

## Lying

Have you ever told a lie? If your answer is “no” then you are probably lying (or engaged in self-deception which is a related, though quite different phenomenon). From the time we are very small, we are taught that lying, like stealing and killing, is wrong. And yet, unlike stealing and killing, lying is something that most of us do, to varying degrees, quite often. “I’d like to invite you to my party, Abigail, but my mom said I could only have ten people,” you say to the geeky girl who keeps trying to be your friend. Maybe the part about ten people is true, but the part about wanting to invite her isn’t. Maybe this isn’t the worst lie in the world. After all, if you were to tell Abigail the truth, it would surely hurt her feelings and make you seem like a heartless cad. Is there really anything wrong with lies like this one?

Some philosophers, most notably the 18<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Immanuel Kant argue that it is always wrong to lie because the success of human communication using language depends on the assumption that we mean what we say. Imagine a world in which misrepresentation and deception were randomly rampant. You ask someone for directions to the nearest mall, knowing full well that he might well send you to the library or to a mall miles and miles away. Of course, he might tell you the truth but how could you tell? How would a judge decide on someone’s guilt or innocence if she could never trust the testimony of witnesses? Kant thought that to lie, even for what you consider to be good reasons, is to disregard the importance of truth in human relationships.

And yet, surely, there are times when lying seems to be the right thing to do. You have probably heard of Anne Frank, the Jewish girl who, with her family, hid from the Nazis in concealed rooms in a house in Amsterdam. This required a complex system of lies and deceptions on the part of their protectors. After two years, someone spilled the beans. Anne died in a concentration camp. It is difficult not to judge the “truth teller” more harshly than the deceivers in this case.

If the view that lying is always wrong seems extreme (or simply unrealistic), then how do we determine when a lie is justified?

As you watch the film and TV clips, consider how you would judge the instances of lying in them. What counts as a good reason to lie or deceive? What sorts of circumstances make us sympathetic to the liar?