



The Metaphysical Case for Honesty

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1. Conventional Arguments for Honesty

What are the most familiar explanations of why dishonesty is wrong? One common argument turns on the observation that lying uses people. Some philosophers have regarded lies as a type of promise-breaking. Even without pressing that particular claim, many philosophers contend that dishonesty takes unfair advantage of others by distorting their choices, leading them to act under false impressions. Such arguments are often coupled with appeals to the idea that most people would not wish to be lied to. We do not enjoy being on the receiving end of lies, the contention is. Therefore, we should not lie to others.

A different line of reasoning appeals to self-interest. A dishonest person risks being caught and entangling himself in all kinds of practical complications. He jeopardizes his credibility and risks suffering the associated harms of a tarnished reputation. Even if a liar is not discovered, his deception is bound to create tensions, since the liar must be perpetually on guard, anxious to avoid being found out. This will lead him to be defensive and artificial, continually editing himself to preserve his secret. This, in turn, will naturally detract from the quality of his relationships with others.

Yet another line of argument is that beyond the local effects on the liar and other individuals immediately involved, dishonesty frays the fabric of social trust. It is not only implanting a specific false belief that can be damaging, but generating the suspicion that falsehoods are being circulated. Dishonesty creates a climate of wariness that carries corrosive consequences for everyone. Social trust is a fragile value; lies initiate its disintegration. We all pay a price in reduced willingness to trust others and to enjoy the benefits that such trust makes possible. As Henry Cabot has written, “Dishonesty cuts the arteries by which social life is nourished. Mutual deceit is social murder.”¹

What is striking about all of these accounts is their emphasis on the social ramifications of dishonesty. Honesty is portrayed as essentially about deceiving others. Even when the appeal is to self-interest, the nature of the harmful consequences stems entirely from other people. One of the few book-length explorations of honesty in recent years, Sissela Bok’s *Lying*, exemplifies this social perspective. Bok’s focus is on communication, as she examines the

effects of misleading other people. While Bok recognizes that lying is only one specific type of deception, she does not acknowledge that even the deception of others is only part of the domain of honesty.² This common orientation around other people, in fact, provides too shallow an explanation of the propriety of honesty.

2. A Broader Conception of Honesty

To appreciate why we should be honest, we must first clarify what honesty is. Honesty is usually understood by contrast with lying, the intentional deception of others, whether through misrepresentation, distortion, fabrication, or omission. Accordingly, honesty seems to mean truth-telling. On reflection, however, this definition turns out to be inadequate. What distinguishes an ideally honest person, someone who epitomizes honesty through and through, is not simply his refraining from deliberately uttering falsehoods to others. An honest person will, among other things, admit his uncertainty when he experiences doubts about some issue. He will not profess a belief or opinion before it is firmly established in his mind. He will admit error or fault, when appropriate, and assume responsibility for his actions rather than manufacture excuses or feign ignorance. He keeps his agreements.

An honest person is the antithesis of a pretentious person. A concern for appearances never overruns his concern for what is genuine. An honest person does not fudge through euphemisms, but names things for what they are. He faces unpleasant facts and the difficult actions that they might demand. These simple observations suggest a richer conception of honesty. Honesty is the refusal to fake reality. It is a person's refusal to pretend that facts are other than they are, whether to himself or others.³ This definition encompasses the acquisition of beliefs as well as the expression of them. It is not only the exchange of information that is valuable to human beings, but the validity of the information itself. Since knowledge is not pre-inscribed in the minds of individuals such that the only question we face is how to convey it, we need guidance for arriving at sound beliefs in the first place. The injunction against faking is the beginning of such guidance. Lying to others is simply one form of the broader phenomenon of faking.

3. The Case for Honesty

If the proper end of human action is a person's own objective flourishing, honesty is a vital tool. When a person is dishonest, he is pretending that some fact is not so or that some non-fact is so. Pretense is metaphysically impotent, however.⁴ Wishing does not make things so. Pretending is just that; it has no

power to change anything. Pretending might make a person feel better, in the moment. It might lighten a heavy heart or lift a person's mood. But it cannot alter the facts responsible for a person's feelings, which a person must address if he is to improve a painful situation.

Honesty is a virtue, at the most basic level, because things are what they are regardless of anyone's opinion or attitude toward them. Ultimately, the way things are is what we must work with to accomplish anything in life. The moral prescription of honesty is thus grounded in metaphysics. More specifically, it is grounded in the law of identity. A thing is what it is and its nature does not depend on anyone's perception of it, opinion of it, attitude toward it, or denials of it. Like them or not, we encounter certain facts in life. Cheese-cake is fattening. Speeding through residential neighborhoods is dangerous. Failing to diversify investments is risky. We can neither wish these facts away nor ignore them away. Facts do not evaporate on meeting a person's hostile reception.

People can change certain facts. We can destroy things, create things, or alter the nature of existing things in certain respects. We can only change facts by respecting facts, however. That is, we must honestly identify facts about possibilities and resources in order to effect change. The crucial point is that when something is so, our mental denials or desires do not change it. Insisting "I am just a social drinker" does not change the person who is an alcoholic. Insisting "He cannot have betrayed me" does not change the fact that he did. Pretense by itself cannot change anything. Thus it is the independent character of reality, teamed with the desire to advance our genuine well-being, that dictates the propriety of honesty.

Suppose that wishing did make things so. In such a world, honesty would be unimportant. We would have no need to face facts if we could simply redesign them at will. Instead, we might simply twitch our noses to alter inconveniences, like Samantha in the 1960s television program "Bewitched." We could have facts magically match whatever fantasies we pleased. Since we do not live in a fanciful sitcom, however, we must respect the conditions that we do face. The nature of reality dictates that we accept facts and work with facts in order to achieve any ends.

None of this is to suggest that honesty guarantees success in life. The facts of a person's situation are not always conducive to his well-being, and honestly confronting them is not a miracle tonic that ensures happy endings. Whatever the facts are, however, facing the facts is the first step necessary to navigating them effectively. A person might still fail to achieve his objective, but being realistic about his situation is a prerequisite for taking actions that have any chance of success. Evading the truth, by contrast, disarms a person. It actually compounds a person's problems by surrendering his greatest asset for battling adversity: his ability to think and act rationally. Rational action depends on the truth of a person's premises as well as on the inferences that

he draws from those premises. A person is not acting rationally, in the full sense, if his actions are based on falsehoods. It is not that a person must be infallible in order to be rational. But a rational person cannot be indifferent to the truth of his premises. He cannot ignore evidence that any of his premises is mistaken. Dishonesty sabotages a person's chances of acting rationally. A person cannot act rationally if he is denying or distorting pertinent facts. The whole point of being rational is to stay in touch with facts, to be guided in our decisions by the way things really are. Faking facts undermines the possibility of making the most rational decisions we can.⁵

Even if it is true that faking facts does not change them, we can sometimes fool other people. By doing so, we can often get what we want. Does this not show that dishonesty sometimes is effective? Dishonesty will appear advantageous only as long as we drop the full context, however, omitting an action's long-range ramifications throughout all dimensions of a person's life. Obviously, the facts remain, ready to reveal the dishonest person's deception at any time. But set that aside temporarily and consider a successful liar, someone who is not found out. Such a person might succeed in getting another person to do what he wants. He might lead someone to believe that he is more cultured, more qualified, or more experienced than he is. A dishonest person might fool a school into admitting him or an employer into hiring him. This does not mean that such a person is equipped to perform the relevant work, however. Distortions do not alter a person's actual strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, capabilities, or character one whit.

Faking does not transport a person into an alternate reality where his fabrications actually obtain. Consequently, it cannot be truly beneficial to him. Projecting a fictionalized vision of himself is at best a diversion from dealing with whatever assets and liabilities he truly possesses. Ultimately, it is facts that determine a person's condition and success. Negotiating other persons is not the fundamental requirement of human well-being. Even if a person successfully manipulates the perceptions of others to be exactly as he would like, the facts that he misrepresents have not budged. While a liar might acquire the trust or confidence of others, then, these are not net benefits. By obtaining them under false pretenses, the dishonest person only evades the facts which will inevitably determine his long-term well-being. Fooling an employer into giving him a job he is not qualified for is not a recipe for career success. Fooling a doctor into skipping uncomfortable diagnostic tests is not the path to health. More generally, playing make-believe does not accomplish anything that can enhance a person's actual well-being.

This much has concerned the person whose dishonesty is undetected. Realistically, a person can rarely, if ever, be assured that his deception will escape discovery. This leads to a further destructive dimension of dishonesty: dishonesty cannot be contained. The attempt to conceal dishonesty naturally leads a person to additional deceptions. The same law of identify that dictates

honesty will, once a person lies, necessitate further deceptions if he is to shield the original lie. Once a person misrepresents a single aspect of reality, because that falsehood has not bent facts to conform to his distortion, corroborating it will demand supporting lies to make the initial falsehood plausible. A bogus claim to have worked in a certain position, for instance, may necessitate auxiliary lies about what the person was actually doing when he claims to have been in that position. These, in turn, may require lies about the tasks he performed and the people he worked with, and subsidiary lies about his leisure activities and friendships. Other people to whom the person did not lie may well know the truth on the matters in question, in which case the liar will have to deceive them, as well. Thus he will need to juggle still further stories that must be consistent both with their knowledge of the truth and with the falsehoods he has peddled to others, which the first group might one day learn.

The more lies a person tells, the greater his chances of being discovered. He must be vigilant, therefore, in tending the impressions of others, guarding every conceivable front on which his deception might be exposed. Since any information in the possession of others threatens his increasingly intricate network of interlocking deceptions, he is like a person on a boat that is springing leaks, frantically patching one after another. His means of concealing one lie, a further lie, only creates more holes that will eventually need to be covered up. In this way, dishonesty breeds dishonesty. Faking, coupled with a person's desire to hide his faking, triggers a steadily expanding rupture between what a person pretends is so and what actually is. An expansion of dishonesty is bad only if dishonesty itself is bad, but this proliferation of deceptions helps to make clearer how destructive dishonesty is.

A dishonest person undermines his own ability to make rational decisions. He drifts from respecting facts as the basis of his actions to relying on fabrications. His concern for reality now competes with worries about maintaining appearances. The dishonest person completely reorients his mind's focus to deceiving other people: What will they think? How will this statement or that action affect their impressions of the charade? He thereby becomes dependent on others' ignorance. By redirecting his focus to the perception of other people, the dishonest person erects for himself a second master dueling with reality: the fictional realm projected by his lies. To the extent that he serves this master, as he must, to preserve his pretense, he is abandoning the rational respect for facts that is indispensable to genuine, lasting well-being.

Suppose a man lies to his wife about how much he spent while shopping because he does not want her to become angry with him. This can easily affect the rationality of his subsequent actions. Concealing the first lie may tempt him to lie about how much specific items cost, thereby encouraging her shopping at the stores allegedly offering such bargains. This would only lead to more bills. If, as a result of his binge, he does not have enough money to pay all his bills, rather than ask his wife for help he may carry a balance on his

credit card, the interest on which will only exacerbate his financial strain. Hiding his extravagance may lead the man to lie to his wife about his mood. When she senses that something is disturbing him, since he cannot let on, he will pretend not to be concerned with anything or he will manufacture some other worry to answer her questions, neither of which is conducive to a healthy relationship. The effect of such small deceptions on a couple's dynamic can be subtle but significant. The point is not that any act of faking will inevitably bring the most dire consequences. Yet any lie, including seemingly innocuous ones, can bring negative repercussions, which will sometimes accumulate into more significant harms. Even short of that, negative consequences are negative, and for a person to abide them indifferently is to betray the pursuit of his well-being.

If the man tells his wife the truth, she may indeed be angry. But if he did spend more than he should have, he is more likely to be able to limit the financial damage by collaborating with her about upcoming purchases. Dishonesty and cover-up also steer his attention from other important questions, such as why he did this, how he can resist similar temptations in the future, and whether his wife's expectations are legitimate. Whatever the answers, it would be most fruitful for him to confront these questions. Dishonesty deters him from doing so.

Whatever the vertigo induced by striving to juggle alternate realities for alternate audiences, the more grave difficulty revealed by the expansion of dishonesty rests in its obstructing rational decision-making. This is the core problem with dishonesty of any sort, whatever its motivation. The spread of dishonesty merely reveals more vividly how impossible it will be for a person to be true to reality, or rational, while floating fictional versions of reality in order to maintain his cover.

The effects of dishonesty on relations with others are not irrelevant to its moral status, then. Bok and others are correct in pointing out the deleterious effects of dishonesty on trust.⁶ These effects are not fundamental, however. They do not, in themselves, render dishonesty wrong. Once a person has faked something, his subsequent concern with the beliefs of others in order to maintain his deception diverts him from the course of rational action. Social ramifications are thus part of the means by which faking is destructive, but the obstruction of rational action is the deepest core of what that destruction consists in. This should become still clearer as we turn to another question.

What if a person can get away with a lie? Would not dishonesty be in his interest in that case? Even if such cases are rare, surely they do arise. It seems that a person committed to his well-being should take advantage of such opportunities. If dishonesty were in a person's interest, he should take the dishonest course. Dishonesty is not in a person's interest simply because he can escape discovery, however. The standard of interest is crucial. On what basis can we validly conclude that a particular action is in a person's interest? The mere fact

that a person wants something is not sufficient, because wants are not a viable standard of interest. People frequently desire things that are bad for them and fail to desire things that are good for them. A person could crave excessive alcohol, for instance, or distinctly desire not to exercise. A rational regard for self-interest is not the same as hedonism; desires are not the yardstick of interest.

Critics might protest that this addresses the objection only in its weakest form. Suppose that what is at issue is not a transient hedonistic pleasure, but a genuine benefit, something that everyone would agree is truly a positive in a person's life, such as a good job. When a person could gain this through deception, how is it in his interest to be honest and thereby deprive himself of such benefits? Once again, the answer turns on the nature of interest. A person's interest cannot be equated with the fact that he has satisfied a certain desire, even when the desire in question is a healthy, respectable one. Interest is a much broader, more complex, all-encompassing phenomenon. Its scope is long-range and wide-range, such that interest cannot be gauged by focusing on any individual elements of a person's condition in isolation from a larger understanding of the impact of those elements on his overall well-being. Interest cannot be measured piecemeal, detached from a broader vision of what a person's optimal condition would be and of the best means of reaching that end. Whether a given object is a genuine benefit to a person depends not only on what it is, but also on how he obtains it. A person's winning a race by crippling himself is not a net gain, even though winning a race is, other things being equal, a good thing. A person's turning a profit by destroying his reputation is not a net gain, although again, other things being equal, making a profit is a good thing. A snapshot of one aspect of an event is not sufficient to warrant a decisive judgment of its impact on a person's well-being.

Any action carries two types of effects on a person's welfare: its immediate, tangible fruit and its less obvious, longer-term effects on the agent. The longer-term effects can be more significant insofar as they shape a person's equipment for making future decisions. An act of dishonesty often carries conspicuous concrete effects such as a job, money, or prestige that it enables a person to obtain. Less appreciated, however, is that an act of dishonesty also carries effects on the agent's character. Dishonest action nourishes a tendency to be dishonest and weakens a tendency to be honest. We develop dispositions through the individual actions that we take. If being honest, as a general mode, is the better way for a person to achieve his interest, then weakening this tendency is harmful to his interest. Despite the urge to concentrate on the effects of an action here and now, it is myopic to deny that a single action often carries various effects on a person's well-being. The fact that an effect may be indirect does not render it less real or less significant. Indeed, the longer-term, roundabout effects on a person often carry greater impact precisely because they will affect numerous specific actions, rather than a single episode. A person's character influences not merely a given action, but a vast number of actions.

It is important to be honest because misrepresenting facts does not change them and it is facts that we must ultimately navigate in order to achieve our objective well-being. When a liar dupes other people to mistaken beliefs, his ostensible gains are safe only as long as their mistake goes uncorrected. If the deception is exposed and they learn the truth, he is likely to suffer various harms. More fundamentally, however, apart from the issue of being found out, a person retains the need to navigate reality rather than merely people's beliefs about reality. Other people's beliefs do not alter reality any more than a person's own misrepresentations do. If a person pretends to be more qualified than he is, this does not strengthen his actual abilities, which exist independently of anyone's beliefs about them. If a person pretends to be more healthy or more wealthy than he is, his actual condition remains undisturbed.

Critics might object to this choice of examples. Honesty makes sense in some cases, they would agree, but not in all. Strategic dishonesty is sometimes in a person's interest. On minor matters, moreover, the lengthy explanations needed to present the truth do not seem worth the effort.

How is a person to judge when it is and is not? The central issue is again the standard of interest. The likelihood that a deception will be found out cannot be decisive in determining whether a person's interest is advanced, given that other people's awareness is not determinative of a person's actual condition. The beliefs of others are not a magic wand with the power to erase a person's problems or deficiencies.

A person might think that the beliefs of others are determinative of a person's well-being, in certain circumstances. The bosses hold the keys to Joe's well-being at his job, for instance, so keeping them fooled seems all-important to his welfare. This view cannot withstand scrutiny, however. What others think about a person can certainly make a difference to that person's success in life. It does not make enough of a difference, however, to alter the more fundamental determinants of a person's well-being. Apart from his success in manipulating the beliefs of others about him, the liar damages himself by departing from the kind of behavior that is most conducive to his flourishing. Sincere representations of facts best position a person for achieving his ends. Deviating from that course by faking jeopardizes his interest in the immediate circumstances and softens him up for future lapses, which would only further impair his chances of flourishing. It is not in a person's interest to play make-believe. He might get away with it without catastrophic consequences on a given occasion. Yet this does not mean that it is a smarter policy than honesty.

Embracing a virtue is embracing a policy. Embracing a policy, in turn, is premised on the recognition that human beings are not equipped to gauge the effects of their actions on something as vast and complex as their overall well-being on a case-by-case basis. Accepting the contention that honesty is fine for many cases, but it must be sacrificed on those tantalizing occasions when

self-interest would truly be advanced through dishonesty, relies on the supposition that individuals can tell in each specific situation they encounter, without the guidance of broader principles, which course of action would best promote their well-being.

The problem is that this is extremely unlikely. The effects of our actions on individual facets of our well-being as well as on the whole of it, short-range and long-range, are simply too multi-layered, and interest is too intricate a network of interacting components, for people to easily identify isolated actions' net effects on their well-being. The proposal that we act honestly much of the time but make ad hoc exceptions does not accept honesty as a virtue. It excludes such principled moral instruction all together, understanding virtues and principles as complementary in this context. While all moral principles require intelligent application to particular situations, if a person could tell, simply by looking at each decision as it arose, what would best serve his interest, we would have no need for a moral code. The proposed mix of honesty and dishonesty is a default of moral direction, offering merely the vague instruction to do what is good for you. That advice is not incorrect, but it is not nearly sufficiently specific to provide the guidance that a person's rational pursuit of his flourishing requires.

Contrary to the objection, then, dishonesty is not in a person's interest. Superficial appearances, particularly of isolated fragments of a person's condition, frequently do not reflect the genuine, overall condition of a person's life or interest. Further, given the multifaceted and long-range nature of a person's interest, a person's best means of advancing his interest rests in abiding by rational principles and developing correlative traits of character. Acting in accordance with a virtue such as honesty, by reinforcing a person's disposition toward rationally self-interested action, becomes part of what advancing his interest consists of. When a person violates a rational principle such as honesty, beyond the obvious satisfaction or frustration of the desire that motivated the action rests a less obvious, more lasting impact on his character. Violations of virtue erode a person's inbuilt barriers against immoral action and make further deviations from the course that would best serve his interest more likely. Such weakening of a virtuous character is decidedly contrary to a person's interest.

Most fundamentally, dishonesty is wrong whether or not a person is found out or is concerned with being found out, because it prevents rational thinking. Dishonesty leads a person to premise actions on falsehoods rather than on facts. Such a course is at best futile; at worst, it is self-destructive. Human beings accomplish their ends, however modest or ambitious, by heeding facts. To achieve any goal, to cook a meal or manage a corporation, to ride a bike or reach the moon, a person must learn about his materials and resources. Will they need to be modified to serve his purpose? Are better alternatives available? What personnel can he employ, and what are their skills and experience?

What are his constraints, such as time limits, climate conditions, or government regulations? How effective are particular methods likely to be? A person must answer these and scores of similar questions by scrupulous fidelity to facts in order to achieve his objectives. Indulging in fantasy would be fatal. A doctor who ignores X-rays or a pilot who ignores stormy conditions is courting disaster. Success in life depends on respecting reality. Because pretense is metaphysically impotent, fooling people is a tremendous diversion of energy. Even when a person does succeed in duping others, their beliefs are at best of secondary significance. Honesty cannot prevent failure. When a person fakes things, however, he is inviting harmful consequences and increasing his likelihood of making further self-destructive decisions.

Since honesty is the refusal to fake reality, the question "Why be honest?" is essentially the question "Why is it good to know facts?" The belief that it is, is so basic a presupposition of routine operations that little can be said in response. The belief in the value of knowledge is implicit in reading and writing an essay such as this. It is implicit in the very question of why it is good to know facts, since the question seeks a factual answer. We take for granted that it is preferable to proceed by facts in nearly everything we do. To challenge the propriety of honesty thus borders on the disingenuous by questioning the propriety of treating facts as our touchstone at the same time that it seeks a factual resolution of the issue. The propriety of heeding facts, as honesty counsels, seems an inescapable presupposition of an intelligent discussion of the propriety of honesty or, indeed, of any issue.

4. Self-Deception

Since honesty is mandated by the nature of reality and the futility of faking, the scope of the guidance of honesty is wider than we normally appreciate. One particular area that has been comparatively neglected by ethicists is self-deception. Since honesty is usually considered a social virtue, self-deception has been relegated to a separate sphere of philosophical inquiry, more psychological than moral. Philosophers who address self-deception devote far more attention to its mechanics than to its moral status. Ordinary people tend not to worry about the morality of self-deception because they are confident that here, they can safely avoid others' discovery. Examining self-deception will enhance our understanding of the breadth of honesty and reinforce the thesis that its propriety is antecedent to its social ramifications. The same reasoning ultimately underwrites honesty with ourselves and others.

Self-deception is dishonesty with oneself, evading certain thoughts or knowledge. The subject of self-deception could be anything. A person could kid himself about his need to save money, prepare for a meeting, see a physician, or pursue tensions with his wife. He might avoid the truth concerning the sig-

nificance of another person's actions, the grimness of a medical prognosis, his contentment in his profession, or his own shortcomings or emotions. Many philosophers pounce on the seemingly paradoxical nature of self-deception to dismiss it. Because self-deception renders a person at once the perpetrator and victim of deception, *qua* perpetrator, he knows the truth, so how could he be fooled? It seems impossible to be both deceiver and deceived. In actual experience, however, we find the practice of self-deception to be quite genuine. Lying to oneself is not identical to lying to other people. An individual cannot simultaneously embrace two contradictory beliefs in clearly articulated form. He cannot simultaneously hold the fully conscious beliefs: I can afford this car; I cannot afford this car. What enables self-deception is the juggling of half-truths and fuzzy ideas, bringing neither into crystalline focus. Often, a self-deceiver suffers unsettling suspicions that he is neglecting something, the dim sense that something relevant warrants attention. His reaction itself becomes part of his dishonesty, as he suppresses such misgivings from the shining light of conscious identification.

Observing some of the most common forms of self-deception makes plain how prevalent this phenomenon is. The broadest form of self-deception is sheer evasion, pushing certain ideas aside as they creep into a person's awareness. Scarlett O'Hara's chronic refrain "I'll think about that tomorrow" is a classic illustration. Deliberately maintaining ignorance about a subject would also qualify. People frequently evade by selectively attending to what they want to hear and tuning out the rest. Another form of self-deception consists in artificially diminishing or inflating events' significance. Pretending that things matter less or more to us than they truly do is dishonest. A person assuring himself that he does not care about a professional setback or the demise of a friendship when in fact, he does, would be examples of this. Compartmentalizing, carving life into distinct realms and proceeding as if each carries its own moral standards, is a form of self-deception when a person is not truly convinced that those distinct standards are valid. A person excusing his cheating by insincerely assuring himself that all is fair in law school would be an example. Erecting such compartments can be a pretext for avoiding confronting his misgivings. Rationalization is yet another common form of self-deception. Rigging an argument to make a pre-determined conclusion appear justified is a thoroughly fraudulent enterprise. People frequently engage in rationalization to deceive themselves about the reasons for their failure, for instance, inventing explanations that seem less threatening than the truth.

This is but a sampling of the numerous incarnations of self-deception.⁷ Yet even this brief list suggests why the subject has not received more attention from ethicists. Self-deception is not malicious. It is usually motivated by a person's desire to protect himself rather than to hurt others. As such, self-deception does not fit the prevailing profile of immoral action. A person's inclination to avoid painful facts or fears is eminently understandable. Much as we might

sympathize with this inclination, however, following through on it is a mistake. At root, the problem with self-deception is the same problem that counsels against dishonesty with others. Misrepresenting facts does not change them. The identity of a person's intended victim is immaterial. Self-deception is self-defeating.

Suppose a person was alone on a farm, in complete isolation from all other human beings. Suppose further that there was no chance of the person ever encountering another human being. Would he have need of honesty in such circumstances? Without anyone to discover any falsehoods, why not fake it to the limit? Such a person could pretend to be whoever he wished, however rich or smart or accomplished, and no one would find him out. He could lie to himself about the work he did or did not do on a given day, and no one would ever know the difference. He could lie to himself about the storm that seems to be brewing, about how much food he has for next week or next winter, about how serious an ailment seems to be, about whether a barn is sturdy or flimsy, and no one would ever be the wiser. A person in such circumstances could fake absolutely anything and escape others' disapproving discovery. This liberation from the eyes of others does not render honesty unimportant. Faking would clearly be a prescription for disaster. Even cursory consideration of this scenario underscores that the most fundamental reason to be honest is not other people, but the nature of the world we inhabit.

Consider a case closer to home, self-deception about how much a person can afford to spend on something such as a dinner or a new sofa. A person's pretending that he can afford more than he can, because he dearly wants a particular item, does not catapult him into a higher economic bracket. Pretending to live in a fantasy realm where he can afford the coveted object actually places the person on a collision course with reality. When the bills come due, he will not have enough to meet all of his obligations. He might be able to pay this month's bills, but he will have to slight the savings account targeted for the kids' tuition or for summer vacation. If he cannot afford the purchase, the money will have to come from something else.

Moreover, such self-deception scrambles a person's considered priorities. Normally, a person holds a hierarchy of values based on reflection on the relative worth of things to him. He may not have worked this out in detail, but a person usually knows roughly how much he can afford to spend on dining out each week, for instance, given his income, bills, and various things' importance to him. One dishonest decision about expenditures, however, negates his considered rankings. Higher values will have to be sacrificed in order to pay for his self-deceptive indulgence. By elevating fantasy, a person's ends that are based on reality are made to pay the price.

The self-deceiver's attempt to maintain the precarious posture of both deceiver and deceived does make it difficult to fool himself. This only adds to the destruction of self-deception by exacting a severe psychological toll. The

self-deceiver is semi-aware of whatever thought he is avoiding, as it persistently surfaces around the perimeter of his consciousness. To some extent, he realizes that he is evading. This carries at least three adverse consequences. First, he may experience self-reproach for not facing the issue. This could be based on a belief in the propriety of honesty or on a more general belief about how to take good care of himself. Self-deception will tend to make a person feel bad about himself for shirking the responsibility to face matters forthrightly. Second, self-deception contributes to worry about the avoided problem. As long as a person evades, he is not acting to oppose whatever threat the unwelcome thought poses, but simply leaving it as a dark cloud hovering over his life. Thus fear about his ability to pay his bills, for instance, or about the health of his marriage, will naturally lurk. As the dreaded issue shoots to the front of his mind from time to time, all the self-deceiver can do is worry. Whereas action tends to alleviate worry by supplying knowledge that a person is doing what he can to battle difficulties, worry spins from being out of control. As long as the self-deceiver does not squarely face the threat, he forfeits the opportunity to resist it and thus is out of control. Self-deception contributes to anxiety by preventing a person from acting in ways that might diminish a potential harm. Third and perhaps most ominously, self-deception fosters a debilitating self-image. By lying to himself, a person fosters the belief that he is incompetent to deal with the world. His evasion sends his subconscious the message that this is how he operates. A steady habit of self-deception suggests that this is how he must operate, the only way he can cope with the challenges of life. Thus self-deception will eat away at a person's sense of efficacy, of confidence, and correlatively, at his self-esteem.

Suppose the news is bleak and a person has an incurable, fatal illness. Why is self-honesty valuable here? One response is that it enables a person to put his affairs in order, to organize legalities and say his goodbyes. Yet some individuals would prefer to bypass such closure and to pass away in the midst of living as usual. It is difficult to show that such preferences are objectively mistaken. The deeper response is not dependent on individual preferences. Once we know, after the fact, that all a person discovered through self-honesty is that he has an untreatable illness, it can seem as if he was better off not knowing. The only way he could learn his condition, however, was by facing the facts. More importantly, the only way he could learn whether anything could be done to combat his illness was to honestly investigate his condition. Thus if a person is committed to his well-being, he should confront the realities of his circumstances. A policy of facing facts does not promise that the results will always be cheerful; bad things happen that we cannot control. With so much that we can control, however, it is sensible for a person to learn the situation he is in.

When we sometimes say that a person is worse off knowing that he has a terminal illness, we mean that it seems an awful thing to live with. No doubt it is. The discovery is not responsible for the illness, however. What is awful

is the fact that the person is dying, rather than the knowledge of it. Given that he cannot do anything about the illness, it is easier to focus on his awareness of his condition, which is all the sadder for being impotent awareness in his case. Still, that does not make the knowledge the problem, particularly since the only route to treatment, when treatment is feasible, is through knowledge. We cannot allow the later vantage point, when the facts are learned to be bleak, to alter our recognition that facing facts is the only way to equip ourselves to act rationally in pursuit of our values.

The popular idea that what we do not know will not hurt us is false. Many people die of late-diagnosed diseases. Marriages collapse because of postponed confrontations of differences. Self-deception is as unrealistic and barren as dishonesty with other people. It is counterproductive to pretend that facts are other than they are because it diverts a person from adopting a realistic strategy for attaining his ends. A person must know the way things are in order to achieve his long-range values. The sooner he faces reality, the sooner he can devise effective strategies for genuinely enhancing his life.

5. Strengths of this Account

The greatest strength of this argument for honesty rests in its fundamentality. It includes the deepest fact underlying the propriety of honesty, the inability of pretense to alter the conditions that a person confronts. Many of the familiar rationales for honesty from Bok and others contain truths. An exposed liar's credibility will be damaged; dishonesty does exploit others. Most people do not wish to be lied to. Regardless of the value that a person places on his credibility, on not exploiting others, or on not being victimized by lies, however, the unshakeable fact is that misrepresenting facts does not change them. This is what renders honesty imperative.

Because it is grounded in the fundamental nature of reality, the case for honesty that we have considered highlights the practicality of honesty. Others who have sometimes asserted the practicality of honesty have done so in a much more provisional way. The harms attributed to dishonesty typically depend on others finding out about a lie. Familiar reasoning warns that dishonesty will bring damaging consequences if a person's dishonesty is discovered. If it is not discovered, neither social trust nor personal credibility is hurt. If the only thing bad about dishonesty rests in the harms that result when other people find out about dishonesty, however, then a sensible strategy would be to lie, but work very hard to avoid being caught. A person might equally conclude that he should eschew dishonesty or that he should become a better liar by cultivating the art of covering up.

The conventional view reflects a tradeoff mentality. We should weigh the risks of detection against the gains available through dishonesty. In fact, how-

ever, the tradeoff is a myth.⁸ No gains can be had via a dishonest course. For even when a person succeeds in fooling other people, he cannot fool reality. He cannot enhance his well-being, long-range, by pretending that facts are other than they are. Such faking only diverts a person from adopting a rational strategy for advancing his life.

It should also be clear that a policy of honesty is in an agent's interest. The popular conception of honesty regards it as a social duty. Often, the presumption is, a person could promote his own interest by lying, but that would be bad for others. As we have seen, however, honesty is emphatically not a concession for the good of others. The need for honesty stems from our self-interested need to respect the law of identity. The idea that morality demands that a person be honest even at his own expense is misguided. Facing facts is never at our own expense. Certain facts might be painful or objectively threatening. Confronting them is beneficial, however, insofar as it allows a person to proceed as well as he can to minimize their damage or to overcome the obstacles that they present. Facing facts is in a person's interest, even when the facts themselves are not. Running away from facts does nothing to change them and only intensifies their power by delaying whatever measures a person can take to counteract them. We have demonstrated reason to be honest independent of a person's calculations about the likelihood of being found out. Since the reason to be honest is self-interested and the facts necessitating honesty are inescapable, we have a compelling motivation for honesty.⁹

Notes

1. Richard C. Cabot, *Honesty* (New York: MacMillan, 1938), p. 6. Also see Charles Fried, "The Evil of Lying," in Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers eds., *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 371, 380, and Immanuel Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives," reprinted in Sissela Bok, *Lying* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 286.
2. Bok, pp. 14–16.
3. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 267–268.
4. See *ibid.*
5. See Fried, pp. 377–378, and Cabot, p. 18.
6. Bok, p. 33.
7. See Mike Martin, *Everyday Morality* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1989), pp. 93–99.
8. See Peikoff, pp. 272–273.
9. I should like to thank an anonymous referee for the journal and its editor, Thomas Magnell, for helpful comments on an earlier version.

