

No one is honest just for the sake of honesty

The Cranky Professor

The Journal, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 75, No. 13, 3 February 2010

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

mark.mercer@smu.ca

The idea that honesty is the best policy does not stand up to scrutiny. Speaking truthfully and candidly might often be a wise course of action, but a person prepared to lie when he judges it best to lie will do better overall than an honest person will, at least so long as he's a person of good judgement.

Of course, honesty is certainly the best policy for those who lack judgement. But that's hardly to speak well of honesty. To note that people who fall down a lot ought to wear helmets isn't to praise helmets.

And so we who are clever and resourceful should try to overcome our debilitating prejudice against mendacity. We would do better in our own terms—that is, for what we want from life, whatever it is—were we prepared to lie when lying advances our cause.

But this argument neglects a live possibility. The premise is that a commitment to honesty is inefficient as a means to our ends, while the conclusion is that we would be better off without any such commitment. The possibility neglected is that honesty counts as one of our ends. The argument, that is, fails to note that a commitment to honesty might be its own reward.

Distinct from the idea of honesty as a policy is the idea of honesty as a way of living. We can commit ourselves to honesty for honesty's sake, as one of our ends, as a part of who we are and what we want from life. Our reason to be honest is simply that we like honesty, just as that one reason for playing hockey is that we like hockey, one reason for being stylish is that we're keen on style.

An objection to this idea is that it is fanciful. Just as a matter of fact, no one would actually want to be honest for the sake of honesty. Now we might be able to imagine someone devoted, for instance, to a saucer of mud, but really we're not going to find any such person, and there are facts about human psychology that explain this well. Likewise, we might be able in the abstract to conceive of a lover of honesty, but that's just a compliment to our powers of imagination.

That as a plain matter of fact no one is honest out of a love for honesty is a conclusion defended in a passage from Plato's *Republic*, a passage reproduced widely in introduction to philosophy anthologies. The character Glaucon directs us to consider two men, one of whom tells lies easily when pursuing his ends, the other of whom doesn't lie at all, not even when he recognizes it to be to his advantage to lie. Now imagine that each of these men acquires a device that enables him to lie without being found out. With the device, neither man will fear that lying will bring him punishment or even cost

him his good name. How would each man behave?

The man originally given to lying in pursuit of his ends will continue to lie. But the man who had always been honest will give up honesty. He, too, will pursue his ends with lies whenever he judges lying will serve him well. (Or so at least Glaucon proposes.) And this shows that the man formerly committed to honesty wasn't committed to it for its own sake.

More explicitly, Glaucon's argument is this: No one able to lie with impunity would remain committed to honesty; therefore, no one presently committed to honesty is committed to it for its own sake.

Now clearly this argument is missing a premise. We find in the conclusion the concept of being committed to something for its own sake, yet we do not find that concept in the stated premise. The argument is missing a premise that says something about being committed to things for their own sake, a premise that ties the stated premise to the conclusion.

I think Glaucon's argument is unsound, and that it is unsound because its unstated premise is false. What is this unstated premise? On what grounds can we dismiss that premise as false?