

LETTER ON THE ETHICS OF LYING

Anthony Lewis

*D*ear Pinocchio:

As we enter our yearly conference, I believe that it is imperative that I remind you of the lessons that I have taught you as a child: in particular, to tell the difference between being ethically and morally right or wrong. Lying is probably one of the most common wrongs that we carry out in our everyday lives. This applies to all human beings, even a small two-timer puppet boy such as you. Most would say that lying is always wrong, except when a good calling backs its up; in this manner they reason their way into moral hypocrisy. I write this letter to help you become a moral and ethical man and to inform you of the practices that you commit. Is your usage of famous lies ethical and in its right place, or have you fallen prey to the deceit of an unintentionally immoral society?

In order to understand the repercussions of your crimes, you must arrive at an agreement with me on the meaning of a “lie.” A lie is “a form of deception” (as you would know), “but not all forms of deception are lies.”¹ In a broader sense, lying is giving some information while believing it to be false, thus intending to deceive. From this definition, society has established that there are certain characteristics that liars exhibit: namely, they aim to deceive or mislead. Thus, in society, lying is considered wrong, as it diminishes the trust between humans and makes it difficult for the recipient of the lie to make a truly informed decision,

as it is based on false information. Yet all of this is revoked in the case of special exceptions. Such is seen in the usage of lies that appear to use evil for supposedly right purposes: for instance, deceptions for the sake of the common good. The vast majority of people view lying sympathetically, or even approve of it, in situations where a small evil would apparently serve a larger good. Examples include lying to a terrorist, lying to those who have no right to the truth, and lying to liars. All of these are acceptable to society, as they call for doing a wrong against those who have committed some sort of wrong or who could misuse information. I have not taught you the proper ethical response to these disputes, but I will allow for you to learn from the best in this subject: Immanuel Kant.

The teachings of Kant, one of my favorite philosophers, have made me the conscious figure that I am today. The concepts that he covers in the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* are not to be swept through lightly. I'll give you a briefing on his work. In his text, he covers the theory of treating people as an end versus a means. This is the difference between treating people as they are supposed to be treated, with respect and dignity, and treating people as degenerates or tools in order to fulfill a goal. In your past life, you have treated many people as means in order to get what you desired: wealth and relief from trouble. With Kant's doctrine, one cannot regress to the life that one used to live. He insists that one must live with values that would be useful and non-detrimental in any situation: that is, to live by the Categorical Imperative.² Lying is not beneficial to you and others in every aspect of your life. Thus, your growth in modern society has displaced you from your original moral and clean slate. Hence, you must now undo your ills, including your faulty assumptions.

Throughout this journey that you may undertake in order to clean yourself up, you must learn how to respond to arguments that will come your way. Society may ask you what to do in the cases of lies for the common good or lies that would prevent physical or mental harm. In accordance with the doctrine that I have taught you, the right response would be to remain honest in every situation, even in cases that would result in the death of others or damage to your body or well-being. That would be the ethical response according to Kant, yet it violates his other ethical value of preserving life. By this logic, we are to do an ethical act, yet receive unethical consequences. Such is the confusing and perplexing world of ethics: it contradicts itself in its message through the same philosopher.³ According to Kantian logic, it would be not only unethical, but immoral not to elevate the value of life. Yet to preserve life, one may at times have to lie. With this in mind, one may go onwards to say that in extreme scenarios, where a person's life may be at risk, lying for the greater good (in the form of "white lies") can hold about the same amount of ethical and moral value as telling the truth in order to remain honest. Thus the question comes about: In extreme situations, should we be unethical but moral in our choice of actions, or ethical and immoral?

I originally wrote this letter in order to urge you to turn from your ways of lying and deceit. Yet I came out of it a new cricket, in realization that the practices that you commit can hold just about the same standing as my honesty and moral compass. However, I hope that I was able to introduce you to your polar opposite, Kant, whose ideology of treating people as a end instead of a means still holds up, although his Categorical Imperative may seem hopeless in this scenario. I leave you with the advice to leave your old ways nevertheless, but not to adopt mine. Instead, find the balance between the two polar opposites:

a mean between these two extremes, from which you and humanity may benefit. I will be off now so that you can ponder and explore the types of choices you will make.

Your Dearest Friend,

Jiminy Cricket

Endnotes

1. BBC Ethics Team. "Lying." *BBC Ethics Guide*. BBC, n.d. Web. 22 Dec. 2013.
2. Kant, Immanuel. *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. *Projet Gutenberg*. Web. 22 Dec. 2013.
3. BBC Ethics Team. "Lying."