

Lying is wrong. Discuss

Lying can be defined as the signalling to a conscious agent the truth of some idea that the agent doing the signalling believes to be false with the intention of the agent receiving the signal believing the idea it conveys. This is importantly different from merely refusing to give information, i.e. secret keeping. This is an important distinction because, by lying, an individual is losing agency because their choices have been manipulated by false information, depriving them of the opportunity to make a different decision. Therefore, to justify lying, one must justify convincing an individual to make what they believe is a wrong decision. This is necessarily true if it is a meaningful lie. If they had access to all the information and made the same decision, there would be no point in the lie.

The foundation for the right to not be deceived is derived from individuals self-ownership, which is itself derived from their status as rational agents. As rational agents individuals have the capacity to decide on their conception of the good and follow it. Ergo, they have the ability to do with themselves what they like, providing it doesn't interfere with the ability of others to do the same. This is the key characteristic of property and can be interpreted as individuals having ownership of themselves. By lying to someone, that individual isn't respecting the ability of the deceived to lead their lives in the manner they wish.

The first case to be examined is when the lie's purpose is to only affect the life of the deceived. From a utilitarian perspective this could be justified when the lie produces a net positive effect, in this case on the life of the deceived. At its core lying presumes that, if the deceived had all the information to hand, they would make the wrong choice. However, who is the deceiver to presume what the right choice is for the deceived? Individuals want to pursue their conception of the good life and, as far as it harms no one else, they should not be prevented from doing that, providing they are rational beings. By lying to someone, the deceiver either presumes that the individual's conception of the good life is wrong, and or that they don't have the right to follow it.

In the former case the utilitarian justifies their intervention on the grounds that the deceived would have more utility if they followed the 'correct' course of life. However, there is no reason to believe that liars are privy to information that the deceived are not. By being misled the deceived are deprived of the choice to follow the life they wish to lead.

The deceived also have the right to refuse the 'help' the deceiver is forcing upon them. This is derived from the ownership of the self. The crucial aspect of property rights is the ability to do what the owner likes with their property. By lying, individuals lose their ability to do what they want with themselves.

The 'for their own good' argument for lying therefore can be rejected on three grounds; that the deceiver is no more likely to know the good than the deceived, the deceived's ability to follow the good is harmed. Most importantly as, if true, the other conditions needn't be met, because an individual owns themselves, it is their prerogative to not follow the good if they so choose.

The next case to consider is when lying is for the good of others. This is the much stronger case for lying because it pits right of the individual to lead the life they wish to, against the utility of the some other party. To take the most extreme example, you are in a room with a person and two buttons. You know that one button will wipe out all life on earth in an unbearably painful manner, the other the will open a trapdoor, killing the would be button pusher. Assuming they will believe you, will you lie about which button to press? The obvious answer appears to be 'yes', that in this case the utility and or rights of other parties outweighs the person's right to do as they wish with their lives.

To take another example, you can lie to a person and have them believe you that an operation is to remove their appendix. In fact, it is to harvest their organs for donation which will save many lives. This seems repulsive. In both examples, utilitarian logic appears to justify both (perhaps assuming the forced organ donation is done in secret.) The critical difference between the two is the actions of the

deceived. In the first example, they are the one causing harm, thereby forfeiting their absolute right self-ownership. This is because, in deciding whether others will live or die they claim ownership of their lives. This justifies temporarily revoking their self-ownership both to restore sovereignty to others and, when individual sovereignty is pooled, it must be done so equally and voluntarily by all parties.

In the second example, the positions are reversed. The deceiver is the aggressor in taking individual sovereignty. The unknowing donor's ability to make rational choices is revoked, losing their ability to decide what to do with their lives. The principles established in these examples can be generalised; lying to help others can be justified when the deceived is taking ownership of others without their consent, but cannot be justified when the decision of the deceived is taken by the deceiver.

In conclusion lying can be just only when it is done to prevent or mitigate actions of the deceived which would be in some way infringe on the sovereignty of others without their consent. In all other cases, lying infringes, exclusively on the deceived, on their ability to make rational choices. This is unjustified because individuals are should free to choose their conception of the good and how to follow it as sovereign beings.