

### **'Lying is wrong'**

Everything from a parent's scolding to religious texts to TV dramas gears a child's brain into thinking that lying is inherently wrong. Truthfully, this is not always the case. To lie is to intentionally deceive but the deception can be carried out with or without malicious intent, a characteristic of lying which has given rise to a strand of lies dubbed 'white lies' by society. It seems contradictory that a child is taught never to lie when some lies are branded as completely harmless. Therefore, in order to discuss whether lying is wrong, we must explore the different reasons for lying and debate whether these reasons are justified. It should not be enough to simply accept lying as wrongful due to some vague concept of moral incorrectness.

The reasons for and intentions behind different lies vary in each situation. It is, however, possible to group the reasons into three broad categories: lies to preserve one's self-interest, lies to protect others and lies of convenience.

When lying to preserve one's self interest, for instance, to shift blame or to save embarrassment, manipulation is often involved. Hence, it is logical to assume that this category of lying is the most malicious. It is natural for any human to want to protect their own interests and this often takes the form of trying to better one's position in life, whether it is financially, socially or career wise. Problems arise when these aims are achieved through lying but at the expense of others. For example, when lying to shift the blame of wrongdoing, one intentionally places the burden of punishment on another person in order to selfishly escape the repercussions themselves. It is obvious and easy to see lying as wrong in this situation because a victim has been created in order to benefit the liar. A less clear-cut scenario arises when there is apparently no harm done to any victim; for example, when lying to make somebody do a favour, no harm seems to be done to anyone. However, there is still an element of wrongdoing because in trying to skew someone's decision process, you limit their freedom of choice and action. They become a victim through their passivity in someone else's bid for personal gain. Thus, if any category of lying can be considered wrong, it is this one.

Lying with the intention to protect others seems innocent enough, with examples including paternalistic lying and lying to the sick and dying. It is hard to see anything wrong with trying to be altruistic, and it can even appear noble when protecting others come at your own costs. When parents hypocritically lie to their children, for instance, about the tooth fairy or about the supernatural benefits of vegetables, they do so with the intention of protecting their children from harsh reality. When doctors lie to terminally ill patients about their condition, they do so with the intention of giving the patient peace of mind. When someone tells their friend they like their outfit when they actually do not, they do so with the intention of making their friend feel confident. The crux of whether these lies can be considered wrong is choice. All these intentions are well meaning but they do bare a similar flaw; the lie is carried out based on what the liar perceives to be best for the other person. The other person has no choice as to what extent of information they receive. Ideally, not only should they have the choice to access full information but they should be allowed to decide how to act on this information.

The final type of lies is those said in order to avoid confrontation or escape lengthy explanation. Replying with 'I'm good' when asked how you are has become a habit for many. Yet it is the frequency with which these lies are said and disregarded that is worrying. A more poignant example would be agreeing with someone's point of view even if you do not. Instead, of debating in an informative argument, lying simply allows you to escape discussion under the guise of diplomacy. Much like the lies of the second category, there is rarely any immediate harm done to anyone as a

Benjamin Suen

result of the lie, and it would be harsh to consider them as wrong. Yet over time, these lies will lead to poorer communication skills, superficial conversations and possibly a general distrust in society.

In conclusion, lying is not always wrong, as Immanuel Kant insisted. Kant placed heavy emphasis on principles over consequences which is wise as judging the 'wrongness' of a lie based on the outcome would be like a criminal deciding whether he regrets his actions according to whether he gets caught or not. However, his black and white statement is flawed in that he fails to account for human emotion and intentions. It is easier said than done to always tell the truth; the decision to lie is sometimes instantaneous and at other times elaborately thought out. What remains true, however, is that sometimes the decision to lie or not, is dictated by the situation and surroundings a person finds themselves in. For instance, a lie may be told in order to keep a deeply personal secret for a friend. Constantly lying is not socially optimal, but neither is a society that has no secrets, where everybody knows everything about everyone else.

If any lies can be thought of as totally wrong, it is those carried out with malicious intent, such as some of those in the first category. Beyond that, lying is never completely wrong or right. Lying is instead, a social device which humans have become very accomplished at using. Perhaps the ease with which people can lie so well alludes to the necessity of lying in today's society.