or condemned on straightforward utilitarian grounds, is contrary to the person’s wishes but not merely contrary to their hopes. For simplicity’s sake, unless a different meaning is indicated I will henceforth use the term “gossip” to refer solely to talk which meets this description. The process of elimination that has allowed us to define the term “gossip” in this restricted sense is illustrated by the accompanying decision tree (see fig. 1).

Although we have managed to whittle down the field of our enquiry quite considerably, the domain that remains is still large. In fact, it contains a good deal of what we ordinarily describe as gossip. Moreover, what remains cannot be examined in the manner employed up to now. So far, we have been able to proceed more or less systematically, taking various moral considerations in an appropriate order. In doing this, we have also been able to stay close to—and perhaps to some extent vindicate—received opinion. But we can no longer proceed in this way for two reasons. First, our moral judgments about what I am now calling gossip are irreducibly complex, involving a weighing up of many and diverse considerations that defy any attempt to arrange them in order of logical priority. Second, it is no longer possible to appeal to “generally acknowledged” principles or values; for there is no general consensus in our society about whether or not such gossip is morally acceptable.

What I propose to do, therefore, is to consider in turn two possible attitudes toward what I am now calling gossip, both of which are fairly widespread. These are: (a) the view that all gossip is morally objectionable; and (b) the view that all gossip is morally acceptable. I will argue that none of the arguments that might be given in support of (a) are very convincing. The case for (b) is much stronger, but this view must ultimately be judged too

Initial domain = talk about other people

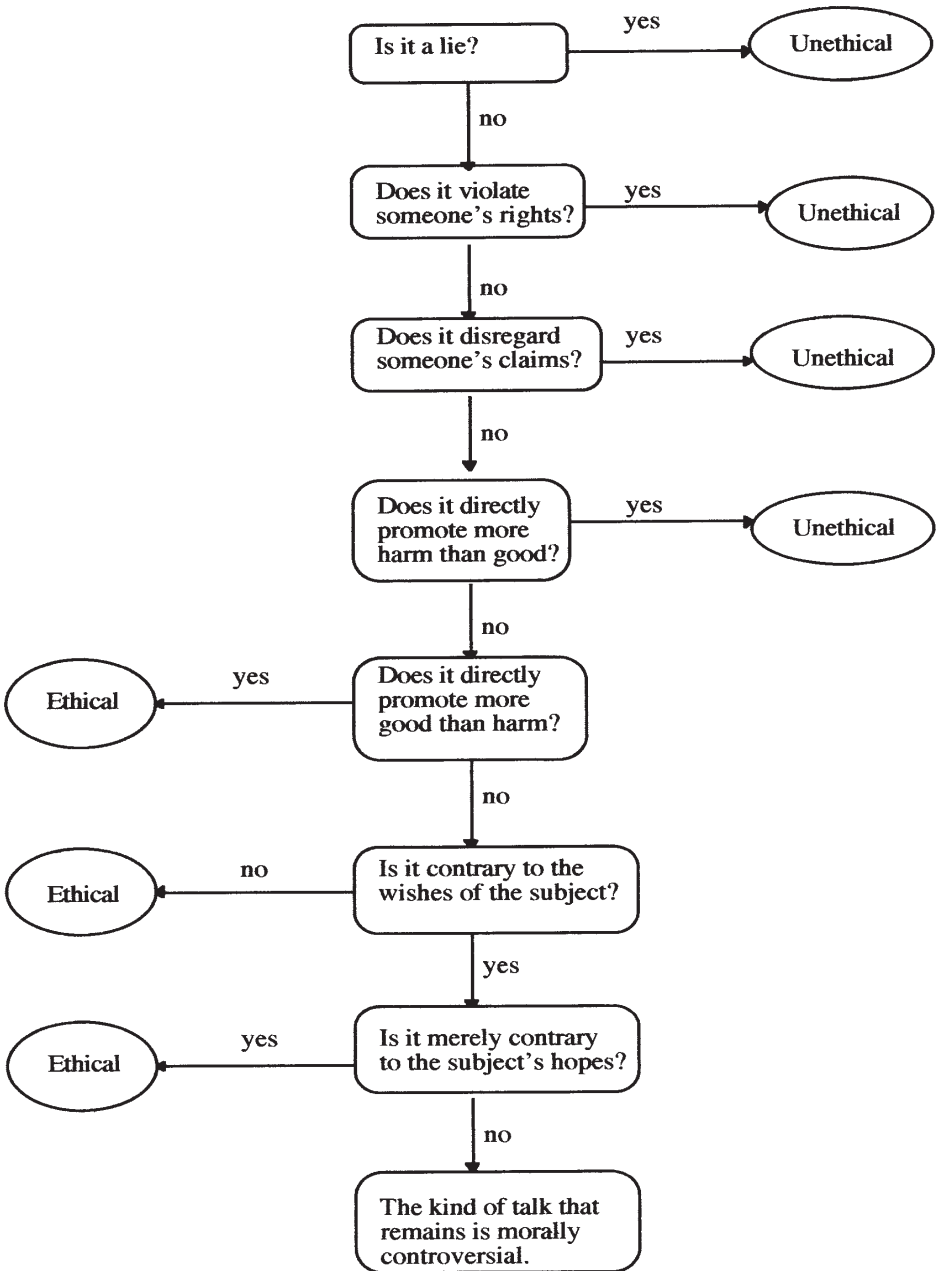


Fig. 1: Eliminating the Morally Uncontroversial

simplistic also. I therefore endorse a third position, (c) the view that some gossip is morally objectionable and some is morally acceptable, but with the rider that *most* gossip should be considered unobjectionable. This position is indirectly supported by the critical examination of the arguments in defence of (a) and (b) which brings to light many of the considerations that inform our judgements in particular cases and thereby reveals just how complex these judgements often have to be.

## REASONS FOR CONDEMNING ALL GOSSIP

Condemnation of negative talk about others goes back a long way.<sup>7</sup> Moses told the Israelites, “Do not go up and down as a talebearer among your people,”<sup>8</sup> although as Rabbi Telushkin remarks, this is probably the least observed of all the Torah’s 613 commandments.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is still quite common to encounter the view that all, or almost all, gossiping (using the term in its unanalyzed sense) is objectionable. People who assert this view might accept the qualifications introduced above which specify circumstances when talk about others is permissible; but in the absence of these they issue a blanket condemnation which takes in all of what we are now referring to as gossip. This attitude is by no means perverse. There are a number of arguments that can be given in support of it, most of which appeal to tenets and values embedded in our ethical culture. However, neither by themselves nor collectively are these sufficient to justify the position in question. Here, I will examine what I take to be the strongest of these arguments.

### **1) When I gossip I cannot sincerely universalize the maxim of my action.**

This, of course, is a Kantian formula. Kant’s argument is that when I act on a maxim that I cannot universalize, the irrationality of my conduct is revealed by the contradiction that is generated.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when I break a promise for the sake of convenience, or steal rather than work for a living, I cannot universalize my maxims since if everyone were to behave that way the practice of promise-keeping, or the existence of easily purloined private property (which are necessary conditions of my actions) would disappear. But it is hard to see how this kind of argument rules out gossiping. One can imagine quite easily how it would be were everyone to gossip; indeed, large numbers of people do gossip pretty freely and the world still turns. A world full of gossips is thus possible; nor is there any obvious reason why I could not sincerely wish to inhabit such a world.

### **2) When I gossip I do to others what I would not want them to do to me.**

The strict Kantian argument may not be appropriate or persuasive in this case; nevertheless, underlying it is the objection to gossip that immediately springs to mind: I would not want someone else to gossip about me, therefore I should not gossip about them. For if I do gossip about them I contravene the golden rule: Do as you would be done by.

There are several reasons for not accepting this as a conclusive argument against gossiping in general.

First, it is not obvious how the golden rule should be applied, since the rule itself does not tell us *whose* wishes should take priority. If I decide not to tell Adam something detrimental to Jake's reputation, then I am perhaps acting towards Jake as I would wish him to act towards me. But since Adam is desperate to hear what I know about Jake, in refusing to talk I am going against Adam's wishes. Thus, with respect to Adam I am breaking the golden rule, for if I were him I would want to be told. Clearly, some principle other than the golden rule must be introduced to justify upholding the rule in relation to one person rather than another.

Second, the golden rule cannot be applied without some further specification regarding *which* wishes should be taken into account. The distinction made earlier between acting against another's wishes and merely going against their hopes makes this very point. If I dash someone's hopes—as when I save a penalty, or reject an article—I am violating the golden rule, taken literally and without qualification; but that does not mean I am necessarily doing anything wrong. The same general point can also be made on slightly different grounds. Let us suppose I am the type of person who likes to be challenged aggressively in a discussion. I therefore challenge my interlocutors aggressively, reducing them to tears in the process. In this case I may be at fault, yet in the most obvious sense I am doing to others as I would have them do to me. Similarly, although many people do not like to be talked about in a way that damages their public reputation, some may not mind, agreeing with Oscar Wilde that “there is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.” The natural response to this line of reasoning by defenders of the golden rule is to describe the action in more general terms so that it becomes something the agent clearly would not like. Thus, I may enjoy being aggressively challenged, but I do not like being made to feel weak, anxious, and fearful; therefore I should refrain from acts which produce such feelings in others. But this response effectively defends the golden rule by appealing to the simpler principle: Don't do to others what they don't like—or, in other words, Don't act contrary to people's wishes. This principle, as we have already seen, cannot be accepted unconditionally. Moreover, appealing to it to condemn gossip (which by our definition is contrary to people's wishes) is a dogmatic move unless further arguments for affirming the principle are forthcoming.

Thus, a simple invocation of the golden rule does not justify declaring all gossip to be objectionable. The golden rule is certainly embedded in our ethical culture, so much so that it is one of the first principles we consult when confronted with a moral dilemma. But it can only be applied in conjunction with other moral principles. Moreover, we often only consult it as a pragmatic rule of thumb rather than as an imperative which carries its own authority. Since human beings are similar in so many ways, consulting our own preferences is often a reasonable way of deciding what other people's wishes are likely to be. But if we did not already think there was something wrong

with going against a person's wishes in certain situations, the golden rule would be otiose.

To this the critics of gossip might respond: Granted that the golden rule is not so fundamental a principle as is often thought, the general principle underlying it is nevertheless sound. And that principle is, simply: Do not act contrary to people's wishes without good reason. Now, the analysis undertaken so far has indicated several kinds of valid reason for acting against someone's wishes: for instance, where doing so would only be contrary to what I called their hopes, or where doing so would probably promote some significant good. But in the case of gossip as it has been defined, these justifications are lacking. Therefore, the imperative not to contradict people's wishes without good reason holds sway here. And as for justifying this principle further, what need one say except that the reason for not going against people's wishes is that they do not like it!

There are three reasons for not accepting this argument as conclusive. First, it does nothing to overcome the problem of determining whose wishes and which wishes are more deserving of consideration. Second, as I shall argue later, most gossip can be justified on utilitarian grounds that we have not yet considered: that is, by reference to the pleasure experienced by those who gossip, or by the many goods promoted in subtle and indirect ways by the social practice of gossiping. In other words, we have not yet exhausted the "good reasons" which can justify acting contrary to another's wishes.

Third, there is a case for viewing much of what we are calling gossip as falling under the rubric of being merely contrary to the "hopes" of the person being talked about. What this means, it will be recalled, is that although contrary to that person's wishes, the action would be acknowledged by them to be justifiable according to generally accepted conventions. Now I would argue that in our culture a good deal of gossip can be legitimized in this way. Few of us want to be gossiped about. But we accept that this is going to happen, and this knowledge influences both our conduct and our willingness to gossip about others. Sometimes these forms of communication can even enjoy a semi-institutionalized status. For example, how do my colleagues find out whether or not I am a good teacher? Primarily, perhaps, by institutionalized methods: sitting in on classes, reading student and peer evaluations, reviewing my syllabi, and so on. But what they hear off the record, from colleagues, students, former students, friends of students, parents of students and the like also influences their opinion, and rightly so. If these people pass on critical opinions about my teaching, they certainly act against my wishes. But I cannot honestly say they are behaving unethically in doing so. As I do my work, I am fully aware—indeed I expect—that people will talk about how good a job I am doing. And when I, in turn, discuss the quality of another person's work, I participate in the same social practice. Earlier, we situated gossip between disregarding someone's legitimate claims and merely going against their hopes. What I am now suggesting is that the latter category may extend further than at first appeared. Thus, a good deal of what

we have called gossip should be seen as more similar to the act of writing a negative book review than to the act of betraying a secret.

Our acknowledgment of these unwritten conventions which render gossip permissible is perhaps most apparent when we feel that the person we are discussing *deserves* to be the subject of critical opinions. If a professor repeatedly makes passes at or has affairs with his teaching assistants, he can expect to be gossiped about. We usually feel less compunction about communicating this sort of information to others than we would about passing on news of some other aspect of his life for which he is not considered responsible: for example, the fact that his father was a criminal. Our relative lack of compunction is due, at least in part, to the thought that being gossiped about is part of the price one pays—and deserves to pay—for acting unethically. It is thus a penalty that one would expect to pay oneself—and so might ruefully accept—if one acted in the same way.

The above considerations are all intended to reinforce the point that appealing to the golden rule is not sufficient to exclude as unethical all, or even most, of what we are calling gossip.

### **3) When I gossip I treat another person purely as a means to my own ends.**

This argument rests on the widely accepted Kantian principle that we have an obligation to respect the autonomy of all human beings, which means we should never treat them merely as means to our own ends. Gossiping, it might be said, violates this principle because in ignoring the wishes of the person being discussed I fail to treat them with respect. And I disregard their wishes in pursuit of my own ends, which often amount to nothing more than experiencing the pleasure I derive from gossiping.

Engaging in gossip (as we have defined it) certainly involves acting contrary to another person's wishes. But that is not quite the same thing as "ignoring" their wishes. It would be more accurate, I believe, to say in most cases that their wishes are *overridden* by other considerations. Proof of this is the fact that in different circumstances we can feel more or less compunction about going against their wishes. For example, where we are close to the person and know them to have a particularly intense distaste for having a certain matter, for which they are in no way responsible, discussed by others, we might well choose to refrain from gossiping.

That is one reason for rejecting the argument from the "ends principle." There is a stronger objection to it, though, which is simply that it involves a strange, misguided description of what is going on in most instances of gossip. Just because I act contrary to someone's wishes does not mean that I am undermining their autonomy or failing to respect their rationality. This is an appropriate way to describe actions through which I manipulate another person by force, threats, or deception. But in many cases gossip has no effect on its subject; so to call it a violation of the ends principle is only credible if we stretch that principle beyond the point where it can maintain its *prima facie* plausibility. Possibly some gossip should be condemned from the standpoint of the ends principle; but it is hard to see how all, or even most, of it could be.

#### 4) When I gossip I damage someone's reputation, which constitutes a tangible harm.

This argument rests on a certain view of reputation, a view endorsed by Shakespeare's Richard II:

The purest treasure mortal times afford  
Is spotless reputation; that away,  
Men are but gilded loam or painted clay.<sup>11</sup>

Now there is no doubt that damage to a person's reputation can be accompanied by other harms such as loss of job, loss of privileges, loss of friends, disrespectful treatment by others, and so on. These are tangible harms that are *experienced* as such by an individual; they should therefore figure in any utilitarian calculation regarding the rightness of saying something detrimental to someone's reputation. As consequences of gossip, however, they may be offset by other good consequences. For example, my revelation to Adam that Jake is cheating on his wife may lead him to be cold-shouldered by some; but this may, in turn, act as a deterrent to other would-be adulterers, thereby producing more good than harm overall. But I would deny that Jake's loss of reputation in Adam's eyes, *abstracted from any sufferings that this leads to on Jake's part*, should be considered a tangible harm. The reason is simple: it is not something that is experienced; it is not *suffered*.<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is quite possible that Adam will come to suffer from the knowledge that Adam has a lower opinion of him. But that will be the result of some further action: a change in Adam's demeanour toward him, or his being told (by Adam or someone else) that Adam now knows the truth about him. In itself, another person's opinion of one is neither good nor bad.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, not everyone will agree that only what is experienced by someone should count as tangibly good or bad. But leaving aside the problem of *why* we should accord a value to something independent of anyone's experiences, such critics must still concede that in that case there can be other nonexperienced tangible goods: for example, knowing the truth. It is easy to see the instrumental value of truth: correct beliefs help us cope with the world more effectively. Just why we should regard the holding of true beliefs as *intrinsically* valuable is no clearer than why we should regard loss of reputation in someone else's eyes as intrinsically bad. But anyone who insists that Adam's lower opinion of Jake constitutes, in itself, a real harm, should also recognize that Adam's coming to have a truer opinion about Jake can be considered, in itself, a tangible good.

#### 5) Gossiping is spiritually unhealthy.

The term "spiritually unhealthy" is not entirely satisfactory since it carries religious or metaphysical connotations which are not intended. But the basic idea is simply that certain habits and practices are bad for one's psychic and moral health in the same way that smoking or eating too much junk food are bad for one's physical health. Gossip, on this view, is not unethical in the sense of violating some principle that ought to govern one's dealings with other people. Rather, it is criticized as an activity that does not belong to an

ideally good or beautiful life and which, if indulged in, can become a habit that pulls one away from that ideal.

Why, exactly, would gossiping not be part of the good life? Two reasons might be given to support this claim. A weak reason would be that gossiping is a waste of time, like watching too much television. People who stand around talking about others all day long leave little time for more valuable occupations. This is a weak argument because it is not really an objection to gossiping as such (and certainly not to gossip as more narrowly defined above). The fact that some people watch too much television does not prove that no one should watch any. And the fact that some people spend more time than is good for them gossiping is no ground for condemning all gossip. Really, what is being criticized here is shallow living—something we are continually discovering new ways to achieve. But there is no reason to suppose that engaging in gossip is at odds with the attempt to live less superficially. On the contrary, since one of the benefits gossip can bring is a deeper understanding of human nature and social institutions (see below), it is more plausible to think that a willingness to talk about people—which at times will involve gossiping—may be an integral part of the “examined life.” Thus we find Socrates, in dialogues like the *Meno* and the *Gorgias*, freely discussing the failings of others in the course of his philosophical enquiries.

A deeper reason we might have for viewing gossip as a spiritually unhealthy practice is that we conceive of the ideally good or beautiful life as one free from any trace of maliciousness, *schadenfreude*, or pleasure taken in someone else’s failings. Moral purity of this kind is one of the hallmarks of the saint. In addition, the saintly ideal is characterized by utter selflessness: a preference for suffering harm rather than inflicting it, and a willingness to sacrifice one’s own pleasures and interests rather than oppose those of another. Since gossip is so often accompanied by a feeling of pleasure in another’s misfortune, and since, by definition, it involves acting against that person’s wishes, to engage in gossip is to fall short of this ideal.

The ideal of saintliness sketched here is undeniably one of the ideals that has shaped our present moral outlook. But as has often been pointed out, the ideal is in some ways paradoxical, and it does not compel unqualified admiration. It is paradoxical because although the life of the saint exhibits extreme selflessness in one sense, it can at the same time be viewed as thoroughly self-centered. The quest for personal purity, while it directs one towards selfless conduct, is not itself a selfless enterprise. And the ideal is not compelling because the saint, even when devoted to the welfare of others, is something of a social misfit. Dostoyevsky’s “idiot,” Prince Myshkin, illustrates this point perfectly. His personality is that of a saint; but for that very reason he struggles to fit into the social world; and his interventions, although intended to help others, often have unfortunate consequences. The saint is thus an otherworldly figure, drawn towards the cloister or the cave. Part of us respects the saintly ideal of inner purity; but part of us scorns it—and rightly so. For we are social beings, and perhaps more than anything else in the world we like to think and talk about ourselves and each other. An ethic that places impossible

restraints on one of our favourite activities is misguided because it cuts too much against the grain of human nature as this finds expression in our own culture and in most others. The saint represents one ideal of the good life. But it is only one such ideal; there are many others. And while the apparent simplicity, innocence, and purity of this way of life certainly have a strong nostalgic appeal, it achieves these at the risk of being less rich, complex, active, adventurous, challenging—one might say less human—than alternative ideals.

### **6) Gossiping is wrong because other people's private affairs are none of my business.**

This is possibly the most common argument put forward by those who feel an instinctive distaste for all gossip. But it is not the sort of argument that can withstand much critical scrutiny. Why aren't other people's so-called private affairs my business? The assertion that they are not could easily be made true by definition. But then its apparent normative force vanishes. On the other hand, if it is not a mere truism it can be challenged. Exactly where, and on what grounds, does one draw the line between what is and what is not my business? Why doesn't the simple fact that I am interested in something make it my business? Still more fundamentally, what makes it wrong for me to talk about something that is, for whatever reason, "not my business"? Such questions raise doubts about the possibility of elucidating in a useful way the notion of something being my business. And they also lead one to suspect that if one tried to do this the argument would quickly boil down to one of the objections already discussed: for instance, that gossiping involves acting contrary to another's wishes (which we already know), or that discussing people in a manner that is contrary to their wishes is spiritually unhealthy.

Still, those sympathetic to this objection might try to support it by claiming that to gossip about others is to violate their right to privacy. And since we ruled out early on all actions that violate a person's rights we should therefore declare unethical all of what we are now calling gossip. The problem with this argument, of course, is that the key claim—that gossip violates a person's right to privacy—is highly controversial. What we ruled out of court earlier was any action that violates a person's *generally acknowledged* rights. Now, it may be conceded that some sort of right to privacy is generally recognized in our culture; it is certainly recognized in law. But not only is there no consensus over what constitutes a violation of that right; the claim that to gossip about someone (in the sense defined above) infringes on their right to privacy is a very difficult claim to support. Such a claim, in essence, asserts that we have a right to not have certain aspects of our lives discussed by others. But it is hard to see what the basis for this supposed right could be.

We have considered six reasons for issuing a blanket condemnation of the kind of morally controversial talk that falls into the category we designated "gossip." Some of these objections to gossip deserve to be taken more seriously than others, and do, to be sure, raise legitimate concerns. But none are powerful enough—taken singly or in combination—to justify a taboo against

all such talk. In fact, as we will see, the arguments that can be given for removing gossip from under its traditional cloud of moral suspicion, taken together, carry considerably more weight.

## REASONS FOR COUNTENANCING ALL GOSSIP

Given that there is no single reason or set of reasons which can justify condemning all gossip, it is worth asking whether there are grounds for declaring all such talk morally acceptable. Here, too, we will find that the arguments are not sufficient to support such a sweeping conclusion. So much is perhaps predictable. What is less predictable, though, is that once one starts to consider the utilitarian arguments for countenancing gossip, it becomes apparent that, by and large, there is far more to be said in its favour than there is to be said against it.

One nonutilitarian argument for sanctioning gossip is simply that it does not—by our definition—violate anyone’s rights. The argument obviously rests on the general premise that whatever does not violate a person’s rights is morally acceptable. This kind of thinking has its advocates. But it surely rests on an impoverished conception of morality. The concept of rights, even if it is extended to include what I earlier referred to as “claims,” simply is not rich enough to serve as the sole marker dividing permissible from impermissible behaviour. It is possible publicly to humiliate a person for no particularly good reason without violating that person’s rights. An ethical theory that saw nothing wrong in this would be suspiciously at odds with some of our fundamental values.

A much more plausible defence of gossip can be mounted on utilitarian grounds. Earlier, when setting aside what we judged to be morally uncontroversial talk about others, we applied, among other criteria, crude utilitarian considerations. Talk that one could reasonably expect to produce more harm than good was declared unethical; and talk that seems likely to produce more good than harm, provided certain other deontological constraints have been respected, was deemed morally acceptable. At that stage of the argument, however, we were only considering consequences of a certain kind: namely, specific events, situations or experiences, other than any immediate pleasure experienced by the speakers, which the talk in question has played a major and fairly obvious causal role in bringing about. We excluded from consideration the immediate pleasure felt by those engaging in gossip to avoid begging the question against critics of gossip who believe that such pleasures should carry no weight whatsoever. And we ignored the possible indirect social benefits promoted by gossip because these, too, are controversial and therefore could not be appropriately introduced at a stage where we were merely trying to eliminate the uncontroversial. It is now time, however, to take these further goods into account.

### Immediate Pleasures Experienced by Those Engaging in Gossip

Gossiping can give rise to various kinds of pleasure. Here I will briefly identify what I take to be the main reasons why gossiping is immediately pleasurable. Obviously, many of these overlap and are interrelated.

- i) *Schadenfreude*: we often experience a degree of malicious pleasure in someone else's failings or misfortunes.
- ii) *Smugness*: Discussing another person's failings or misfortunes can produce a smug sense of self-satisfaction at one's own comparative virtue, abilities, or wisdom.
- iii) *A feeling of power*: To know something detrimental<sup>14</sup> to the reputation of another person gives one a sense of power, both over the person concerned and in relation to those who are not yet in the know. Releasing this knowledge momentarily heightens this feeling. This is why many of us enjoy being the one who is able to relate the information, why we sometimes hold back from discharging it as soon as possible, and why the pleasure of disseminating the news is in proportion to the size of our audience.
- iv) *Titillation*: Gossiping can be titillating because of the subject matter, which sometimes relates to such inherently interesting topics as sex, money or power. But in many cases its power to titillate stems more from the fact that one is discussing aspects of a person's life which, by convention, are kept secret. The gossip may, in this respect, be plausibly compared to the voyeur. Knowing what one is not supposed to know, and talking about things one is not supposed to talk about, are, in themselves, strangely exciting. Of course, if we were less puritanical, less concerned with personal privacy, and less suspicious of gossip in the first place, this aspect of gossip's pleasureableness would largely evaporate. Thus, as with sex, it would perhaps be better if we did not have so many neurotic hang ups about it; but the fact that we do have these hang ups gives rise to kinds of pleasure we would not otherwise experience.
- v) *Catharsis*: Gossip undoubtedly can have a cathartic function, providing a release for negative feelings such as anger, frustration, bitterness, envy, or resentment. This in itself can ease the painful tension characteristic of such states, a tension which, if not reduced in some way, might well have a corrosive effect on our own spiritual health and happiness.<sup>15</sup> This is an additional point to be made against the argument considered above that engaging gossip is a spiritually unhealthy practice. It is important to bear in mind, here, that we are not talking about simply "bad-mouthing" people—that is, expressing strongly critical opinions of their character, work, or behaviour. We are talking about passing on information about them. In some situations, of course, to do this may well have devastating consequences for the person concerned or for others. But let it be recalled that talk likely to produce significantly more pain than pleasure has already been excluded from our purview. Given these qualifications, the cathartic function of gossip can be given its due weight. This may not be all that great, but alternative ways of working out one's negative feelings towards others are, on the whole, less appealing.
- vi) *People are interesting*: For almost everyone, conversation is one of the most enjoyable and satisfying recreational activities. This is true even when the subject matter is something other than people. But of all the things we do like to talk about, people—their character, conduct, and relationships—surely rank

as the most interesting to us. This is proved by the fact that we spend more time discussing people than anything else. As to why people interest us so much, the reasons are many: they can have a massive affect on our lives; they are uniquely complex; they are neither completely predictable nor completely unpredictable; they are to some degree mysterious, and probably, most of all, they are like ourselves, which means that whenever we talk about other people we are, in some sense and to some extent, talking about ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

vii) *Solving mysteries*: As we just remarked, one reason people are interesting is that they present us with something mysterious. This is true of even the “simplest soul.” All we can observe is their behaviour, including their linguistic behaviour. What we desire is an explanation of this behaviour in terms of motives and intentions. Being able to explain it is both satisfying in itself and enables us to better anticipate their future actions, an ability which we value for obvious reasons. Most of the time, of course, we feel that we do have an adequate explanation in hand. If a friend starts test driving new cars, and we happen to know that her present car is old, unreliable, and in need of expensive repairs, an obvious and satisfactory explanation of her behaviour presents itself. But if she begins to dress differently, or make regular trips to another town, or turn down all social invitations, or spend money with unaccustomed extravagance, or behave with uncharacteristic coldness towards us, then we naturally look for an explanation. Some will say this desire for an explanation is sheer nosiness, but even they must confess that it is entirely natural. What makes the new behaviour pattern mysterious is the fact that it cannot be explained on the basis of our present knowledge. We thus need further information; and in many cases the most likely way of obtaining this information—if the horse’s mouth is unforthcoming—is through conversation with other people. Exchanging such information need not, of course, be morally controversial. But sometimes it can be, particularly if it concerns an aspect of a person’s behaviour about which that person is secretive. In such cases, what we have designated gossip can render the opaque more clear, and thereby afford us a particular and perhaps uniquely human kind of pleasure.

viii) *Learning is enjoyable*: As Aristotle remarked, the desire to know is part of human nature. Satisfying this desire is therefore an important source of pleasure. Obviously, we are not equally interested in all kinds of knowledge, and a mass of trivial information about other people, even private information about our acquaintances, would bore most of us. But achieving a better understanding of the character, motives, actions, and relationships of someone we know—whether it be an acquaintance or a public figure—is something most of us desire, as is a deeper understanding of human beings in general. And gossip is indispensable to our achieving such insight. When we learn that an apparently happy marriage is on the rocks, that a respectable figure is abusive to his family, that a moral evangelist is a spendthrift, or that a sober citizen goes on periodic benders, we are conscious of attaining a shrewder insight into human character. Indeed, a more profound understanding of

people is one of the benefits and one of the pleasures of maturity. But it is hard to see how it would be possible without a willingness to discuss people in a way that goes behind the appearances and, in many cases, against their wishes.

Now it has to be admitted up front that the nature of some of the pleasures just described is ethically dubious according to conventional norms. These norms are generally critical of *schadenfreude*, smugness, or delighting in one's power over others, and it is easy to see why. Individuals for whom these are major sources of pleasure are viewed as excessively egoistic; they cannot be trusted to have the spontaneous concern for the welfare of others, especially those close to them, that make for good friends and loving relationships. It could be argued, therefore, that these "guilty" pleasures are offset by the disutility promoted by the personalities of those who enjoy them to excess. However, there is no obvious reason to view the other pleasures mentioned in an unfavourable light. On the contrary, since those who enjoy these pleasures are likely to understand themselves and others better, they are also more likely to be sympathetic and valuable companions. A healthy interest in people is thus, to use Hume's categories, a quality that is useful to both ourselves and others.<sup>17</sup> Besides, all things being equal we should be grateful for the opportunities for pleasure that life offers us, not have a bad conscience about them. Talking to people about people is one of these. To refrain from it for fear of moral corruption is a form of moral neurosis.<sup>18</sup>

### **Goods Promoted Indirectly by Gossip**

In addition to the immediate pleasure experienced by those engaging in gossip, there are a number of other goods, generally of a social rather than personal nature, which the practice of gossiping helps to promote.<sup>19</sup> These include the following.

i) *Gossip improves our understanding of social reality.*

As noted above, most of us are engaged in the ongoing project of trying to better our understanding of the world we live in. A particularly important and interesting part of that world involves other people, interpersonal relationships, and the social institutions within which these relationships are embedded. False impressions about individuals, their character, motivations, interests, actions and relationships are like false data to a researcher. One important function that gossip can and often does serve is to correct false impressions, thereby making people and social phenomena in general more comprehensible. A better understanding of these things can be considered valuable both in itself and for the further benefits it brings (see below).

ii) *Gossip facilitates the operation of social institutions.*

This is probably the most important good resulting from the knowledge of and insight into our social reality that gossip provides. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that many complex social institutions could scarcely function without gossip. Consider, for instance, a university. For the university to function, faculty and administrators must work reasonably well with each other. Inevitably, though, situations arise in which the faculty would

like to understand more fully than they do administrative decisions that affect them. Why did this person resign? Why was that person fired? Is the dean looking for another job? What does the provost think of the dean? Is the vice president respected by the board of trustees? Simply reading the official memos put out by the administration is not always going to yield adequate insight into what is going on. Yet this is not necessarily because the administrative bureaucracy is pathologically secretive. Sometimes, quite often in fact, it is just inappropriate to broadcast certain information. The fact that two deans have an unreasonable antipathy toward another would not be openly stated in an official memo; if someone expressed this view at a meeting it would be unlikely to appear in the minutes. But this fact perhaps needs to be known and taken into account by faculty and administrators who have to make decisions affecting academic programs, curricula, intercollege relations, or individual careers. It is important to stress that what is at stake here is not simply whether or not a person's desire to know is satisfied. People *need* to know certain things if they are to make rational, informed decisions. And if the official channels do not provide the information they need, then they must obtain it through unofficial channels, by far the most important of which is gossip.

iii) *Gossip counteracts secrecy.*

The ideal of a world without secrecy, in which everyone's circumstances, relationships, actions and motives are open to the scrutiny of all, is clearly not realizable; nor is it obviously desirable. But in the world as it is there can be no doubt that secrecy, particularly on the part of those in power, is sometimes excessive and objectionable. In certain situations the instinctive self-interest of the rich and powerful warns them that it may be against their interests for the exact extent, nature, origin, and uses of their wealth to be public knowledge. And throughout the private and public sectors there is a widespread, and in many cases reprehensible, tendency for management to favour withholding information from those working under them—a strategy that helps to exclude the latter group from participation in decision making and puts them at a disadvantage when they are allowed to participate. Insofar as gossip helps to counteract this sort of secrecy, it can thus be seen as a useful—indeed, essential—instrument to be used in resisting entrenched systems of power and domination. Of course, those who wield power will also make use of gossip; the files of J. Edgar Hoover offer a spectacular illustration of this. But in general, the dissemination of information about such things as salary discrepancies, executive perks, kickbacks, nepotism, vested interests, conflicts of interest, and so forth benefits those excluded from power more than it helps those who exercise power since the former have less to hide.<sup>20</sup>

iv) *Gossip helps enforce social mores.*

People who transgress a community's norms and conventions are likely to be the subject of much critical conversation. Knowledge of this fact serves as a deterrent to many would-be transgressors. Of course, the threat of legally enforced penalties, or socially imposed penalties such as ostracism, is often

more powerful. But shame, or the prospect of shame, can exert considerable pressure on most people, as can the simple desire to be spoken of well rather than ill. If gossip was rare or unknown in our community, the motivating force of these fears and desires would naturally be much weaker.

Obviously, though, enforcing a society's mores is not always a good thing. It all depends on the mores in question. Knowing that one's behaviour will be critically discussed by others may have deterred some would-be adulterers or wife-beaters. But it has no doubt also been a source of fear and anxiety for gays, partners in miscegenetic relationships, and others who act contrary to an oppressive moral orthodoxy. For this reason, it has to be recognized that the role gossip plays in encouraging people to conform to the existing mores does not always redound to its credit, and the good that it sometimes promotes has to be weighed against the harm it can undoubtedly do.

v) *Gossiping can foster intimacy between people.*

This is certainly not the most obvious of the indirect goods promoted by gossip; but given that intimacy, when desired and enjoyed by those concerned, is a good thing, it should not be overlooked. What I have in mind here is not so much the kind of closeness that might result simply from sharing secrets about a third party, or from common participation in a session of unrestrained criticism directed at other people. Rather, my point is that the avoidance of gossip would place significant constraints on what one may say in conversation; and in many situations we must transgress those constraints if we are to confide in another, or have so-called "heart to heart" talks with them about things that concern us nearly. The quality of our closest and most valued friendships can thus rest upon, or at least be enhanced by, our willingness to engage in gossip.

Earlier, we argued that where talking about others does not violate anyone's rights or disregard their legitimate claims, a crude utilitarian calculation may be sufficient to justify (or condemn) such talk. To avoid begging any questions, we excluded from this initial reckoning the goods we have just considered: namely, the immediate pleasures involved in and the indirect benefits promoted by the practice of gossiping. As we have seen, these additional goods are many, varied, and significant. Taken individually, no one of them is weighty enough to constitute a sufficient reason for countenancing all gossip. But taken together one could argue that they tip the balance in favour of this view.

In my opinion, this is a powerful argument, but it cannot support a universal conclusion. A simple example is sufficient to show this. Suppose I tell a certain audience something about a colleague that I am sure she would prefer them not to know: for example, that she is a close relative of a notorious terrorist. The information is publicly available, so no rights or claims are being violated. The immediate and long-term consequences of my act are not such as to decide the issue: some members of the audience experience a slight thrill; my colleague experiences some discomfort. My action, being contrary to her wishes but not merely contrary to her "hopes," falls under the rubric of what we have termed gossip, and nothing we have said so far clearly rules

out such an action as unethical. Yet most of us would unhesitatingly say that it would be wrong. We need not undertake a detailed analysis of just why we would condemn such an action. Suffice it to say that there are further considerations that inform our moral judgements and complicate the process by which we arrive at them. In this case, for instance, we would presumably take into account such factors as the *degree* to which my action was contrary to my colleague's wishes, the nature of my relationship to her, whether and to what extent I owe her my loyalty, and to what extent she bears responsibility for the facts concerning her which I am relating to others. Moreover, we *ought* to take such things into account. Issues such as loyalty or desert are neither empty nor irrelevant. They are, however, "messy," and thus present difficulties for any attempt to reach neat conclusions through an oversimplified account of our moral deliberations.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF ETHICAL JUDGEMENT

The example introduced at the end of the preceding section is intended to support the view that blanket moral judgements are not possible regarding gossip as we have defined it. Sound judgement will often be complex, taking into account many considerations. We can get a better idea of just how complex and finely balanced our judgements have to be by briefly identifying some of the main considerations that guide us when we try to determine whether, in any particular instance, it is morally acceptable to gossip. The list is not intended to be exhaustive; but it does, I hope, include the most important variables to which we need to be sensitive in our deliberations.

- *Justice*: To what extent are those we are speaking of responsible for the facts about them that we are discussing?
- *Seriousness*: How contrary to their wishes is our talk?
- *Motive*: What are our motives in engaging in gossip? To what extent are we motivated by a desire to inform, a need to discuss, a wish to gloat, etc.?
- *Source of information*: How did we come by our information? Is it publicly available? How reliable is it?
- *Our relationship to those we are discussing*: How close are we to them? To what extent do they have a claim on us not to act contrary to their wishes? Interestingly, though not unnaturally, our sense of obligation towards another person is often affected by that person's death. Thus, unless we are constrained by a strong sense of loyalty—the kind usually felt only towards close friends and relatives—most of us gossip cheerfully about the dead; and the longer they have been dead, the less compunction we feel, presumably because we believe it less likely that anyone (including ourselves) will suffer as a result of what we say. Certainly, contemporary scholars writing about late famous individuals rarely appear to recognize any constraints at all, nor are they usually criticized for disseminating sordid, reputation-damaging details about the character and conduct of these individuals.<sup>21</sup> Writers and readers appear to agree with Lytton Strachey that "discretion is not the better part of biography."

- *Our relationship to those we are talking to:* How close are we to our confabulator? How sure are we about what this person will do with the information we impart? It is noteworthy that most of us talk much more freely about others to our partners or spouses than to anybody else. This is true even of those who are generally very critical of gossiping. In effect, we seem to allow the fact we are talking to our partner or spouse to render us exempt from constraints we would respect were we talking to anyone else. The most plausible explanation (and justification) for our making this exception is that in the case of someone we know so well and whose interests are so close to our own we feel reasonably certain that our talking to them will not have unforeseen or undesirable consequences.

- *The relationship between the recipient and the subject of the gossip:* Are they acquainted? If so, what is the nature of their relationship? If not, are they ever likely to meet?

An intelligent moral judgement about whether, in a specific instance, one should gossip will have to be alert to the possible relevance of all these questions and, no doubt, many others besides.

## CONCLUSION

Three general conclusions emerge from our enquiry. First, there is nothing *necessarily* wrong with gossip (as the term is commonly understood). Talk about others may be wrong for all kinds of reasons, as we have seen; but it may also be perfectly acceptable. Second, if the talk in question is an instance of gossip as more narrowly defined above, then it cannot ipso facto be declared either right or wrong. An irreducibly complex judgement will be required which weighs against one another diverse claims and considerations. Third, notwithstanding this last point, we should be suspicious of the censorious attitude that moralists have traditionally taken towards gossip. As we saw, there is more to be said in its favour than is commonly appreciated, and very often more to be said for it than against it. In relation to both the individual and society, it has many positive aspects which tend to be overlooked. A proper appreciation of these should make us less ready to condemn it and feel less guilty about doing it.

## Endnotes

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1. The term "talk" here covers all forms of communication.

2. In the same way, if a torturer were to say to his victim, "I think another turn of the screw will refresh your memory," this statement has the general form of a report about the torturer's

own thoughts; and within that is embedded a prediction; but it is perfectly clear that the illocutionary force of these words is to threaten the victim, and this is how they should be understood and evaluated.

3. Hard-line utilitarians may object to my procedure from a different angle, arguing that utilitarian considerations should be introduced prior to the earlier questions about lies, rights, and claims. In response I would point out: (i) The order I follow in this section is intended to reflect as closely as possible conventional thinking; (ii) The order is compatible with rule-utilitarianism; and (iii) The order in which the “narrowing down” criteria are applied does not alter the domain of controversial gossip which we are left with at the end.

4. There are exceptions to this principle: for instance, voluntary euthanasia. But it is precisely because the act in such cases is not contrary to the wishes of the person it directly affects that opinion is swinging towards deeming voluntary euthanasia acceptable. In the case of con men who defend what they do on the grounds that they do as their victims wish, we usually argue that what they do is wrong because it would be contrary to their victim’s “informed wishes.”

5. It is because young children have not grasped the conventions in question that they do not distinguish between acts that are merely contrary to their “hopes” and acts that contravene their wishes in such a way as to give them legitimate grounds for complaint. Thus, young children are likely to be equally outraged if one beats them at cards or steals their ice cream. Both actions will be immediately denounced as “not fair!”

6. Obviously, when I say these actions would be acknowledged by the subjects themselves to be “justifiable according to accepted conventions,” it is only the *expressing* of the opinions, not the opinions themselves, that is in question.

7. For a detailed discussion of how pejorative attitudes toward gossip find expression in the English literary tradition, see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

8. Leviticus 19:16.

9. Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom* (New York: Morrow, 1994), 65.

10. See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1990), 38–41.

11. *Richard II*, I, i. An opposing view of reputation is offered by Iago: ‘Reputation is an idle and most false imposition: oft got without merit, and lost without deserving’ (*Othello*, II, iii).

12. The argument I offer here is a familiar one within the mainstream liberal tradition. Thus Joel Feinberg, in *Harm to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) distinguishes two senses of ‘harm’: a) a setback to a person’s interests; and b) a violation of a person’s rights. We have already established that the kind of talk we are here considering does not involve a violation of anyone’s rights. And for it to be a setback to someone’s interests it must, surely, involve something more than simply an alteration in the way that person is viewed by others.

13. Someone might object here that if I believe that another person’s opinion of one is, in itself, neither good nor bad, then I have no reason to condemn someone who deliberately spreads false rumours about a person who has died. But to deliberately spread false rumours is to lie; and lying was ruled out at the beginning of our analysis.

14. The expression “detrimental to the reputation” should be understood in the broadest sense. Information can damage a person’s reputation in another person’s eyes without necessarily reflecting on that person’s abilities or moral character. For example, in this broad sense, my reputation may diminish in your eyes if you learn that one of my parents had a history of mental illness.

15. The cathartic function of gossip is apparent from the practice of the West African Ashanti. They severely punished malicious gossiping, in some cases by the cutting off of the gossip’s lips or even by death, but to provide a release for the buildup of hostile emotions they held regular ceremonies where these feelings could be publicly vented. See Ralph Rosnow and Gary Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York: Elsevier, 1976), 91–2.

16. Psychologist Robin Dunbar speculates that language itself evolved as a substitute for grooming, a practice that, among other things, enables individuals to achieve a better understanding of other members of their group. If this is so, other people, and particularly their potentially dangerous and antisocial qualities, would indeed be the oldest topic of conversation. See Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

17. See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

18. For an example of this sort of moral neurosis, consider the Talmudic precept, “Don’t speak well of your friend, for although you will start with his good traits, the discussion might turn to his bad traits.” Babylonian Talmud, Bava Bathra 164b. Cited in Telushkin, 67.

19. See Robert Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze’ev (eds.), *Good Gossip* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994). Most of the positive aspects of gossip discussed here are mentioned by more than one of the contributors to this anthology.

20. I take it for granted here that it would be a good thing to bring about a more equitable distribution of power, both in particular contexts such as the workplace, and in society a whole. However, it could also be argued that in our political culture, as with individuals, gossip often provides a relatively harmless outlet for envy and resentment which, if not discharged, might lead people to challenge the existing system more vigorously. In short, talking about the rich may be a substitute for eating them!

21. Of course, this phenomenon is hardly new. W. H. Auden called attention to it and (somewhat hypocritically) condemned it over fifty years ago:

Idle curiosity is an ineradicable vice of the human mind. All of us like to discover the secrets of our neighbours, particularly the ugly ones. This has always been so, and, probably, always will be. What is relatively new, however—it is scarcely to be found before the latter half of the eighteenth century—is a blurring of the boundaries between the desire for truth and idle curiosity, until today it has been so thoroughly erased that we can indulge in the latter without the slightest pangs of conscience. A great deal of what today passes for scholarly research is an activity no different from that of reading someone’s private correspondence when he is out of the room, and it doesn’t really make it morally any better if he is out of the room because he is in his grave (W. H. Auden, “Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” in *Forwards and Afterwords* (New York: Vintage Books, 1943), 80.