Honesty for the sake of living well

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Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosophy professor at the University of Notre Dame, in Indiana, has formulated what I believe is a deep and compelling argument in favour of honesty. The discussion below draws on MacIntryre's thought, especially as expressed in his book *After Virtue*.

Our initial question was this: Is it wise to be committed to honesty? I argued in a previous column that a commitment to honesty cannot be well defended on grounds of usefulness. Any moderately intelligent and resourceful person, I believe I've shown, likely will do better in many of her projects by being open to lying than by being closed to it.

A commitment to honesty, though, can be held either on grounds of usefulness or out of love for honesty itself. Thus, if it is ever wise to be committed to honesty, it is wise to be committed to it out of a love for it as constitutive of one of one's projects. Our present question, then, is quite specific: Can it be wise to love honesty for its own sake?

MacIntyre's answer is that it can be wise to love honesty, for honesty is a constitutive part of a life lived well, a life with which one is satisfied and richly content.

Much of what we do in life, though, is little more than drudgery. We ride the bus, we shop for shoes, we wash our clothes, we punch the time clock. Of course, some of what we do is pleasant or relaxing or entertaining. We enjoy a meal or a chat with friends, we watch a movie or play a video game, we go to the beach. Yet it would be a dull life in which work and drudgery served merely to enable us to afford food and entertainment.

Happily, we also—or, at least, we may also—participate in one or more complex activity defined by standards of excellence, standards that, when we participate in the activity, we endeavour to meet. We play the guitar or hockey, we raise children, we conduct an investigation, we tend a garden, we manage a business, and we do it seriously.

Unlike riding the bus or lounging on the beach, we can do these things well or poorly. There are ends to be achieved in doing these things—ends such as a well-played game of hockey or, in the case of parenting, young adults able and eager to make their own way in the world—, ends that require skilful engagement in the activity. They are activities in which we can fail. But in meeting the standards of excellence internal to them, we go a long way toward creating for ourselves lives we perceive to be worth living.

A person's education in honesty begins—and, perhaps, ends—with his participation in activities of these sorts. We must be truthful, first with ourselves, second with our co-participants, if we are to develop the skills needed to meet whatever standards of excellence define success. That is, we must listen to criticism and acknowledge our shortcomings. And we must be candid with those participating with us. We put success in jeopardy when we praise them falsely or ignore their errors. (According to MacIntyre, we need to be courageous and fair, as well as honest, in our participation and in our relations with other participants, if we are consistently to meet the standards of excellence that define success.)

Now a hockey player plays to win, of course, but if she cheats she loses whatever success in hockey itself is, even should her team win the game. Likewise, dishonesty or lack of candour might gain for her good feelings or forestall social setbacks, but she won't, with her lies or silence, be participating in her sport.

Honesty, then (along with courage and fairness), is necessary to success in attaining the ends of the various complex activities through which we come to see our lives as worth living. To engage in the activity deceitfully undercuts the activity itself, and turns it into something else.

That, I think, is in itself a large and important result, but we have to note that it falls short of being a defence of committing oneself to honesty in one's life as a whole. It is a defence of a commitment to honesty within particular activities of a certain sort. Serious, worthwhile painting requires honesty within painting, serious, worthwhile biology requires it within biology. How do we get from there to activities of other sorts, and to when we are simply going about our daily business? How do we get to painters and biologists who are honest simply as people?

There are two routes. One is to note that one's life as a whole can count as an activity of the sort marked by standards of excellence the consistent meeting of which produces a deep satisfaction. The other is to learn from our relations with other participants. We know from our experiences in complex social activities, especially those involving family and friends, that honesty is a necessary part of reciprocity and respect. If we wish to encounter others through reciprocity and respect, then, we will be honest with them, whether we meet them within a skilled activity or not.

This defence of honesty makes no claim that one must be an honest person outside certain activities if one is to live a life worth living in one's own eyes. The argument, that is, is not that anyone is a fool to be dishonest, at least apart from certain activities. The argument, rather, is simply that for many of us, it is not in the least foolish to love honesty passionately and constantly.

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