

Lie – Violence: Is it good or bad?

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“ – In the same field, how can the two sides be so different? The guys over there are dead serious, while you guys are cheery and breezy.

One Paddy Youth, still dancing to the wind, swiftly replies,

– Sir, it’s because our circumstances are different. Our bunch is light and free, while those guys spend all day long worried and guarding their ripe grains. What a terrible waste of time! Beautiful sunny days are for singing, dancing, and chattering away...”

In “Light and Free”; [The Kingfisher Story Collection](#) (2022)

Recently, I have had the honor to be a part of the research about the connection of religious teachings with lie and violence in Vietnamese folktales (Vuong et al., 2019). The research, employing data generated from the folktale collections of (Nguyen, 2014a; Nguyen, 2014b), highlights the double-standard in the interpretation and practices of lie and violence preached in the teachings of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. People might have different views on this result, so do I.

In my opinion, lie and violence have always been considered as vices due to its literal meanings, but I would like to refer their role as a means for fulfilling some kinds of purpose rather than judging them bad or good. There are two examples which might help elaborate my thinking.

The first example is even being taught in Vietnamese high school. When I was in high school, I was instructed on how to write a discourse essay. One of the main topics was “Is lying good or bad?”. After hours of discussing and debating, my teacher eventually told us that lying was bad, but to some extent, it was good too. To assert her claim, she gave an example that doctors need to lie to keep the patients not worrying about their bad health conditions (cancer, e.g.). From the teacher’s example, did doctors conduct immoral acts? To me, it is so wrong to have such accusations on someone trying to save other lives.

In our common sense, killing someone is an immoral act no matter what. However, the world we are living in is full of unexpected events. Just like the news I read recently about a woman accidentally killing a burglar who had killed her husband (Quang, 2019). Did the wife do something wrong and immoral? It is still a no, as the wife was trying to protect herself from the burglar.

In both cases, the doctor tells a lie, or the wife kills the burglar, I still believe they did not conduct any immoral act, as their ultimate purposes are not for harming people, but saving people or self-defense. This explanation can also be applied to other circumstances, such as religious teachings.

That lying and violent act can still result in a favorable consequence for the committer, even in the context of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism teachings. To me, that seems to be double-standard. However, let’s recall the ultimate purpose of each religious teaching: Buddhism – compassion and meditation, Taoism – natural harmony, and Confucianism – societal order, all of which are for the good of the humanity. For that reason, the appearance of the act of lie or violence in the context of religious teachings is more likely a means to convey the moral value of the purpose of the committer. For example, in ‘A story of a bird named Bim Bíp,’ a story in the collection of Vietnamese folktales the bandit with his violent act leads him to enlightenment which is a favorable consequence because his violent act does not cause harm to the monk but manifests his ‘true heart’ (Ho, 2019). From this story, the violent act of the bandit is just a means for fulfilling the purpose of being enlightenment which is the goal of Buddhism teaching.

In sum, we should only consider the act of lying and violence as a means to fulfil a purpose, but not bad or good, as bad or good is for judging the purpose of the committers, like the

circumstances of the doctor and the wife aforementioned. It is also similar in folktales. Every piece of folktale has its own purpose. The image of violence and cruelty in folktales can sometimes be used to teach fear, help people learn about safety, or even demonstrate discipline (Boudinot, 2005; Haar, 2006), while the moral lesson about honesty is taught through the consequence of the act of lying (Kim, Song, Lee, & Bach, 2018; MacDonald, 2013). Folktales with factors of religious teaching also have their particular purposes which are usually quite elusive and vague, especially in the context of Eastern religious teaching (Le, 2019); therefore, without careful consideration, we might view them as double standard. It is also noteworthy that there exist such low-cost reading materials as folktales, which could be rich in meanings and contents for future generations to learn about how, why and when their cultures have come. And this is good news for numerous social sciences and humanities scholars, according to Vuong (2018).

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