

The case against honesty

The Cranky Professor

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Lying can often get you what you want. So why not lie?

Because lying can also get you into all sorts of trouble. The liar needs to remember his fictions or else be found out. Once he's found out, his reputation is in tatters and no one will believe him ever again. Having lost people's trust, it will be difficult for him to secure any of the things trust makes easy.

This reason in favour of honesty is exaggerated. Really, it's not always that hard to keep one's story straight. Many lies succeed in doing what they're intended to do and never get found out. Moreover, being caught in a lie is rarely the end of the world. People are happy to forgive a lie or two when the liar is exciting or charming, and they're quick simply to overlook a lie when overlooking serves their purposes.

The question isn't whether to be a congenital liar instead of being entirely honest. Those are not the only options. The question is whether to be open to lying, to be willing to tell a lie when one judges that lying would, overall, be the most effective way to attain one's end. Should one be honest—that is, should one as a matter of commitment or habit never tell lies, except, perhaps, in extreme situations—or should one be a judicious liar, prepared to speak falsely on those relatively rare occasions when doing so will advance one's interests?

Consider a clever and resourceful person prepared to lie whenever she judges that lying will best promote her life's projects. Such a person stands a much better chance of enjoying more of the things she loves for their own sakes, and of enjoying them more often, than stands an equally clever and resourceful person committed to being honest. That, in a nutshell, is the case against honesty.

She stands a better chance of enjoying the things she loves, for the honest person, whatever his projects are, abstains either habitually or out of principle from a particular means by which to attain things he wants, even when those means are the most efficient means available to him. A person not committed to honesty, on the other hand, uses whichever means are the most efficient available to her, without scruple.

The honest person has, in effect, tied one hand behind his back.

This chain of reasoning leads us to the conclusion that a clever and resourceful person prepared to lie whenever she judges that lying will best promote her life's projects will likely do better in life than an equally clever and resourceful person committed to honesty. You yourself, then, being clever and resourceful, would do well to overcome your debilitating prejudice against lying.

But maybe you aren't all that clever or resourceful. You don't think well in hot moments and you're given to overestimating the chance you'll succeed and underestimating the risks and penalties. Well, okay, to remain on the safe side you had better cultivate honesty. Too bad for you.

Or perhaps you would note that dishonest people suffer pangs of conscience. Suffering pangs of conscience hurts and it's also debilitating. Thus, a wise person commits herself to honesty even at the cost of tying a hand behind her back.

Certainly, then, a wise person cursed with a conscience would seek as best she can to rid herself of it. A wise person wouldn't let some weenie voice in her head condemn her to an inferior sort of life.

Or you object that the best community in which to pursue and enjoy the things one loves is the community in which honesty and the other virtues prevail, for in that community each individual benefits from the peace and prosperity virtue brings. The best way to create and maintain such a community is to commit oneself to honesty and the rest.

Yes, a wise person will be concerned to promote honesty and virtue among her fellow citizens. She will be concerned to help create and maintain a peaceful and prosperous community, because she wants to enjoy the benefits available only in such a community. Nonetheless, she has no reason to limit herself to those benefits she attains honestly.