

Regarding The Notion That “Lying Is Wrong”

(Merton College 2018 Essay Competition)

What does it mean to lie? To lie is to intentionally deceive, with the use of "intentionally" being crucial in a legal and moral sense. From infancy, the "fact" that it is morally unacceptable to lie is repeatedly hammered into our ethical perception of the world by our parents, our schools, even our popular culture and entertainment. Certainly, it would seem to many that lying is only a detriment to a society; take the legal system for example. On a fundamental level, the courts revolve around the presentation and refutation of evidence and arguments; when evidence is falsified and cannot be proven as such, the system simply cannot function and deliver justice appropriately. However, can the principle of unyielding honesty be applied universally; in other terms, are there circumstances where lying is permissible?

Firstly, let's examine the stance that lying is wrong under any circumstance. The main arguments against lying revolve around its consequences. Humans rely on their rationality and what they perceive to be true, empirical evidence to make decisions every single day; this ability for deep conscious thought and informed decision making is what makes humans so distinct from other animals. Yet, if one person is actively trying to deceive the other, and the other is inclined to believe them, how can they possibly make an informed, rational choice on the issue presented? Take our interactions in the market economy for example; one of the underlying principles of the free market is that consumers should have access to as much information as possible in order to make optimal choices. If we have an economy where everybody is actively trying to swindle each other, this system will simply collapse as consumer confidence will reach abyssal levels due to repeated investment into products that while seeming flawless in theory, turned out to be worthless; this is why we have laws against practices such as false advertising to protect consumer interests. The importance of honesty branches into all areas of life; the recent example of the EU Referendum vote in 2016 has seen much contention due to some of the exaggerated claims by the Leave campaign, in particular that leaving the EU would save us £350 million a week (analysis has shown that the true figure is close to about half of this). Considering how marginal the Leave majority was (a mere 3.8%), it has been argued by some that were people voting with correct information, the result of the referendum may have been very different; of course, this is not to say the Remain side was completely without fault, considering that their repeated claims of economic recession as a direct result of the Leave vote have not come to fruition, but this does not excuse the half-truths of the Leave campaign and does not retroactively reverse the effects of lying on democracy.

Nevertheless, is lying always wrong? Many in favour of “white lies” point to the philosopher Kant's classic dilemma of the murderer at the door. Here, Kant asserts that even if a villain came to the door hunting for your friend, one should respond with the truth to their questioning regardless of circumstance. On the surface, this seems completely ridiculous; surely by not lying, one would be potentially endangering lives and indirectly assisting a criminal? There have been other scenarios presented where lying has been argued to be acceptable; for example, a doctor lying to a patient about the seriousness of their condition so as not to induce stress or other mental issues, or a government lying about its national defence in order to obfuscate and confuse hostiles. Some have even gone as far as changing the subjects of Kant's problem to a Nazi officer and a Jew to add further ethical complications and bolster their argument. Yet, the key principle which many oversight when it comes to Kant's scenario and I believe is essential to consider in law is the idea of unintended consequences; for example, consider if we lie to the murderer and say the friend is not in the house, but upon seeing the murderer the friend attempts to escape. However, the murderer, believing that his target is elsewhere, continues his search and finds the escaping friend; here, by telling what we thought was a white lie, we have indirectly assisted in murder. The same principle can be applied to other scenarios; if the doctor is deceptively optimistic with patient regarding their condition, this could lead to the patient acting irresponsibly and exacerbating the symptoms of their

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condition. Furthermore, if a government lies about the state of its national security in order to prevent conflict, this could actually propagate hostilities; terrorists, for example, may be more optimistic and choose to carry out attacks if defence is undersold; moreover, if defence is exaggerated, this could lead to civilians becoming complacent and may provoke invasion if other governments are frightened enough by the claims.

In closing, while a shallow interpretation would be that it certainly seems that there are scenarios where lying is the “correct” and moral choice to make, these scenarios are often fantastical at best and providing a dangerous precedent at worst. Humans are not perfect beings, and while we may perceive that there are some lies that are fool proof and will only benefit society, the unintended consequences of even regular, menial decisions in everyday life can escape even the best of us; while the consequences of a lie may not appear in every case, they are too frequent and damaging to be ignored. Great thinkers throughout history going as far back as Aristotle (and perhaps even further) have repeatedly asserted that honesty is the foundation of a free and developed society; to ignore the repeated warnings of the dangers of “white lies” when they have reared their ugly heads throughout history, from the exaggerations of Julius Caesar’s early successes to the proclamation that Iraq was in possession of WMDs, would be disastrous to nearly every aspect of society and morally despicable.

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