

'Lying is wrong.' Discuss

For St. Augustine, it was “obvious that every lie is a sin, but that it makes a great difference which is the intention underlying the lie”¹. Although Augustine acknowledges that lying does have varying degrees of culpability, he nevertheless believed that it was not permitted to lie under any circumstances, even to save a man’s life. Nowadays, the general public is not so austere in their condemnation of lying, but there is a consensus that lying is almost always wrong, but to be excused if the intention is right.

What makes the intention right? The intention is good if the lie will have positive consequences (which would involve a net gain in welfare, e.g. by pleasing someone or to save someone’s life) but bad if the lie will have negative consequences (which would involve a net loss in welfare like, e.g. by causing someone harm). However, the liar cannot foresee the consequences of the lie with complete accuracy until it is committed and therefore would be taking a risk in the morality of the lie.

The often given argument in favour of the “white lie” is that if somebody asked a friend for their opinion on an outfit that is objectively unflattering, would it be wrong for the friend to compliment the outfit in order to avoid hurting their feelings? The intention is correct as the lie is told in order to prevent the friend’s feelings being hurt but the statement remains a lie as the liar has relayed a statement, believed by themselves to be false, with the intention of the recipient of the lie to be deceived by that statement. In the possibility that the recipient of the lie continues their life without any knowledge of the lie committed against them, then there would be a net gain in welfare due to the increased happiness of both the recipient and also the liar (who is pleased as they has made their friend happier and also relieved as they did not have to tell an uncomfortable truth). However, if the recipient is later mocked or ridiculed for their outfit, both parties would suffer a decline in welfare as the recipient would feel worse because of the unsolicited negative feedback and realising that they can no longer trust their friend whilst the liar would feel worse due to having their lie found out and also causing their friend to feel worse. Telling the truth would result in the first friend feeling slightly hurt but ultimately grateful for the feedback and the second friend feeling slightly guilty for criticising the outfit - there would be a net welfare loss compared to the lie not being found out but a net welfare gain compared to the lie being found out.

Therefore, the morality of the lie is not purely derived from the intention but also the consequences, but this can only be seen after the lie has been told.

However, lies can have much bigger impacts than hurt feelings: in Benjamin Constant’s “On Political Reactions”, he references how “a philosopher goes so far as

¹ A. (1955). CHAPTER VI. The Problem of Lying (A. O., Trans.). In *Enchiridion: On Faith, Hope, and Love (English translation)*.

to assert that it would be a crime to lie a murderer who has asked whether our friend who is pursued by him had taken refuge in our house.”² Contrary to the philosopher, more people would condemn the friend for giving up the location of the pursued than believing the friend was right in telling the truth as the lie was not only well-intentioned, but also the consequences of the lie resulted in less harm. However, this lie would do the murderer a disservice as they are being deceived but it can be argued that the murderer would lose their right to truth after violating other people’s rights to life and safety and so his loss in welfare can be discounted.

It is also important to judge the morality of lying based on its impact on society and veracity as a whole. In a society where lying is the norm, telling lies may still be considered wrong but is not nearly as condemnable as telling a lie in a society where everyone tells the truth. In the former society, there would be an inherent lack of trust due to the commonplaceness of deception therefore a liar would unlikely be believed and his words would have little impact. However, in the society of truth, telling lies would be profoundly exploitative as the liar’s words would be readily taken as true. If the intention of the lie is wrong in both cases, then it is the consequences of the lie that distinguish its morality.

If the lie in the latter society is found out then more people would realise the advantages to be had out of telling lies in a society where truth is the norm but then the seed of mistrust would be sown and it would slowly develop into the former world. There are many clear disadvantages to living this world: relationships would be difficult to develop due to lack of trust in other people; learning would have to be entirely self-taught with no help from books or teachers; and concepts like cooperation and teamwork would be greatly hindered.

Similarities from that world and our current situation of living in the post-truth era can be drawn: it is becoming harder and harder to find genuine facts in the age of fake news and the need to check the credibility of sources becomes ever more important due to the distrust prevalent in our society.

Ultimately, if lying is borne out of intention to cause harm and consequently has caused a net welfare loss, then it is morally wrong due to the possible negative consequences on the liar, recipient, and veracity in society as a whole.

² Constant, B. (1797). On Political Reactions. *France*.