

‘Lying is wrong.’ Discuss.

To claim that lying is always wrong is not only a short-sighted generalisation, but also a statement which, although potentially founded on moral grounds, attributes a malicious nature to an action which holds the potential to express an understanding of a situation and those involved in a more intellectual and considerate manner than blindly following a rule that is ingrained in us from childhood.

First we must draw upon the reality where children taught ‘lying is wrong’ constantly witness the adults surrounding them not reciprocating this rule. We justify this by recognising this to be their method of protecting them from the outside world, yet we fail to consider this differentiation between believing lying to children as being more acceptable than lying to adults as a flaw in this moral law. On the one hand we understand that children are fragile and need to be protected from what truth implies, especially if it would potentially cause more harm to the child than the lie would (e.g. when a relative dies). We also agree that adults are better equipped to handle the truth and require less protection, however we fail to recognise that we not only lie to children to protect, but also to give them a ‘happier childhood’, e.g. Santa. These lies are not to protect children, but to deceive them into believing something we believe will make them happier, suggesting we do not have any problems with lying to children at all. Does it not pose a contradiction if we think lying is okay if it is to children?

Perhaps the most convincing argument supporting this rule would consider the dilemma of trust as caused by lying. Telling someone the truth implies that you trust them to handle the information, lying implies the opposite. Lying also questions the liar’s reliability; how are we to trust what they say when they have the potential to lie? This lack of trust as a consequence to lying is perhaps one of the most important points to pull on when debating the morality of lying. Trust issues in relationships with others can be damaging, so leading on from this it could be considered that anything that may cause this is wrong, i.e. lying. Thus we can agree that lying without a justifiable reason does apply to the rule. From this we can draw upon what liars aim to attain from them: lies are essentially ways of manipulating others by deceiving them so you attain an outcome you deem desirable. If your aim is to achieve a greater good, perhaps protecting someone from harm, how can we argue that they were doing the wrong thing? For example, consider a humanitarian aid worker lying to a child about her parents being safe to calm her enough to get her to safety. Hypothesising on the outcome if the lie hadn’t been told, the child may have been too restless to comply with procedure and the aid worker may not have had the time to save her and others. Indeed, the aim of the lie was not to hurt the child, rather to help them and others, a more desirable outcome than the potential outcome if the child hadn’t been lied to. Ergo, the relationship between lies and wrongful actions is created by the person’s intentions with the lie; lying with the intention of it causing harm shows that you are manipulating others into a presumably negative outcome which is wrong. However, if your intentions are pure and you aim to attain a positive outcome via utilitarianism then it can arguably be viewed with moral legitimacy; surely any action which aims to do good is not evil?

Motive becomes especially important when we consider that often it is not the lies themselves that hurt someone most, rather why the person told the lie. Many would accept lies as legitimately good actions for reasons discussed above, however if the person had bad intentions with the lie, we become hurt that they wanted to cause us distress. On the contrary, saying a lie to protect someone, as discussed, would perhaps classify as the person having done nothing wrong, even if the information causes the same damage to the receiver as if the person was actively lying because we can understand that they didn’t want to hurt us; maybe the liar is showing kindness for that person in this context as they are trying to protect them.

Nonetheless, the argument of motive needs to be dissected according to the situation; lying with the right motive may still cause a negative outcome. What about when the child in the humanitarian aid example discovers the truth about their parents? They could lose trust with all aid workers and it would be more difficult to rehabilitate her, thus creating a worse situation than if she had been told the truth straight away. Although they have tried to do good, a negative outcome has been created on the back of this momentary success when the truth is uncovered; a traumatic experience has been caused to a child who was expecting something based on a lie. The aid worker did not know how the child would react to the truth, they could only assume; it is this assumption that perhaps goes against the argument of right motive because it implies you don’t believe the receiver can react favourably, furthering the dilemma of trust. Nonetheless, although a negative situation is created, the negative outcome would presumably have occurred anyway

when the truth becomes apparent. Therefore this delay of the negative outcome, the momentary buffer of protection in the form of a lie, in the meantime has created a better position for that person to receive the truth, justifying it if the liar has the intention to reveal the truth at a more appropriate time.

Lying is wrong is not a universally-applicable rule to all conditions under which lies occur; we must consider the liar's intentions in order to credit its justifiability.