

'Lying is wrong.' – Discuss

From the *Bible* to *1984*, lying has fascinated humans throughout history. Our religions, upbringings, and moral compasses have all been shaped and moulded by prevailing views on the rightness of telling the truth. Despite this, the subject has divided the greatest minds of humanity, from Kant's staunch assertion that any and all lies are wrong, to Nietzsche's belief that those who tell the truth may simply be too weak to tell a lie.

Firstly, the act of lying must be defined. One of the complexities surrounding lying is the fact that what constitutes a lie is often dependent upon the liar. Truth, untruth, deception – these concepts are all subjective frames of reality, self-imposed and mutually exclusive from the exact viewpoints of any other individual. This leads to the phenomenon that one person's truth may be another's lie, complicating the process of deducing whether lying is wrong.

The recent rise of fake news has clearly highlighted this. By way of example, President Trump may view a scathing piece of journalism as simply untrue and dismiss it as fake news; the journalist in question will likely view the piece as objective fact and high-quality reporting. In this scenario, each party's capacity for self-conviction has led them to convince themselves that the opposing party is wrong: each has a steadfast belief that the *other* is lying. Furthermore, they will promote information that substantiates this belief, and dismiss information that contradicts it. This leads to each holding diametrically opposed views of what constitutes lying in the situation, frustrating any attempts to extract the truth.

Fundamentally, this opposition arises from a disagreement over what constitutes the truth. As lying is deliberate deception, and deception is propagating that which is untrue, an individual's understanding of the truth ultimately determines whether or not they believe they are lying.

Secondly, the impact of a lie must also be defined. For whom is lying wrong? Initially, the liar must be considered. One viewpoint, adopted by such figures as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant, is that all lying negatively affects the liar. The viewpoint taken by these thinkers is that lying harms individuals, corrupting them; eroding their moral values. It prevents individuals from developing virtuous characters. They therefore reach the conclusion that lying is inherently wrong for the individual liar. On the contrary, figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche were of the belief that individuals who refrain from lying do so due to weakness of character. This viewpoint sees placing such virtues as compassion and respect below the virtue of honesty as a fundamental symptom of weakness.

Lying also has an impact on the receiver of the lie, and on wider society. One perspective on this issue is that lies undermine the social cohesion of a society, preventing trust and compassion from flourishing. The many lies surrounding the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal impaired trust in US politics and public life, with the effects still being felt today. George Orwell also explored the use of large scale lying to impact society in his novel *1984*, where state-administered lies are used as power over the public. An alternative perspective however, may be that 'white lies' are integral to the normal functioning of a society. This viewpoint asserts that these seemingly harmless, day-to-day falsifications are simply a part of natural human interaction.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding lying and its effects, there is one invaluable tool at our disposal – *evidence*. Through gaining a detailed, informed understanding of the context and pre-existing conditions of a lie, an informed conclusion can be reached as to whether or not a lie can be considered right or wrong. A more generalized model of this basic principle was developed by Augustine of Hippo, who ordered lies into 8 categories of increasing severity from lies in religious teaching to lies that harm no one but prevent someone from physical harm. Even with minimal contextual or additional information,

Augustine is able to rank a lie in severity, showing how evidence is the premier tool when determining whether a lie is wrong.

The importance of sufficient evidence in reaching a just conclusion can be determined through a simple example: *A mother takes their child out of school for a week on holiday, despite realising that the child will miss out on valuable schooling. The mother lies to the school, saying the child is ill. The mother's actions are later uncovered and, after disputing a fine the school imposes on her, she is put on trial.* It seems clear to any onlookers that the lie in this situation is wrong. However, the same scenario with more detailed information brings this conclusion into dispute. *A single mother takes her son out of school for a week on a trip she had promised him on his birthday. She is poor, and the only time she can afford to take her son on holiday is during term time. She ensures her son brings schoolwork, so he doesn't fall behind. The mother lies to the school receptionist as she knows to tell the truth would put her at risk of a fine, which could cause her trouble in feeding and housing herself and her son. However, she is found out and disputes the fine, leading to her being put on trial.* The same situation with more evidence available may result in a very different conclusion, showing the value of evidence when analysing a lie.

It is unlikely that any avenue of science, religion, or philosophy will ever be able to accurately establish that lying is categorically wrong or right. Through the collation of facts, information, and evidence, however, a meaningful and just conclusion may be reached, based on the specific scenario. Therefore, the answer as to whether or not lying is wrong may be 'it depends on the circumstances', and those must always be examined.