

'Lying is wrong'. Discuss.

From the Oxford English Dictionary, a lie is “an intentionally false statement” and to lie is the act of “telling a lie”. This definition only covers lying in respect to truth rather than to honesty. Honesty can differ from truth because the understanding of events depends on context and the knowledge of all facts. This is highlighted, when giving sworn testimony, by the oath “to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth”.

Society's views on lying depend on a wide range of criteria, mainly based on concepts of morality, whereas the Courts' views of lying are shaped by a much narrower set. The Courts have to judge lies on the basis of principle and on the basis of consequence. There are few circumstances where the Courts deem lying wrong in principle, for example perjury is wrong under all circumstances regardless of intent and consequence. Outside such circumstances the Courts will decide whether a lie is wrong based on other factors, such as intent, harm caused and consequences.

For the purpose of this essay, in deciding whether lying is right or wrong, a broader view will be taken than one of the Courts. The following criteria will be used to judge whether individual lies is wrong:

1. Whether the purpose of the lie is selfish or selfless,
2. Whether the lie causes harm,
3. Whether the lie is likely to erode the trust in the relationship of the parties involved,
4. Whether the lie undermines societal norms and degrades the perceived value of truth over falsehood

Whether the purpose of the lie is selfish or selfless - In deciding whether a lie is wrong a fundamental question is whether the purpose of the lie is to benefit the perpetrator of the lie [for the sake of brevity from now on referred to as 'liar', without associating prejudice with the term], or not- the former case can be thought of as a selfish lie, and the latter as a selfless lie.

Whether the lie causes harm - A lie will have caused harm if the consequences were harmful to a party other than the liar. However harm also occurs if the lie caused another party to take a different course of action even if the consequences of the action were ultimately not harmful. This is important as it infringes on the other party's right to make an informed decision, as well as potentially exposing them to a level of risk that they may not have intended to take.

Whether the lie is likely to erode the trust in the relationship of the parties involved - This is probably of less interest to the Courts than it is to wider society, and it's concept of morality. In making a moral case society accepts that trust between parties is essential to existing in an ordered society and it is disadvantageous to the parties, as well as immoral in principle, when such trust is eroded.

Whether the lie undermines societal norms and degrades the perceived value of truth over falsehood - Once again although this factor has a significant effect on society, it is of less interest to the Courts. The cumulative effect of lots of lies between individual groups in society potentially has a wider effect in changing the norms of society and the perceived value of truth over falsehood. This can change the nature of society and the way it functions to the detriment of all. An example being the changing nature of US politics, where “alternative facts” are now seen as a viable political tactic, whereas in the past being dismissive of precise truths would be a disqualifying factor for a candidate. Also a climate where everyone disagrees over basic facts leads to greater divisions within society, a

small example being the question over the number of people present at President Trump's inauguration compared to President Obama's has led to a lot of heated arguments.

Many lies will not satisfy the stated criteria, so therefore cannot be deemed wrong. These can be termed "good lies". One example might be complimenting someone's cooking even if it was not good. This would be a "good lie" according to the stated criteria, because the intent is selfless (to avoid the cook feeling disheartened), no harm is caused to others, unlikely to erode trust in the relationship (and indeed likely to strengthen it), and does not alter societal norms - in fact it adheres to the norms of courtesy, respect and gratitude.

Another example is that of lying to save innocent life, as happened during the Holocaust, when many Christians claimed Jewish children as their own, in order to protect them. Considering the criteria, the lie is selfless, and does not harm anyone. Although it does erode trust between liar and those lied to, this is negligible compared to the good it does. The lie also reinforces the societal norm that lying to save innocent life is a virtue.

In deciding the general question whether lying is wrong we have to consider the number of "good lies" compared to "wrong lies", and the total overall effect of all the "good lies" compared to that of the "bad lies". It can be argued that the total number of "good lies" told by an individual party, or indeed society as a whole, exceeds that of the "wrong lies" (consider how frequently one may tell a "good lie" as a matter of courtesy, compared to "wrong lies"). Taking only this point of view it is possible to argue against the statement that "lying is wrong".

However in general most good lies tend to be inconsequential, in that any good they do tend to be quite minor. On the other hand wrong lies tend to have quite significant consequences - for example fraud, which has very great consequences on individual parties and society as a whole. From this perspective it is possible to argue that lying is wrong.