Often it is easy to see what is wrong with lying. Many lies are vicious: they are meant to hurt, and often do. Other lies are self-serving at the expense of others: they gain something for the liar but are detrimental to those who are deceived. Even well-intentioned lies are sometimes discovered, with consequent damage to valued relationships and to trust and credibility in general. Many lies are violations of professional obligations; others are breaches of promise to particular individuals. But there are also instances in which these explanations do not seem to apply and yet the lie is still not beyond moral question. We feel that there is at least something to be said against lying even then, but it is not obvious what this is. No promises or professional commitments are at stake; no harmful consequences are intended or expected; and yet the lie still seems at least prima facie objectionable. We naturally wonder, "why"? To rest the matter with the intuitive remark that truth-telling is always a prima facie obligation is hardly satisfying. To say that killing, maiming, and causing pain are prima facie wrong may arouse no further questions; but why, one wonders, should truth-telling be viewed this way, especially when a lie seems likely to result in more good than harm?

At least a partial answer, I suggest, is that lies often reflect inadequate respect for the autonomy of the person who is deceived. Unfortunately, though autonomy has been an increasingly popular concept in recent years, there is no uniform understanding about what autonomy is. I hope that by tracing different conceptions of autonomy from their Kantian prototype we can see more clearly, and specifically, the various ways in which lies interfere with autonomy. But the interest in autonomy extends beyond our immediate question about lying: benevolent lies merely illustrate one of many ways in which narrow utilitarian thinking can foster unwarranted interference in others' lives.

My remarks will be divided as follows: First, I characterize a special class of benevolent lies which pose the main issue sharply; second, I distinguish several conceptions of autonomy with associated moral principles; third, I try to explain how, in different ways, these principles oppose benevolent lies; and finally, I comment briefly on how a believer in autonomy might respond to the hedonist contention that it is irrational not to lie if a lie will result in the most favorable pleasure/pain ratio.
My aim is not to find a precise rule or decision procedure for deciding hard cases. In fact I suspect that the search for one would be misguided. Many different considerations oppose most lies, and in difficult situations there are arguments for and against. My object is not to rank these competing factors in importance but rather to articulate one type of consideration that is too often over-shadowed. Malice, harm, and breaches of trust are so obvious and so often objections to lies that subtler sorts of objection, though usually present at the same time, may be overlooked. The point of isolating very special examples of benevolent lies is to focus attention on such objections; it is not to deny the importance of other arguments or to articulate considerations that apply only in rare circumstances.

A former teacher related to me the following true story (which I have modified slightly). He had a student who showed in tutorial conversations signs of deep, suicidal depression. The student was later found dead, and the circumstances were such that others could easily have seen his death as accidental. The professor helped to gather up the boy's belongings to return to his mother, and no suicide note was found. But the mother, a devout Roman Catholic, was deeply worried about her son's soul, and she asked the professor point blank whether he had any reason to suspect suicide. The professor, an atheist, wanted to comfort her and so, by a quite deliberate lie, assured her that, as far as he knew, the boy had been in good spirits.

Another true story concerns a doctor who discovered that his mother, a very elderly but happy woman, had extremely advanced atherosclerosis. Her doctor had apparently chosen to treat the problem as best he could without informing the woman how near death she was. The son had no objection to the medical treatment or her doctor's decision to withhold information. Though he thought his mother psychologically and physically capable of handling the truth, he believed that her last days would be happier if she did not know. The problem arose when she asked her son directly, "Do you think the doctor is telling me everything?" The son lied; but since the question concerned his opinion and he had learned of her condition in ways she did not suspect and without anyone else knowing that he knew, he felt confident that she would never discover his lie. He lied to make her more comfortable, and she was in fact happy until her death.

Consider, lastly, a dilemma which could occur even if it has not. Mary has made a painful break from her ex-lover, John, and though pulled towards him, is on the mend. Her roommate is pleased for her, as she knows that John and Mary were, and will remain, painfully incompatible. She is fearful, though, that John and Mary will get together again, causing both unnecessary misery before the inevitable final separation. Overhearing John talking with a friend, she learns that John is ready to "start over" if only he receives an encouraging sign; and she expects that Mary, ever the optimist, would give the sign. Later Mary asks the roommate, "Do you