

Author James Herriot relates the story of Mrs. Tompkins and her budgie, Peter. Herriot, a veterinarian, visited the home of the frail and elderly widow to clip the beak of her budgie. Peter had not been his usual self lately, and Herriot thought clipping his beak might revitalize him. As Herriot reached into the cage and gently picked up the budgie it fell limp in his hand. Peter" apparently frightened, had died from heart failure.

Near panic, Herriot decided he should not tell Mrs. Tompkins that her pet had died. The loss, he felt, might be too devastating to her. He realized that she had not noticed what had happened - she had poor eyesight and was hard of hearing . So he quickly rushed Peter out of the house, explaining that he would be better able to do the job in his office.

Herriot found a suitable substitute budgie at a bird store. Placing "Peter the Second" in the cage, Herriot assured Mrs. Tompkins that all should be well now. As it turned out, Mrs. Tompkins was never any the wiser. She believed that Peter was revitalized as a result of having his beak cut.

Was Dr. Herriot's decision to deceive Mrs. Tompkins morally justifiable?

ANSWER: The rule that a person should not be deceived is morally fundamental, but not absolute. There are circumstances in which a rational, impartial individual could conclude that the psychological distress prevented by a deception is so great as to far outweigh whatever evil the deception might cause.

Granted, such a conclusion is difficult in most instances, and should not be made without deep psychological understanding of the affected individual and full knowledge of situational factors. In this case Dr. Herriot appears to have been both a highly principled man, who had deep respect for the moral autonomy of people with whom he dealt, and also a deeply sensitive human being. The fact that his judgment led him to conclude he should perpetrate a deception upon Mrs. Tompkins is itself some evidence that in this instance the deception was morally justified.

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