

Chapter 14

Be a Liar!

In Chapter 12, we followed four separate lines of argument each of which lead to the conclusion that we have good reason not to be liars. To lie, recall, is to represent oneself as believing some proposition when, in fact, one believes that proposition to be false. Each line sought to give us strong reason to be concerned generally not to lie. In Chapter 13, though, we were confronted by at least one objection to each of those lines of argument. Suppose that each line of argument against lying were shown by those objections to be unsound. Would that mean that we have no good reason to be honest people? No. It would show only that none of the lines of argument gives us a good reason to be generally honest. Perhaps some other line of argument is sound, one we haven't considered yet.

Do we, though, looking at the matter from the other side, have good reason to be liars? –We couldn't have reason, certainly, to tell lies willy-nilly or whenever the mood struck us. But perhaps we have reason simply not to care whether what we say is a lie or not. One idea that turned up time and again in the objections was that sometimes we can do better by lying than by not lying. When we lie, we might put things that matter to us at risk, and so we have to be careful. But often enough we can lie carefully and, thereby, advance our interests further than we could have advanced them without lying. We will, in this chapter, consider this point with all the seriousness it demands. We will try to construct an argument that whatever sort of life a particular person would do well to live, that person can live that life better if she is always prepared to lie.

1. The main argument

No one is honest for its own sake. That is, no one finds being honest, no one finds speaking the truth, intrinsically rewarding. Since no one is honest simply for the sake of being honest, people who are honest are so only out of their desires for the effects of being honest or their fear of the effects of being dishonest. The effects of being honest include honour, respect, and trust; they also include making other people less inclined to be dishonest toward one. Some of these effects—honour, for instance—are effects that some people love for their own sakes. Other effects aren't loved for their own sakes, but are nonetheless valued as efficient ways of securing one or another thing that is loved for its own sake.

The effects of being honest that people prize, though, actually come to one merely from one's having a reputation for being honest; they do not come directly from one's honesty. It is neither necessary nor sufficient that one be committed to honesty in order for one to bring about these effects. What is necessary and sufficient is a reputation for being honest.

Now, it is certainly true that there are many different ways of life in which people find happiness or fulfilment. Two people can lead very different sorts of life, and yet each find his own life wonderfully worth living and think the other sort of life horrible. Yet each of these people, though they pursue and enjoy very different things, are alike in that they both obtained

to the greatest extent possible, given their material situation, those things that they love for their own sakes.

Consider, then, a clever and resourceful person willing to lie whenever she judges that lying will best promote her life's projects. Such a person hasn't adopted a principle or habit either for or against lying; instead, she evaluates in the specific situations in which she finds herself the risks, rewards, costs, and penalties of lying, relative to her projects. She acts on the best bet in the case, whether the best bet involves speaking the truth or remaining silent or lying or whatever. Such a person, it would seem, 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. And so, a person stands a better chance of living well, whatever it is in which for him living well consists, if he is always prepared to lie rather than if he is honest by commitment.

If we put all these points together, the points made in each of the paragraphs of this section so far, we must draw this conclusion: To live the best life that you, a clever and resourceful person, can live, you need always to be willing to lie. You need, that is, to be a dishonest person, though, importantly, one whom others believe to be honest. (You need a reputation for honesty at least until you become powerful.)

This is a fairly complex argument, one we need to go over again if we are to see how the parts fit together. Here is the argument, in summary: Since no one loves being honest for its own sake, people who are honest are honest because they expect through their honesty to reap rewards or to avoid costs or punishment. It is not, though, honesty itself that brings these rewards to those who gain them; it is, rather, only the reputation for honesty that brings them. Now a person is happy or fulfilled in his life to the extent, all else equal, that he obtains those things he loves for their own sake. But a person committed to honesty in her pursuits of what she loves for its own sake will be less successful in those pursuits than she would be were she not committed to honesty—so long, of course, as she is at least moderately intelligent and resourceful. So, then, for one to live as well as one can, one must always be prepared to lie. To live as well as one can, that is, one must always be prepared to lie—so long as one is clever and resourceful enough to maintain a reputation for honesty.

That, then, is the main argument in favour of being dishonest—or, actually, in favour of not caring whether one lies or doesn't.

We might explain here what we added parenthetically above, that it is important for one to maintain a reputation for honesty only until one has power enough not to need to bother. Some people are so rich and powerful that they should hardly be concerned even to appear honest.

Let us now examine and defend each of the premises of the main argument.

2. No one values honesty for the sake of honesty

Imagine two people, one committed to honesty, the other not. (That is, suppose that by all empirical evidence one of the two never lies, even when lying would advance his interests, while by all empirical evidence the other of the two doesn't hesitate to lie when he judges lying will advance his interests; suppose as well that we have lots of empirical evidence for each.) Now imagine that each were to possess some device that made it possible for him to lie without being found out. (Maybe the device works by surreptitiously injecting the listener

with a drug that causes her to believe the speaker and to feel convinced that any evidence of deceit can somehow be explained away.) Clearly the dishonest person, now without fear of being caught or punished for his dishonesty, would not hesitate a moment to lie whenever he judges lying will best serve his purposes. But how would the person who, to all appearances, has been totally honest act now? Thanks to her device, she no longer fears being discovered were she to lie. So she no longer fears punishment for lying and she no longer fears that lying will put at risk her reputation for honesty. Her behaviour, we must admit (if we are honest), would now be indistinguishable from that of the dishonest person. She will lie whenever she judges lying will best serve her purposes. Since she now can get away with lying, she will lie.

A person actually committed to honesty out of a love of honesty itself, though, would not forsake his love in such changed circumstances. Had the formerly honest person truly loved honesty for its own sake (or hated dishonesty for its own sake), he would have set the device aside, as having no use for it. He would have set it aside, even though he understands how useful it would be in his pursuit of the many other things he loves for their own sake. But he didn't set it aside.

The thought experiment we just conducted shows, we are invited to conclude, that no one values honesty for its own sake. (No one finds being honest intrinsically rewarding.)

You might want to dispute the conclusion of this argument. You might, that is, want to say that indeed some people do love honesty for its own sake. You might be right. If you are, there must be something wrong with the argument through which we have just worked. Before you attempt to construct your argument to the conclusion you favour—that some people do love honesty for its own sake, that some people do find honesty intrinsically rewarding—attempt first to specify just where the above argument goes wrong.

3. People are honest only out of their desires for the effects of being honest

For anything that one values, one values it either for its own sake or for its effects. (One can value something *both* for its own sake *and* for its effects, of course.) You're keen on swimming, let's say. So, either you simply like to swim (you value swimming for the sake of swimming) or you swim for the sake of being on the beach or for the sake of exercise or for the sake of whatever it is you like that you think swimming brings. Applying this principle, we get: A person keen on honesty is so either because she values honesty for its own sake or because she values honesty for the sake of something else, something that honesty brings. The first premise in the main argument, the one we discussed above, is that in fact no one values honesty for its own sake. If that is true, then anyone who values honesty values honesty because and only because she expects something she does value for its own sake eventually to come to her as a result of her being honest. That's the only other option. People who are committed to honesty are so committed, then, only out of their desire for the effects of being honest.

4. The effects a person seeks from being honest actually come only from the reputation for being honest

A person who spoke the truth as she understood it but who is wrongly believed to have lied will not receive the honours, the respect, the consideration, and the trust that people bestow on those they believe have spoken the truth. In fact, if the case is one about which people care strongly, she will be hated and shunned. Thus, being honest is not itself sufficient for gaining the effects one seeks from being honest.

On the other hand, a person who in fact spoke what she believed was untrue meaning, thereby, to deceive people but who is wrongly believed to have spoken sincerely will receive the honours, the respect, the consideration, and the trust that people bestow on those they believe honest. Thus, being honest is not even necessary for gaining the effects one seeks from being honest.

In both cases, it seems, both in the case of speaking sincerely and being hated and in the case of speaking insincerely and being respected, what is doing the work is the perception others have of one. If others think you are sincere, you reap the rewards of sincerity, whether the others are right or wrong; if others think you insincere, you suffer the penalties of insincerity, whether the others are right or wrong. So, then, it is one's reputation that does the work, and neither one's honesty nor one's dishonesty, whichever the case might be.

Therefore, we must conclude, the intended effects of being honest actually come to one rather from one's having the reputation for being honest. They don't come from honesty itself. Moreover, it is possible for one to lie but be thought to have spoken sincerely and it is possible for one to tell the truth and be thought to have lied. Thus, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that one be committed to honesty in order for one to have the reputation for honesty.

5. One's life goes better the more one obtains the things one loves for their own sake

Riding the bus isn't always or even usually unpleasant, though it certainly can be terribly unpleasant on occasion, but no one rides the bus for the sake of riding the bus. (Maybe we should say just that it's a rare person who rides the bus for its own sake.) We're happy enough to ride the bus if it's a pleasant ride and riding the bus is an efficient way to get where we're going and we're going somewhere where we can enjoy something we love for its own sake. So, our lives are not diminished by a short, pleasant ride on the bus to the beach, when we want to go to the beach just for the sake of the fun we expect to have at the beach. But it's the fun of the beach that really matters to us. We want to be at the beach for as long as the beach fun lasts. We don't do so well when the bus ride to the beach takes so long we have to leave the beach before we want to leave it.

Consider your life and all the many things in it that you love for their own sakes (or all the many things that could be in it that you would love for their own sakes). Now imagine you are forced by circumstance to use less and less efficient means to obtain those things. You would be spending more and more time and energy trying to obtain the things you love for their own sakes and less and less time actually enjoying them. You are happier and more fulfilled in your life the more you are with the things you love for their own sake; you are less happy and less fulfilled the more you are struggling to obtain them. (That some of the things we love for their own sakes are ways of pursuing other things does not constitute an objection to this point.)

The best life of all for you, then, whatever sort of life it happens to be, is that in which you are to the greatest extent possible engaged with the things you love for their own sake.

6. Being prepared to lie helps one to obtain the things one loves for their own sakes

An honest person does not lie to others. That is, she does not weigh the advantages and disadvantages of lying and not lying and then go with the best bet, whichever it happens to be.

She simply refrains from lying, even when she recognizes that lying is the best bet. But that means that an honest person abstains from using a particular means, lying, by which she might attain things she loves for their own sakes, even when that means is the most efficient means available to her. To be honest, it appears, is to tie one of one's hands behind one's back.

A dishonest person, on the other hand, a person, that is, who is indifferent to whether some envisioned course of action involves lying, will lie whenever he judges it is in his interests overall to do so. The dishonest person does not set lying aside but keeps it handy in his toolkit.

Now, generally speaking, a person who abstains from using what in the case is the most efficient means to further her projects will almost certainly use more time and energy in pursuit of things she loves than she would were she to use whatever the most efficient means happens to be. We all can get to our goals more quickly and more easily using two free hands than using just one.

Therefore, a clever and resourceful person prepared to lie whenever she judges that lying will best promote her life's projects stands a much better chance of enjoying more of the things she loves for their own sakes, and of enjoying them more often, than she would were she to labour under a strong commitment not to lie.

7. To live as well as you can

The conclusion of the argument is that to live as well as you can, whatever it is that would make your life go well, you are well advised to be dishonest. You are wise, that is, not to care whether you are telling the truth or lying. To be honest is to care not to lie even when lying is the most efficient means to your end. But, then, to be honest is to burden yourself in your pursuit of what matters to you, and that is certainly a foolish thing to do.

We should note that the argument makes no strong claims about what makes a life go well, what happiness is, or what fulfilment is. Perhaps there are many sorts of well-lived life, perhaps there are only a few sorts. No matter. All of them are lives in which the person living them has acquired much of whatever it is he most loves for its own sake.

And we should note that the argument applies only to fairly clever and resourceful people. A person too stupid and limited ever to make a success of lying in a hot moment or a tight spot really ought to adopt honesty as his policy. But you are not such a person.

8. Objections

1) The very best way to acquire and maintain a reputation for honesty is to be committed out of principle or habit to honesty. This is because to be prepared to lie whenever one judges it best overall to lie is to put at risk one's reputation for honesty and, thereby, to put at risk the honours, respect, consideration, and trust that come with a reputation for honesty. It is also to risk punishment, the very worst outcome from the point of view of one's quest to enjoy the things one loves for their own sake. People are notoriously bad at estimating the chance that they will get caught should they lie; and people typically overestimate the value of what they

can accomplish by lying and underestimate the cost of being caught and punished. So, to stay on the safe side, the wise person commits himself to honesty.

Response: A reputation for being honest can be a great asset and being honest is the best way to gain and maintain that reputation. And, yes, for some people being honest is the only way they can acquire and maintain a reputation for honesty. But for you, clever and resourceful as you are, being honest is not the only way to acquire and maintain a good reputation. A few well-timed public displays of honesty and you have the reputation you want; now it's just a matter of being careful not to lose it. You would be less likely to lose it if you were honest, but overall it is better for you to take a little risk. That only a clever and resourceful person, one able to estimate risks and values accurately and reliably, could acquire and maintain a reputation for honesty while being dishonest does not imply that for you wisdom counsels honesty.

2) Liars suffer pangs of conscience. Suffering pangs of conscience is bad in itself and also debilitating. Thus, a wise person commits herself to honesty.

Response: A person without a conscience is, then, most fortunate! A wise person cursed with a conscience seeks as best she can to rid herself of her conscience. A wise person unable to rid herself of her conscience will draw a deep breath and, with profound regret, resign herself to living less well than she might have lived.

3) The best community in which to pursue and enjoy the things one loves for their own sakes is the community in which honesty prevails, for in that community each individual benefits from the peace and prosperity honesty brings. The best way for one to help create and maintain such a community is for one to commit oneself to honesty.

Response: A wise but dishonest person will be concerned to promote honesty among his fellow citizens in order to help create and maintain an ethos of honesty in his community, so that he might enjoy the benefits available in such a community. But he has no reason to limit himself to the honest pursuit of these benefits. He continues to stand ready to lie in seeking his good.