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'Lying is wrong.' Discuss.

Lying, an ill-thought of skill of subtlety and intricate detail in the best examples, is a term that must be treated with the utmost care lest one slip into technical carelessness. As such, this essay shall try to define both it and the term 'wrong' as well as making an investigation into what sort of relationship these terms have; thus, resulting in the conclusion that lying is, from separate points of view, not necessarily wrong.

When discussing a statement of this sort it is of great importance to define it in the narrowest possible but still functional understanding. The term 'wrong' is exemplary of a one difficult to define with anything narrow and still generally applicable. Therefore, for simplification this essay shall assume the term in the title is synonymous with immoral. But according to what standard? Almost all morality systems base themselves upon either deontologism (an action is wrong because it is inherently wrong) or consequentialism (an action is wrong because it begets undesirable consequences). But when it comes to the subject of lying, as was said in an investigation into lying by Cornell Medical University College[1], 'lying transcends most disciplinary, cultural and historical boundaries' and so this discussion is applicable to all morality systems, be they of belief or logic. This essay shall leave no moral stone unturned and the title shall be considered from both points of view.

For the most part, lying is a fairly easy thing to define as 'making an untrue statement with intent to deceive[2]', but in the legal case this definition is not specific enough to properly encompass what a lie actually is. Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, the Isenberg definition that 'a lie is a statement made by one who does not believe it with the intention that someone else shall be led to believe it[3]' shall stand. There is here an important distinction to be made between what legally defines lying and deceiving. The definition of the former has been put forth but it is subtly different from that of latter. The Tort of Deceit is the most logical source from which to ascertain a legal definition of deceit. This tort requires the ingredients that: (1) Defendant makes a false representation to the Claimant; (2) Defendant knows that the representation is false or is reckless as to whether it is true or false; (3) Defendant intends that the Claimant should act in reliance on it; and (4) claimant does act in reliance on the representation and, in consequence, suffers loss[4]; as shown in the case of '*Eco3 Capital Ltd & Ors v Ludsin Overseas Ltd [2013] EWCA Civ 413 (23 April 201)'[5]* .

[1] https://rampages.us/dissemblingandwhatnot/wp-content/uploads/sites/7836/2015/08/Lying-in-Everyday-Life.pdf

[2] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lie

[3] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lying-definition/#TraDefLyi

[4] http://www.magrath.co.uk/ingredients-for-tort-of-deceit-cook-up-a-storm-in-the-court-of-appeal

[5] http://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2013/413.html&query=(Eco)+AND+(3)+AND+(Capital)+AND+(Ltd)

It must also be pointed out that a 'false representation', as stated in subsection 2(2) of the Fraud Act 2006[6] does not necessarily have to be untrue, but only misleading. So, if one were to say in a job interview that one went to Merton College, the assumption would be that I lived and studied at Merton College, when this statement would hold true even if I had only visited, thus making it a true statement yet a false representation. The importance of this distinction at a glance seems irrelevant but its importance lies, as said before, in the clarification and further narrowing of what constitutes a lie.

Whether lying as it has been defined is wrong, is a discussion that can only now be answered. From a deontological point of view lying is always wrong (as is deceit for that matter), on the basis that communication is a process needed for prosperity and that truth communicates but a lie does not. Therefore, on this basis lying is always wrong. In the case that there is a clear and moral alternative to a lie then of course anyone would agree that this point of view stands true. But one might ask 'What if a lie prevented an action worse than a lie from occurring?' And this essay would answer that from a deontological perspective the lie must still be wrong as a lie is always wrong. However, the situation could also be thought of in another way. One can lie or allow something worse to happen. If there truly is no other option better than either of them, the reasoning would be that to lie, although a morally wrong thing to do, is less immoral than the alternative. This results in the fact that in this case to lie is the least bad, ergo the best, system of action. Paradoxically, this gives the conclusion that deontologically, although lying is always wrong, relative to the alternatives, it is indeed right.

While this paradox manifests itself in a deontologist, it does not do so for a consequentialist. The reason for a lie generally being immoral is the same, so given the choice between a lie and a more useful alternative, the latter is the right thing to do. However, the point where one is given the choice between a lie and something worse is a simpler one than when this essay looked at it previously. If the consequences of the lie are objectively preferable to the consequences of the other, then it follows that not only is the lie morally right relative to the alternative, but it is morally right objectively. So, consequentialism does not condemn lying out of preference or necessity at all.

From these two schools of thought similar answers have arisen, that when an alternative is consequentially beneficial or inherently better, it is wrong to lie, but when the alternative is worse by consequence or by nature, then lying is not only acceptable, but the right thing to do. The conclusion to be brought from this is that in this idea the two schools of thought agree: Lying is not necessarily wrong.

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[6] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/35