

The Virtue of Honesty

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Preliminaries

This will be more of a lecture format than usual. Structured discussion. Stop me for questions and comments at any time. Preview of TOC talk “White Lies, Black Lies.”

Honesty concerns both deception of others and deception of oneself. Tonight will focus on truthfulness, honesty with other people. Issues of evasion and self-deception significantly different from those of truthfulness. Already discussed in meeting on rationality.

Introduction

Aesop’s fable “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.”

Fable reflects common view of primary reason to be honest. Dishonesty can damage trust in our relationships. So many lies go undetected. Trust Argument inadequate to justify honesty as a virtue.

Recent defenses of dishonesty rely upon inadequacy of this argument. Fashionable defenses of dishonesty by philosophers and psychologists: Nyberg and Ford. We can help people by lying to them. Reality too harsh.

Tonight discuss the major egoistic arguments for honesty. There are lots, more than 12, some uniquely Objectivist, others also found in philosophical literature. Hope for practical benefits in discussing these arguments, so that think of possible long-range consequences if lying seems like a good option. Also discuss when honesty not required.

Defenders of dishonesty also rely upon an expansive view of lies. Any failure to say exactly what you are thinking and feeling, any filters or discretion dishonest.

So in the second part of our discussion, want to defend an idea of telling relevant truth, but not always the whole truth, as required by the principle of honesty. Help us solve hard cases of how much truth to reveal.

Defining Honesty

Honesty is the virtue of refusing to fake the facts of reality. Negative definition. Refusing to do something. Positive formulation, commitment to the facts of reality, is simply rationality. Honesty as commitment to only reality. So how can we fake reality to others?

Easiest way is to outright say something we know to be false. Examples: Take credit for work done by co-workers; tell young child that his thumb will fall off if he keeps sucking it. These are lies of commission.

We can also fake reality by telling only partial truths, by leaving our critical information. Example: I tell you “my watch says 3pm” when know that it is broken. That’s a lie of omission.

We can also fake reality through gestures and body language. Example: Nodding and smiling at a proposal to force students to “volunteer” to help the needy at a PTA meeting.

Faking reality requires an intent to deceive, to misrepresent the facts. We’re hoping they won’t discover the truth. Look more closely at this in the second half of discussion.

Arguing For Honesty as a Virtue

Go through three arguments: first most fundamental, two others most complex. Rest discuss, drawing upon own experiences of long-range consequences of dishonesty.

We need so many arguments because any given consequence not guaranteed for any given lie. Form principles based upon general, usual, likely long-range consequences. These arguments highlight those likely long-range consequences. As Peikoff said: win battle but lose war with dishonesty.

Primacy of Existence Argument: Deception does not alter the facts. Denial of metaphysical subjectivism.

Example: Spread malicious gossip about a friend. Denying it won't erase memory of comments from people who heard them or resolve underlying hostility or magically grant you more discretion in future.

Argument seems too obvious to mention. Advocates of dishonesty explicitly or implicitly reject this argument. Lying protects us from the "sharp edges" of reality. Lying protects people from malevolent universe. Particularly evident in feel-good self-esteem movement.

Self-Deception Argument: Deception of others may promote self-deception. Argument not made explicitly in Objectivist non-fiction, but commonly seen in AS. James Taggart always hoping that Dagny will agree to his lies as protection against facts. Questions about how this works. See it empirically in habitual deceivers of others, they usually also deceive themselves. How?

- Emotional motivation: Unpleasant emotions about deception and underlying facts may motivate self-deception.
 - Self-Deceptive Denials. Guilt about the lie may result in denial of having lied and perhaps of underlying facts concealed by lie. Example: Student cheats on test by looking in textbook. Scared that will be caught, so lies to teacher when questioned. Feels guilty about cheating and lie. Re-writes events in mind so that didn't really cheat and didn't really lie, because didn't have time to write down any really good answers.
 - Self-Deceptive Rationalizations: Guilt about the lie may motivate rationalization of the lie as justified. Example: Woman who feels guilty over deceiving her husband about excessive spending rationalizes her lie on the grounds that he has lied to her too. Even if he has lied, doesn't justify her lies. Oddly enough, most likely consequence with people who are generally honest, who think that honesty is best policy.
- Cognitive Ease: Deception of others about X makes self-deception about X cognitively easier.
 - Easier to adopt biased viewpoint if already presenting slanting truth to others. Example: Man denying responsibility for failed project focuses only on facts which exonerate him, not those which implicate him, in order to give most convincing account to others. Easier to push unpleasant facts from him mind. Might not intend to self-deceive, but slides into it over time. Wants lies to be true.
 - Acceptance of lies by others serves as evidence of their validity. Particular effective if lie is a matter of interpretation and if no rational standards for proof. Example: In AS, Stadler desperately wanting Dagny's recognition, even if dishonest, to prop up

his self-deception of himself as a rational person. (357) JT trying to convince DT of lies in AS. Part of sanction of victim; other people lies prop up own self-deceptions. Example: Abusive mothers using physician's failure to notice child abuse as indications that the injury was an accident.

- Aid to Lies: Self-deception reinforced because makes lies to others more plausible and consistent. Example: Someone who believes that he didn't really badmouth a friend less likely to give off verbal and physical cues (like shifty eyes or fidgety feet) of deception. Also, story more likely to be plausible, because have already made the story plausible to oneself.

Whatever the reason, dishonesty with others does seem to facilitate self-deception, paves the way cognitively and emotionally.

Question: Does this seem plausible? Or is correlation between self-deception and other-deception the result of self-deception resulting in other-deception?

Habit Argument: Any one lie may contribute to a habit of lying. In TS's VV. Aristotelian argument. How does this happen?

- Every lie creates danger of more and wider exceptions to our principle of honesty. Want to believe that were justified, so carve out exceptions. Those exceptions likely to expand over time, to become more consistent. As with self-deception, particularly likely for people who do hold honesty to be an important virtue. Example: Copy homework. Rationalize as okay because with permission. But same rationalization can be used for copying work on papers and exams, so long as have permission. End up cheating on papers and exams because already have easy excuse.
- Dishonesty atrophies the skills needed to be consistently honest while still being discreet or tactful or sensitive or whatever. Honesty in difficult situations takes finesse, discernment, emotional control, etc. Being honest all the time helps us develop the skills to be honest when difficult. But even being only very occasionally dishonest (in hard cases) squanders opportunities to develop those skills. Example: Avoided jerk at seminar. At airport saw him. He asked whether I was avoiding him. I didn't know what to say, so I denied it. Like deer in headlights. Couldn't think up good answer because wasn't used to dealing with those hard situations.
- With habit of dishonesty, lie is default response, first thing to pop into brain, even when obviously and immediately disadvantageous. Takes too much effort and time to think of honest answer upon demand. Dishonesty seems like only option. Honesty seems to come at steep price of our privacy, of tact, etc.

Question: How else might lying become habitual?

Arguing For Honesty as a Virtue

Questions: What other types of long-range consequences? What effects of dishonesty have you seen in your own life?

Distraction Argument: Constructing and maintaining plausible lies requires time and effort that could be better spent on more pleasurable and productive pursuits. In TS's VV. Not thinking about solutions to problems, but rather their concealment. Dishonesty excessively complicates life. Example: Making up elaborate tale about why you missed a lunch date with a friend is a waste of

time! Spend that time thinking about how to fix problems with disorganization or make up lapse to your friend.

Dependence Argument: Dishonesty makes us dependent upon the ignorance, laziness, and irrationality of other people and puts us at odds with the knowledge, perceptiveness, and rationality of others. We create conflicts of interest where none need exist. Uniquely Objectivist argument. Extension of the Gail Wynand argument that those who seek to manipulate others become their pawns in the end. Must pander to other people's delusions. Example: Scientist falsifying data puts himself in conflict with rational people, because they might discover his fraud.

Slippery Slope Argument: One lie may not be sufficient to conceal the truth. We may have to lie again and again to prop up the original lie. We may have to lie to more and more people, even those we would much rather be honest with. Each new lie, of course, increases the risk that our deceptions will be discovered. Not all lies have a slippery slope. But don't necessarily know in advance. Example: Scientist falsifying data lies to colleagues, students, assistants, friends, and family. The more successful his lie, the more attention his "discovery" receives, the more he must lie.

Vice Argument: Dishonesty generally promotes vice and undermines virtue. The virtues are interrelated, so can't be perfectly virtuous except for dishonesty. Dishonesty may weaken our commitments to other virtues. Example: Plagiarizing paper violates principle of honesty and of productivity. Lying about true judgment of friend's bad behavior is cowardly and unjust.

Social Metaphysics Argument: Lies prioritize the false opinions other people over the facts and one's own judgment. In NB's BPO. "Only I will know." Humiliation. Can promote habit of social metaphysics. Problem of circularity? Does argument depend upon concealed act regarded as immoral? Example: Man who lies about rival to get promoted over him in job. "Only I will know that am unjust and undeserving." Degrading to care so little about one's own opinion of oneself.

Hidden Consequences Argument: Manipulating others may have unintended, hidden, and harmful effects upon ourselves and to those we care about. Highlighted some of these hidden consequences in paper on false excuses. Other particular types of lies have similarly hidden consequences.

Example: Telling a late friend that we were not inconvenienced might spare a conflict, but also may help perpetuate their habit of tardiness because they don't know how much we are bothered by their lateness.

Trust Argument: The discovery of deception can damage the trust so essential to our relationships. Liar's word can no longer be taken at face value. Weak argument because depends upon lie being discovered. Example: Friend who falsely denies revealing a secret. Will you trust him with your secrets? Trust him to admit any wrongdoing?

Reputation Argument: The discovery of deception can damage our reputation, and thereby limit our capacity to form new relationships. This argument focuses not on present relationships, but future ones. Really weak argument because depends upon lie being discovered and communicated to others in community. Example: Man with reputation for cheating on girlfriends might have trouble finding new ones, particularly new ones worth dating. Plenty of men without reputation for philandering to date.

In sum...

Illusory Value Argument: Ill-gotten gains are not actually gains at all if seen in their full context, including the long-range consequences of dishonesty itself. In Galt's Speech, Rand says (without explanation or justification) "neither love nor fame nor cash is a value if obtained by fraud." Seems implausible and bizarre. Is money, even if gotten dishonestly, not a value? Will it not buy me bread and medicine? Can't I use it to advance my life?

Tara Smith makes Rand's argument sensible. Can't just focus on likelihood of successful deception versus risk of being caught. (That's why Trust Argument is inadequate.) We need to look at the full context of ill-gotten gains, particularly the method of acquiring those gains. The method itself has consequences that bear upon the worth of the value. "Ill-begotten gains are not gains because, by their method of acquisition, they weaken a person's means of furthering his life" (169). Although it may seem that we can occasionally profit through dishonesty, the benefits are only illusory, because the method of dishonesty itself is so costly and so corrupting to a person's life, particularly to capacity to act in future. We can see these corrupting effects of dishonesty particularly in the Habit Argument and the Self-Deception Argument. Can only maintain that ill-gotten gains are values if drop context.

Limits of Honesty

Honesty not Kantian duty. Honesty is virtue in context of voluntary, trading relationships with people capable of rationality. When force being used against us, when honesty would serve evil, then outright dishonesty is morally acceptable. Can avoid irrational people, but not those wielding force. In BPO, NB says that anything victim of force chooses to do in own self-defense against initiator of force is right. (Harming other innocent victims not permissible.) Speaks of "suspending morality".

Generally conceived of as gaining versus keeping a value. Okay to be dishonest to keep value, but not to gain one. Sometimes we deserve to lose values, like spouse's loyalty if cheat or good reputation if harm friend. So need a concept of justice to make gain versus keep a useful distinction. In BPO, not morally acceptable to use deception to gain values which would not possess otherwise. Morally acceptable to use deception to protect values which you possess by right and which is threatened by force. That seems good to me. Example: SS is demanding you turn over Jews hidden in attic. Example: EPA wants to forbid you from using 33 of your 35 acres because endangered mouse lives there.

Not always in our interest to lie to rights-violators. Pick battles wisely. We still risk harmful consequences by lying in these cases, such as slippery slope, distraction, social metaphysics, not to mention prison or fines. Are we stuck with a case-by-case evaluation in these cases as to whether better to lie or tell the truth? Live in a world where force is being initiated all the time, so principles would be useful.

Protecting Privacy

Disagreement in Objectivist literature as to whether morally acceptable to lie to protect privacy.

In Rand-approved BPO, NB says that honesty does not require answers to questions from people on matters that do not affect them. Honesty consists of refusing to answer question, perhaps pointing out impertinence. Choice is between honesty or silence. "You don't lower yourself to the status of a liar for the sake of their impropriety." This makes sense. Not forced to deal with people who ask privacy-invading questions. Can always cultivate zone of privacy by steadfastly refusing to answer invasive questions. Example: Don't talk about who you sleep with at work, then don't

have to answer questions about whether sleeping with the boss. Need to actively cultivate zone of privacy in advance so refusal to answer question isn't seen as confirmation.

In OPAR (276), Peikoff asserts the opposite: "There are men other than criminals or dictators to whom it is moral to lie. For example, lying is necessary and proper in certain cases to protect one's privacy from snoopers. An analysis covering such details belongs, however, in a treatise on ethics." No mention of privacy exception in "Philosophy of Objectivism" tapes that OPAR based on.

Unless Peikoff is talking about stalkers (but those are criminals), don't see either how to justify or how to reconcile with Branden's very clear statements made with Rand's approval.

AS Example: In AS Dagny does lie to mother to protect hers and Francisco's privacy about their beginning sexual relationship. "When she came home, she told her mother that she had cut her lip by falling against a rock. It was the only lie she ever told. She did not do it to protect Francisco; she did it because she felt, for some reason which she could not define, that the incident was a secret too precious to share." (100)

AS Example: Hank getting angry at man who saw through their "Mrs and Mrs Smith," but Dagny saying "don't ever get angry at a man for stating the truth" (283).

AS Example: Eddie Willer's lies "for the first time in his life" to conceal his immediate dismay at learning that HR is DT lover. Makes up an excuse for why he is discomposed. (607)

Examples: Keeping failures from people who are mean, who would use them to tease. Keeping medical condition from gossip tree at work. Preventing overwhelming questions in time of grief.

Other Justified Lies

Questions: Are there any other justified lies? Lies to irrational people? Lies to people who would use truth as weapon against us? Lies in court even if guilty of real rights violation?

Lies to irrational people: In AS, Stadler takes view that must lie to irrational people. "Men are not open to truth or reason. They cannot be reached by a rational argument. The mind is powerless against them. Yet we have to deal with them. If we want to accomplish anything, we have to deceive them into letting us accomplish it. Or force them. They understand nothing else." (183) But that is self-defeating strategy.

Telling The Relevant Truth

Honesty not just negative virtue: don't lie. Refusing to fake reality. Also positive virtue: tell the truth. But how much truth do we owe other people? Am I being dishonest is say something technically correct, but leave out critical information? Real complexity. People struggle with how much information to convey to other people.

Capacity to effectively present unemotional, aloof silence and give minimal answers is skill worth cultivating. But we don't want to be silent all the time with all people. Lying not necessary to protect privacy or be tactful in most cases if can be silent instead. So how much information should we be telling in various circumstances?

We need to tell the contextually relevant truth. Convey the important, essential information in communications. Not mere technical truth; can be misleading. Not the whole truth; can be boring and uninteresting.

Point is not that people have an altruistic "right" to the truth or that their need for truth obliges us to give it to them. Rather if wish to have a particular sort of relationship with person, then we ought to be sharing certain types of information at certain times.

What determines contextual relevance?

- The nature of the information: Willing to share it with anyone? with select few? with no one? Depends upon our own personal preferences of privacy. Example: Woman just had baby. News of birth is public. Details of difficulty in labor more private.
- The nature of the relationship: Is the other person close? distant? What is the general level of intimacy? What kind of information expect to be shared? Example: Death of a pet. Should tell family members and close friends because those close to us expect to hear of important events in life. But for casual acquaintances, no need to open up grief to them. No expectation of shared intimacy.
- The background knowledge: How much information needed for reasonable inferences to the truth? NB in BPO says: "One must always judge the full context of a situation and act in a manner which will not give anybody an objective (that is rational) reason to misinterpret one's actions and be deceived by them." Example: Woman tells friend that leaving husband because he cheated on her, but fails to mention that she cheated on him for years before. Not giving enough objective judgment.

These three are primary considerations. What other considerations might there be?

- The current situation: Is situation appropriate for discussion or should wait until later? Present moment not always appropriate for sort of discussion necessary. Okay to withhold information for short time. Example: Not telling wife about her husband's death while she's in the car on the cell phone. Don't want to endanger her life, even though she ought to know asap.
- The meaning of the inquiry: What information is actually being sought? Shouldn't always take questions literally. Example: "Do I look fat in this dress?" Not asking for comparison to Kate Moss but to usual appearance.
- Expectations of dishonesty: In some situations, dishonesty is expected, so honesty not required. Example: Bluffing in poker game. Doesn't mean that in poker game can lie about anything, just about strength of hand. Example: Exaggerations and minimization in marketplace bargaining.

One useful question: If other person discovered full and total truth, would reasonably feel deceived? Question: More criteria? Relevant truth examples:

- Example: "I don't support the NRA." True, but because are compromising weenies. Misleading information, so dishonest.
- Example: "I am not a Christian" better than "I don't go to church."
- Example: Reply to question "How are you?" with "I'm fine." Doesn't mean that life is perfect. Merely polite acknowledgement of other person's existence. Depth of inquiry depends upon context.
- Example: Japanese hamburger story (Nyberg 160) "Amazing" and "Wonderful" but not delicious. Express appreciation for effort, even if avoid the issue of how it tastes. If directly asked how it tastes, make light of it, as is unimportant!

Question: Other hard cases? When does omitting information for the sake of politeness cross over into appeasement?

Coping With Dishonest People

- Get away! Limit contact!
- Be very careful, honest, and fair in dealings so that outsiders can clearly see irrationality.

- Try to stay calm, even when doing blatantly terrible things. Emotionalism not looked upon well.
- Be alert to signs of dishonesty. Verify important claims. Make person commit on paper.
- Don't lie for such people, not even a little bit.
- Don't aid person's self-deceptions. Don't appease irrationality. Example: In AS, Lillian wants Hank to lie to her, even though she knows it is a lie. (290)

Conclusion

Honesty is an achievement. Not the norm. Deception common in animal kingdom. The honest life is the simpler life.

Since made commitment to be honest all the time, to not tell white lies, never had situation in which would be really advantageous to lie. Simplified my dealings with others immensely. Forces me to be a better person.