Chapter 13
"Don't Lie": Discussion and Criticism

1. Why we lie

Almost all of us lie now and again, and many of us lie easily and frequently. This is so despite the fact that most of us profess both to admire honesty in others and to be quite honest ourselves. Why do we lie?

Lying often serves our interests, or at least so we judge, while not lying sometimes makes things go bad. We lie to get our way, we lie to help others, we lie to protect our privacy, we lie to protect the privacy of others. Really, anything we might do is something we might lie to do. Telling the truth, not speaking, lying–each of these is a particular means we might use in pursuing our projects, and most of us most of the time choose the one we think most efficient in the case, without appealing to principles that rule out lying.

Now there are honest people in the world, just as there are habitual liars in the world. Habitual liars, we might agree, are fools, for they suffer under their reputation as liars. But honest people, as well, might be fools, for they labour under a refusal to lie when lying would best serve their purposes. Perhaps best is not to lie except when one can do well by lying, and then to lie carefully.

It is certainly true we don't like being lied to. And people whom we find have lied to us cannot expect to remain our friends or to enjoy our good will. That, of course, gives us a good reason to be careful when thinking about lying to someone. If our lie is discovered, the consequences will be bad for us. Anyone commonly judged a liar, we see, is in a bad situation, if she is not indeed shunned and despised (unless she has status or power enough to attract people and get her way despite her dishonesty). But we can avoid earning the reputation of being a liar by lying carefully, by taking care not to get caught. We don't have to be honest to avoid being thought dishonest. So why should we adopt a policy of not lying?

In the previous chapter, we worked our way through four different lines of thought, each meant to show that we have sufficient reason, despite the occasional or even frequent usefulness of lying, to be honest on principle or by habit. The four lines of thought differ from each other regarding how strongly we should cleave to the principle of honesty. On one of them, the principle is simply a rough rule of thumb. On it, honesty is a default position, properly overridden in cases on any number of grounds. One two of the others, honesty is more than simply a default position. On only one of these lines of thought, though, is honesty a firm principle, one to be violated only in the most serious of cases.

Do any of these lines of thought succeed? Does any one of them indeed give us sufficient reason to be honest on principle? In this chapter we will raise objections to each of the four lines of thought. We won't answer these objections in this book. Trying to answer them is for us to do on our own, for ourselves. Perhaps one or another reason to be honest on principle survives these objections. We'll have to see.

2. The social contract

If you don't lie to me or to anyone else, then I won't lie to you. I promise this to you and you promise this to me. We now trust each other and, because of that trust, we are able to co-operate with each other and to compete with each other more securely and efficiently than we would otherwise have been able. In co-operating and competing while trusting each other, we create a stable, secure, and prosperous society in which to live. Were either of us to lie to the other, though, that trust would be destroyed, and with it our prospects of co-operating with each other and competing fairly. Since I benefit from living in a stable, secure, and prosperous society, I have strong reason to be honest with you, even on those occasions on which I would do better by lying to you.

First objection: The trust we have in each other would be destroyed by my lie only were my lie discovered. But if on an occasion I can lie without getting caught, and by lying on that occasion I can advance my interests, then I should lie on that occasion. Now it takes thoughtfulness and skill to lie successfully, but I am thoughtful and skilful. So really I shouldn't be honest on principle because of any social contract I have entered; I can maintain your trust in me even as I am prepared to lie to you. (My first lie to you, of course, is that I promise not to lie to you.)

Second objection: My own behaviour is a drop in the social bucket. I can do little either to promote trust in my society nor to destroy it. If my sterling example isn't going to increase appreciably the amount of trust, then I might as well violate trust when I can do so successfully. I might even think to run the risk of getting caught if the stakes are high enough to make running the risk worth it. On the other hand, if my being caught lying isn't going to diminish appreciably the amount of trust in my society, then it is only the penalty of being caught that I should fear. Moreover, in a trusting society I can take advantage of the trust of others to further my own ends; while in a suspicious society I would be a fool to trust others. Really, then, the social contract gives me no good reason to be honest on principle.

Third objection: It is not trust at all that underlies efficient co-operation and fair competition. It is, rather, penalties and punishment. Trust is the quality of taking a person's word or thinking well of him when there's good evidence that he's lying or he's done bad. Trust might, then, be important in one's life with friends and intimates. There the risk involved in trusting might be well worth taking. (If you trust, and your trust is vindicated, your relationship survives, while if you fail to trust you immediately forsake the relationship.) What makes possible stability, security, and prosperity is not trust but instead an effective police force and a firm judiciary. If I believe that you will be found out and punished should you lie, I have good reason to believe that you won't lie. I myself won't lie, then, not because it would destroy trust (there's no trust between us for me to destroy), but because I believe you are vigilant and that the consequences of my lying would be bad for me. (We both have an interest in winning and an interest in enjoying a well played game; what should we do? Should we trust each other to play by the rules and to call our own fouls? Or should we hire a referee?)

3. Respect for others

To lie to a person is to attempt to manipulate that person–that is, to lie to a person is to attempt to use that person for your own ends without her consent. Next, to manipulate a person is to treat her disrespectfully. To manipulate a person is to treat her disrespectfully whether you intend disrespect toward her or not, and whether she perceives that she's being treated disrespectfully or not. That lying is manipulative and manipulation is disrespectful together implies that to lie to a person is to treat her disrespectfully. Therefore, we who wish to not to treat people disrespectfully have a strong reason not to lie.

First objection: It is not disrespectful to lie to someone for their own good when lying is an efficient (or, perhaps, when lying is the only) way to serve their good. Lying out of care or concern or love is not disrespectful.

Second objection: Some people deserve to be lied to. Their behaviour has earned them our disrespect. Those who would intentionally harm us or violate our privacy should be treated with disdain or contempt, and not just in order to thwart their ends, but because they deserve our disdain or contempt.

Third objection: Not everyone cares whether they treat everyone they encounter with respect.

In the previous chapter we considered an argument in response to the third objection, an argument meant to establish that each of us has a strong reason always to treat others with respect, whether we want to or not. We ourselves demand respectful treatment at the hands of others, this argument begins. We demand respectful treatment in virtue of our possessing dignity. We cannot but recognize that others as well, though, possess dignity. We must, then, whether we want to or not, treat others respectfully.

First objection to this argument: That we recognize that others possess dignity just as we do does not, in itself, give us a reason to treat others respectfully. There is no contradiction in both demanding respectful treatment in virtue of one's dignity and failing to treat respectfully others who, one recognizes, also possess dignity. We must also *want* to honour the dignity of others with respectful treatment if the fact that they possess dignity is to be for us a reason to treat them respectfully.

Second objection to this argument: This argument seems to presuppose that a person could have a reason for doing some particular thing when no end or preference that that person actually has would be touched by doing that thing. But it is absurd to suppose that a person could have a reason for treating others respectfully when nothing that that person likes or cares about would be served by his treating others respectfully.

4. The greater good

People who are concerned for the happiness or flourishing of people generally should avoid telling lies because the risk of producing bad consequences by lying is, often enough, not a risk worth taking. The risk isn't a risk worth taking as a lie that is discovered to be a lie or that otherwise goes wrong can have seriously bad consequences for all concerned, and no one contemplating telling a lie can be sure that his lie won't be discovered or otherwise go wrong.

This argument, if it succeeds, shows only that one should hold the directive to avoid lying simply as a mere rule of thumb. It's not always true that should one's lie go wrong, the consequences will be seriously bad; and frequently one can be pretty sure that the consequences won't be seriously bad. Moreover, it's not always true that one can't have a

good idea how likely it is that one's lie will go wrong. The argument is merely that there's a small presumption in any situation that the risk associated with lying is greater than the risk associated with not lying. So we should tend not to lie.

First objection: In any particular case, the situation with regard to lying is exactly parallel to that with regard to not lying: one cannot absolutely know everything that will happen in either case, or even very much, nor can one absolutely know how likely any particular outcome is. So there is no presumption either way. But maybe the response to this is that it's harder to keep the lies straight than to keep the truth straight, and so we should follow as a rule of thumb not to lie.

Second objection: Even if this argument succeeds, it succeeds only in establishing a weak rule of thumb. (It gives a strong reason to stand weakly on the side of honesty; it does not, though, give even a weak reason to stand strongly on the side of honesty.) In the end, it seems, this argument is no different than what we characterized in Chapter 12, section 4, as the most obvious reason not to lie, the argument from bad consequences for onself. We dismissed that argument on the grounds that it involved an unduly pessimistic account of our ability to lie successfully.

5. The virtue of honesty

Being honest–that is, being committed by principle or habit not to lie–is necessary to living a successful life, according to the fourth and final line of thought we considered in the previous chapter.

The argument that being honest is a necessary part of living well involves the idea that only by being honest can one create and maintain deep emotional ties to friends or maintain friendly relations with co-workers and acquaintances or attain the goods that make one's pursuits meaningful. So, if one is not honest, one will inevitably lack at least one of three things constituent of a life worth living.

Specific objection: Honesty is not in fact something that makes for good relations with co-workers or acquaintances. One who is honest must also be tactful if she is to maintain good relations with others. Part of tact is the quality of knowing how to put what one wants to say so that it doesn't hurt people's feelings or cause resentment. Another part of tact is knowing when to remain silent. Tact, then, involves understanding other people's cares and emotions. But one who understands other people's cares and emotions is well situated to discover when lying would be more effective over all than not lying. So, it turns out, what enables honest people who do well socially to do well socially is not their honesty, but their tact. (Their tact, among other things; cheerfulness and good humour, for instance, might also be part of the package.) The practical intelligence that underlies tact, though, can serve the dishonest as well as the honest, so honesty is not, after all, essential for friendly relations with others.

Of course, others will like you only if they think you are being honest with them, but that's a matter of what they think of you, not of how you actually are.

This is a specific objection just in that it focuses on only one of the three things for which the argument said honesty might be necessary. It leaves both the other two alone.

General objection: The argument does not show that one must be an honest person to do well in life; if it succeeds, it shows merely that one must be to some degree honest in certain

realms of life to do well. An honest person, we've said, refrains generally by principle or on habit from lying. He doesn't, that is, pick times and places in which to be honest, times and places in which to deceive. But much of life occurs outside the three areas cited in the argument. We interact with clients and shop keepers, with politicians, bureaucrats, and fellow union members, with teachers, doctors, and lawyers. The argument from virtue gives us no reason not to lie when selling our house or buying a car or pursuing our agenda or setting an appointment or impressing an acquaintance or getting out of a jam with a superior. Honesty, or at least a strong push toward honesty, can, on this line of though, be reserved simply for when honesty is a virtue. That lying is inconsistent with friendship and often inimical to success in practices does not, or so we must conclude, give us a reason to be honest generally.

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We intended in this chapter to confront each of the four lines of thought with objections. Do any of these objections succeed? For each that fails, how does it fail? If we have shown each line of thought to be in one or another way faulty, can we repair the faults? Can we find other arguments that are sound? What good reason do we have to be honest?