

“Lying is wrong”

The debate around this topic, in ethical philosophy, begins with the definition of lying; however, there is a consensus in the philosophy world around the traditional key aspects of a lie. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines the aspects of a lie as - the *statement*, the *untrue nature*, the *addressee* and the *intention to deceive*. The aspects have been summarised by the definition that will be used, throughout the essay:

To lie =df to make a believed-false statement to another person with the intention that the other person believes that statement to be true.

One must understand the second aspect of the title phrase; wrong. What is wrong? Most people will agree that “Lying is wrong”, but how many will agree with the statement “lying is always wrong”? This is observed in philosophy as lying being *pro tanto* wrong, or wrong ‘so far as that goes’. Moral absolutism and relativism both outline the method to determining what is right and wrong. For this specific essay and its legal nature, I will adhere to the ideals of moral relativism (like that of the English courts and their use of common law). Moral relativism makes the case that there are no absolute rights or wrongs, but right and wrong can be determined relative to a certain moral frame of reference; consequently, what is wrong is context driven, and a universal law or absolute rule cannot be placed onto the act of lying.

At its most basic, lying can be seen to be wrong as it violates the trust of the addressee (**B**) by deceiving them of the accuracy of a statement (**p**). This violation is wrong as it leads to a society with a lack of trust, resulting in a life more difficult for the person (**A**) stating **p**, and for others in society; furthermore it takes away the power of making an informed and free decision from **B**, by distorting **B**'s perception of reality. Within a legal context, with **A** as a witness in a case and **B** the jury/ barristers/ judge, if **A** deceives **B** to the accuracy of **p**, it can lead to false conclusions made within the case and injustice being served. The authoritative nature of the courts is undermined and justice is taken from the victims of the case. The English legal system uses a jury/judge to decide what is right and wrong, with the law as a relatively strict ‘moral rule-book’. In this particular scenario, the lie or act of perjury hinders the courts from determining what is right and wrong, as it distorts its perception of reality, whilst also adding difficulty to the liar (having to remember and act in line with the lie). The morality of the lie depends on two factors - the motivation and the consequence of the action.

One cannot examine consequences without acknowledging the most well known consequentialists, the utilitarians. The utilitarian method of determining morality bases itself on total human happiness; so, if there would be a net decrease in total human happiness as a result of an action, then that action would be considered a wrong action. Taking the case examined

earlier, if the total benefits to those persons concerned (**A**, **B** and any others affected by **p**) outweighed the total damages to those persons concerned, then a utilitarian would conclude that the lie was justified or at the very least excusable. This logic does not take into account the spread of benefits (e.g. if only **A** benefitted greatly but 10 other people suffered collectively less), or the idea that selfish-gain is typically not valid as a moral justification. Although utilitarian methodology seems logical on the surface, it lacks the nuance required to be applied in real-world situations - without even taking considering the impractical nature of measuring 'total human happiness'.

If using consequences of an action to find its morality seem unsatisfying - that leaves us to judge the motivations of the action. Thomas Aquinas splits lying into three types of lies; malicious, 'jocose' (lies said in jest) and 'officious' (lies that are helpful). These three types of lies all have different motivations - malicious lies are told to do harm, 'jocose' lies are told light-heartedly to little positive or negative impact and 'officious' lies are told to help another. Aquinas said all lies were wrong (*pro tanto* wrong in this context), but some were pardonable (specifically the latter two). He regarded malicious lies as being a mortal sin, and in secular terms could be read as inexcusably wrong - although he saw 'jocose' and 'officious' lies as venial sins. Aquinas provides an increasingly satisfying answer to the question of why lying is wrong as he acknowledges that lying *is* wrong, yet allows room for a pardon. The post-action nature of a "pardon" allows to take into account the consequences of the action but still judges the motivation of the action.

Given the relative approach that I have taken to judging the morality of lying (in line with the view that Nietzsche puts forward on the subjective nature of morals), it is unsurprising that my conclusion is a subjective one. Lying is wrong, naturally as it has an inherent immorality to it; but, lying can be *pardoned* when considering the motivation and consequences of the action. If the motivation of **A** to state falsely **p** to **B** was righteous and considered moral, then only on that basis one could move on. The consequences of the action would also be examined, and if again found to be positive and beneficial, only then could **A** be pardoned for lying.

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