

Lying is never right



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LYING IS NEVER RIGHT James Rachels cites the “ categorical imperative” of Immanuel Kant, who argues that “ lying is never right, no matter what the circumstances”. I fully agree with Kant.

Human conduct seems to indicate that many believe it is right to lie, at least on certain occasions. We find ourselves living in a society that literally conditions us to lie. Everywhere we look in our society we find glaring examples of lying and deception. In fact, after having experienced Vietnam, Watergate, Abscam and the Iran-Contra affair, most Americans believe this country’s leaders consistently lied to the people¹. Add to this the Clinton scandal in which perjury is to be determined by what the meaning of “ is” is, one must admit the mistrust Americans have for everyone and everything, and just how much this blight on America’s moral landscape has affected us all.

According to Webster, to lie is “ 1: to make an untrue statement with intent to deceive; 2: to create a false or misleading impression.” Lying, as defined by St. Thomas Aquinas, “ a statement at variance with the mind”, is more accurate than Webster’s “ to create a false or misleading impression.” This is because, according to Webster, it is possible to lie without making a false statement and without any intention of deceiving. If a person makes a statement which he thinks is false, but in reality is true, he certainly lies inasmuch as he intends to say what is false. A well-known liar may have no intention of deceiving anyone - for he knows nobody believes a word he says - but if he speaks at variance with his mind, he does not cease to lie.

Catholic and ethical writers commonly make a distinction between (1) injurious, or hurtful lies (2) officious lies, and (3) jocose lies. An injurious lie is one that hurts

1 - Cambridge Survey Research 1975/1976. www.allanturner.com/lying.html

someone. An officious or white lie is such that it does not injure anyone. Jocose lies are told for the purpose of affording amusement. When a habit of lying has been contracted, it is practically impossible to restrict its vagaries to matters which are harmless. Therefore, although injury to others is excluded from officious and jocose lies by definition, yet realistically there is no sort of lie which is not injurious to somebody. According to Catholic teachings, an injurious lie is a mortal sin, but officious and jocose lies are of their own nature, venial sins.

Telling the truth is not the easiest course of action to follow. On the contrary, telling the truth is often difficult, and frequently leads to unpleasant consequences. A major disturbing thought for us is that Christians, of all people, need to lie. Where are our Christian principles? "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another." (Ephesians 4: 25). God makes it clear that "all liars shall have their part in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Revelation 21: 8)

Unfortunately, not all of us have understood the absolute nature of God's moral requisite against lying. Plato, in his "Republic", allows doctors and statesmen to lie occasionally for the good of their patients and for the common weal. Following the path of Plato, Paulsen, Van der Velden and other writers, while admitting in general that a lie is intrinsically wrong, argue that there are exceptions to the rule. Famous reformer Martin Luther was reported to have said: "What harm would it do, if a man told a good strong for the sake of the good and for the Christian church.... a lie out of <https://assignbuster.com/lying-is-never-right/>

necessity, a useful lie, a helpful lie; such lies would not be against God, he would accept them.” (Cited by Luther’s secretary in a letter to Max Lenz, ed., Brief Wechsel Landgraf Phillips des Grossmuthigen von Hessen mit Bucer, Vol. 1). Stanley Paher justifies the lies told by Rahab, the harlot to save two spies: “ It was, therefore, a Godly thing to lie and the Holy Spirit’s commendation of her actions show this. It was not sin.” (Commandments in Conflict.. II”, Vanguard, Vol. 11, November 1984, pp 300, 301).

Plato, Paulsen, Van der Velden, Luther and Paher can be theologically classified as “ graded absolutists” , who hold that lying under certain circumstances is right because showing mercy to the innocent is a greater moral duty than telling the truth to the guilty. Then there is “ conflicting absolutism” wherein one believes he lives in an evil world where absolute moral laws sometime run into inevitable conflict. The absolutist believes that he will break what he considers to be the lesser law (lying) to uphold the greater law (preserving life).

There is also “ unqualified absolutism”. Persons like Kant believe that lying is always wrong. One is never permitted to lie, much less morally obligated to do it. This, and this alone, is the clear teaching of God’s Word. Aristotle, in his “ Ethics” states that it is never allowable to tell a lie. St. Augustine is of the same view as Aristotle and Kant. He wrote two treatises to prove that it is never lawful to tell a lie; that the naked truth must be told whatever the consequences may be. He goes on to say that it is based on the fact that if we allow a lie of necessity, there seems to be no reason from the theological point of view, for not allowing occasional murder and fornication when these crimes would procure great temporal advantage; the absolute character of the moral law will be undermined, and it will be reduced to a matter of mere

expediency. Lying is opposed to the virtue of truth or veracity. Truth is primarily a self-regarding virtue: something which man owes to his own rational nature, and no-one who has any regard for his own dignity and self respect will be guilty of the turpitude of a lie.

Is it therefore ever right to lie? Absolutely not! No confidence will ever be placed in a liar. We should recognize lying for the evil it is and never try to justify it under any circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be.

References used :

1) Catholic Encyclopedia: Lying

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2) James Rachels: “ The Elements of Moral Philosophy”.

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<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/g/gaskilld/ethics/EMP%20chapter1.htm>

3) Lying: Is it Ever Right?

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