292. Is it Wise to Be Committed to Honesty?

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Lying can often get you what you want. So why not lie?

Because lying can also get you into all sorts of trouble. The liar needs to remember his fictions or else be found out. Once he's found out, his reputation is in tatters and no one will believe him ever again. Having lost people's trust, it will be difficult for him to secure any of the things trust makes easy.

This reason in favour of honesty, popular though it is, is exaggerated. In fact, it's not always that hard to keep one's story straight. Many lies succeed in doing what they're intended to do and never get found out. Moreover, being caught in a lie is rarely the end of the world. People are happy to forgive a lie or two when the liar is exciting or charming, and they're quick simply to overlook a lie whenever overlooking it serves their purposes.

The question I'm posing isn't whether to be a congenital liar rather than to be faultlessly honest. The two endpoints are not the only options. The question is whether to be open to lying, to be willing to tell a lie when one judges that lying would, overall, be the most effective way to attain one's end. A person open to lying might lie only very rarely. Should, then, one be an honest person—that is, should one as a matter of commitment or habit never tell lies, except, perhaps, in extreme situations—or should one be a judicious liar, prepared to speak falsely on those relatively few occasions when doing so will advance one's interests?

Think of a clever and resourceful person, any clever and resourceful person you know. Now image two versions of this person. One version is prepared to lie whenever she judges that lying will best promote her life's projects. The other is not. That is the only difference between them. It would seem that version A of your clever and resourceful person stands a much better chance of enjoying more of the things she loves for their own sakes, and of enjoying them more often, than does version B. That, in a nutshell, is the case against being committed to honesty.

Version A stands a better chance of enjoying the things she loves than version B, for B, the honest person, whatever her projects are, abstains either habitually or out of principle from a particular means by which to attain things she wants, even when those means are the most efficient means available to her. A person not committed to honesty, on the other hand, uses whichever means are the most efficient—honesty or deception—without scruple.

Honest people have, in effect, by ruling out lying, tied one hand behind their back.

This chain of reasoning leads us to the conclusion that you yourself, being clever and resourceful, would do well to overcome your debilitating prejudice against lying.

But maybe you aren't all that clever or resourceful. You don't think well in hot moments and you're given to overestimating the chance you'll succeed and underestimating the risks and penalties. Well, okay, to remain on the safe side *you* had better cultivate honesty. (It's not so great to be you, apparently.)

Or perhaps you would note that dishonest people suffer pangs of conscience. Suffering pangs of conscience hurts and it's also debilitating. Thus, to avoid pangs of conscience, a wise person commits herself to honesty even at the cost of tying a hand behind her back.

Certainly, then, a wise person cursed with a conscience would seek as best she can to rid herself of it. It's not likely that wise person would let some weenie voice in her head condemn her to an inferior sort of life.

Or you object that the best community in which to pursue and enjoy the things one loves is the community in which honesty and the other virtues prevail, for in that community each individual benefits from the peace and prosperity virtue brings. The best way to create and maintain such a community is to commit oneself to honesty, kindness, justice, decency, and the rest.

Yes, a wise person will be concerned to promote honesty and virtue among her fellow citizens. She will be concerned to help create and maintain a peaceful and prosperous community, because she wants to enjoy the benefits available only in such a community.

Nonetheless, a wise person has no reason to limit herself to those benefits she can attain only honestly.

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

Of course, honesty is certainly the best policy for those who lack the ability to evaluate possible courses of action and to make quick decisions in hot moments. But that's hardly to speak well of honesty. To note that people who tend to fall down ought to protect their heads isn't to praise the wearing of helmets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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It would seem, I have said, that a person can have one of but two reasons to commit oneself to honesty. One can commit oneself to honesty in the belief that that commitment will serve one well in one's projects or one can commit oneself for the sake of honesty itself, because one loves honesty itself. We have seen, though, that as tool, honesty is fit only for the chuckleheaded. Thus, we who are intelligent and resourceful can be wise to commit ourselves to honesty only should we hold that honesty its own reward. But if Glaucon is right, no one, as a matter of fact, actually experiences honesty as its own reward.

Glaucon's argument as explicitly presented in *Republic*, recall, is this: No one able to lie with impunity would remain committed to honesty; therefore, no one presently committed to honesty is committed to it for its own sake. Clearly it is missing a premise, one we need to supply for ourselves.

My suggestion is that the conclusion is connected to the stated premise via the idea that a person who loses a commitment to something when circumstances change must have had only an instrumental commitment to that thing. That is, he was not committed to it for its own sake. The background thought is that a person who values something for its own sake doesn't abandon that thing in the face of changing fortune.

In other words, the missing premise is that love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.

Now certainly we can take the fact that a person easily abandoned one of his commitments to be evidence that that commitment did not rest on a strong positive affective attitude. But we can take it as evidence only. It is possible actually to love something and through changes in one's circumstances to lose that love. Glaucon's implicit premise is false, that is, and, for that reason, his argument is unsound.

It's possible for a person to love something and to lose that love so long as that person loves many other things. Our lives are our attempts to find ways to honour each of the things that matter to us, given our circumstances and our prospects. When more than one thing matters to us, our loves will compete with each other for our time and resources. As circumstances change, we can discover it easier to devote ourselves to some particular thing that matters to us, and we can begin to favour it at the expense of another. That a love fades, then, does not prove that it wasn't really ever a love.

Showing Glaucon's argument to be faulty, though, is not to show that one should love honesty for its own sake and, thereby, be committed to honesty as an expression of one's love. It is not, indeed, even to show that it's possible to love honesty for its own sake. It is only to remove one objection to the idea that we might yet be wise to be committed to honesty, even though we are foolish to be committed to it as a way of getting other things that we want.

Nonetheless, since we are without a sound argument that none of us does love honesty for its own sake, we are free to suppose that what appears to be a person's intrinsic commitment to honesty is indeed an intrinsic commitment. So let us assume that it is possible to be committed to honesty as an expression of one's love of honesty. Now we need to know whether such a love is ever a wise love.

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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 have argued 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.

First, though, whatever sort of life we live, whatever our deep commitments are, much of what we do 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 jobs and drudgery served merely to enable us to afford quick meals 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 write a poem, we manage a business, and we do it seriously.

Unlike riding the bus, restocking the shelves, washing socks, or lounging on the beach, these other things take skill and we can do them 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, in many cases, 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 accomplishment in our activity. That is, we must listen to criticism and acknowledge our shortcomings. And we must be candid with those participating with us. We put in jeopardy our ability to meet standards of excellence when we praise our co-participants 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 accomplishment.)

Now a hockey player plays to win, of course, but if she cheats she loses whatever it is that accomplishment in hockey itself is, even should her team win the game. (Whatever significance Maradona's "Hand of God" goal had in history, it was not a moment of excellence in soccer.)

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 honesty when we are simply going about our daily business? How do we get from painters and biologists who are honest in order to excel as painters or biologists to painters and biologists who simply as people are wise to be committed to honesty?

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 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 marked by standards of excellence or not.

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This final 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 marked by standards of excellence. The argument, rather, is simply that for many of us, it is not in the least foolish from the perspective of living well to love honesty passionately and constantly.

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