What makes lies wrong?

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1. Introduction

A question about lies
It is safe to say that some lies are morally wrong. What makes these lies wrong?

Goals of this paper
I will first explore and briefly discuss different possibilities for answering the question as to what makes wrong lies wrong. This discussion will turn out to bear upon the general question as to how the wrong-making (and the right-making) relation is to be understood. I will then show that an appropriate understanding of the wrong-making (and the right-making) relation has far-reaching consequences for ethical theorizing. In particular, I will argue that the idea that there is a plurality of morally relevant factors is incompatible with the thought that it makes sense to look for a unified normative grounding of morality.

2. Wrong-making, right-making, and ethical theorizing

Wrong-making and right-making: the idea
The thought that wrong acts are made wrong by some of their properties (and that right acts are made right by some of theirs) is backed up by the view that the moral status of acts in some way or other *depends* on their non-moral properties.

Ethical theories and the moral 'because'
Enquiring into wrong-making and right-making properties is not some marginal topic of moral philosophy. One risks overlooking this if one only focuses on the *practical aim* of ethical theories, which is to offer moral guidance. One way of doing this is to come up with a moral principle of the form
> an act ϕ is morally right if, and only if, ϕ is F
for some suitable property F. Such principles do not convey information about wrong- or right-making properties.
This is different with principles of the form
> an act ϕ is morally right if, and only if, *and because* ϕ is F.

Justifying vs. explaining
Judgements of the form 'ϕ is right (or wrong) because ϕ is F' are attempts to state on grounds of what ϕ has the moral status it has. This is why such judgements are an essential part of the normative *content* of an ethical theory (or of what is implied by it) and not attempts to *justify* judgements about moral rightness or wrongness.

3. Case study: what makes wrong lies wrong?

The question about lies, refined
Let ϕ be a morally wrong lie. What is the property F of ϕ *in virtue of which* ϕ is wrong, i.e. the property F for which it is true that ϕ is wrong *because* ϕ is F?

The standard definition of a lie
A lies if, and only if,
(a)   A makes a statement,
(b)   A's statement is untruthful,
(c)   A makes the statement in question to another person,
(d)   A intends to deceive B with regard to the statement in question (i.e. A intends to get B to believe the truth of A's statement).

Candidates for contingent wrong-making properties of wrong lies
Given some wrong lie ϕ candidates for a property F such that
        ϕ, as a contingent matter of fact, is F and ϕ is wrong because it is F
is true are, e.g.: '… harms its addressee'; '… restricts its addressee's autonomy'; or, more general: '… has negative consequences'.

Lying not a morally relevant factor in itself (I)
If a wrong lie ϕ is wrong on grounds of one of the properties just mentioned, then lying is not, in the respective context, a morally relevant factor in itself. In such contexts, the fact that ϕ is a lie is, at best, an epistemically relevant (fallible) *indicator* for whatever is the morally relevant factor.

Candidates for necessary wrong-making properties of wrong lies
Given some wrong lie ϕ, candidates (some less, some more plausible) for a property F such that
        ϕ necessarily is F and ϕ is wrong because it is F
is true are, e.g.: '… involves using language contrary to its function'; '… is an attempt to deceive'; '… is an attempt to deceive employing linguistic means'.

Lying not a morally relevant factor in itself (II)
Under these proposals, the fact that the act in question is a lie is not a more or less fallible, but a perfectly reliable indicator for the presence of whatever is the morally relevant factor. Lying is, however, as before, not itself a morally relevant factor.

Lying as a morally relevant factor
That an act is a lie is a potentially morally relevant factor only if it is possible for a lie to be wrong *because* it is a lie – in other words, only if there are wrong lies ϕ for which it is true that
        ϕ is wrong because ϕ is a lie.

4. Pluralism vs. monism in ethics

Generalizing the result
The stated result straightforwardly generalizes to all potential morally relevant factors:For *any* property F: F is a potentially wrong-making property only if there are wrong F-acts that are wrong because they are F.
        For *any* property F: F is a potentially right-making property only if there are right F-acts that are right because they are F.

Ethical theorizing and right-making

A statement of the form 'an act φ of type *F* is right [or wrong] because it is *F*' is neither trivial nor uninformative. Indeed, any ethical theory that is reasonably informative with regard to foundational ethical questions needs to involve such statements.

The foundational character of right-making features

If a morally right act φ is made right by its property *F*, then there is no point in enquiring any further into a deeper normative foundation of φ's wrong-making features. If some act φ is made wrong by its property *F*, then it is wrong to say that 'actually', what makes φ wrong is some *other* property *G*.

Ethical pluralism

Ethical pluralism is the view that there is a plurality of potentially right-making (and/or wrong-making) properties.

Grounding ethical pluralism? – The general idea

Ethical pluralism of the sort advocated by Ross is often accused of providing only 'an unconnected heap of duties'. This is why several authors, most notably Audi and Hooker, have set out to provide such a normative foundation for Rossian pluralism.

Example: Hooker's project

Hooker aims at showing that Ross's principles about *prima facie* duties, such as, e.g., the principle that there always is a *prima facie* duty (i.e., a moral reason) to keep one's promises, can be justified with reference to a rule-consequentialist principle.

In view of the above results on right-making, there are, with regard to such a project two, and only two options:

– *Either*, the unifying principle mentions the right- and/or wrong-making features. Then the resulting theory is not arrived at by amending ethical pluralism, but rather by abandoning it.

– *Or*, the commitment to ethical pluralism and its claim that there is a plurality of right- and wrong-making features is retained. Then it cannot be the case that the overarching rule-consequentialist principle informs us about wrong- or right-making features.

A general lesson

When it comes to pluralism and monism in ethics, you can't have the cake and eat it, too. Either you are a pluralist, or you are a monist – but you can't be a pluralist on one level and a monist on another, allegedly deeper one.

5. Outlook

A stylized theistic ethical theory

In order to get into view a type of option that is not ruled out by the above argument, consider somebody who holds a plurality of principles such as:

(I)   one ought not to kill (because it is killing).

He is, however, also interested in providing some kind of a unified underpinning of this plurality of his principles. Here is the option considered by him:

(II)   [one ought not to kill (because it is killing)] because God said so.

In contrast to, e.g., Hooker's theory, this principle does not conflict with the fact that the ban on killing specifies the wrong-making feature of killings. Consider by contrast the following principle:

(III)   killings are wrong because God said so.

This principle says that killings are made wrong not by being killings, but by the fact that God said they are wrong. This is very different from principle (I), and the grounding of it in (II).

Example: Scanlon's contractualism

A possible example for an ethical theory that is analogous to the theistic ethical theory just considered is Scanlon's contractualism.

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