Chapter 15
Why Care to Be Honest?

What sort of person should one be? Should one be the sort of person who rarely, if ever, tells a lie? Or should one be a person who lies whenever he has good reason to think lying will serve him well?

We could ask this question of any ethical value. Should one be a just person? A kind person? A fair person? A selfless person? An impartially generous and helpful person? We would be able to adapt and use much of what we said in the previous three chapters should we turn our attention to one of these other questions.

Let us list what we have learned in our discussion of lying so far. 1) We have learned that lying destroys (though not always permanently) certain types of relationships we have with others, relationships, moreover, that, if the psychologists are right, are necessary for us to be happy or for us to live a life that in our own eyes appears to be going well. 2) We have learned that we must be honest about our own performance in a practice and about the performances of other participants if we are to meet the standards of excellence in that practice. Again, if the psychologists are right, we cannot be happy unless we see ourselves meeting standards of excellence in one or more practices. 3) We have learned that to lie to someone is to treat that person disrespectfully. (We have learned this if the objections we heard can be answered. I think they can.) 4) We have learned that it is not much more difficult to lie safely and successfully in pursuit of one's ends than it is to do many other things safely and successfully.

Now neither 1) nor 2) gives us reason to be honest generally. That is, neither gives us a reason to be an honest person. They give us reason to be honest in certain situations, specifically, when with friends and when participating in a practice. 3) gives us a reason to be honest generally, to be an honest person, but only if and to the extent that we care to treat others respectfully. 4), on the other hand, gives us at least some reason not to be committed to honesty outside the situations mentioned in 1) and 2) and so far as we don't care about respect.

Should we, then, care to treat others respectfully? Should we care *strongly* to treat others respectfully? –Not just the people close to us, or the people who matter to us in virtue of their personalities or accomplishments or connections to us. Should we care to treat respectfully acquaintances and strangers? Should we care to treat respectfully people we will never meet living half way around the world?

If we care to treat people respectfully, we do so either because we value respect for its own sake or because we value what we believe respect will bring. According to the argument of the previous chapter, no one values honesty for its own sake. That claim implies that no one values respect for its own sake, given that honesty is an essential part of respect. Anyone who does care to treat people respectfully, then, does so only because she wants what she believes treating people respectfully will bring her. But, again adapting the argument of the previous chapter, it is not being respectful that gets one what one wants but, rather, only

appearing to be respectful. A wise person, then, does not care whether she treats people respectfully. A wise person is ready to lie to others or otherwise to treat them with disrespect whenever it serves her purposes to do so.

The second part of this argument seems unassailable. I see no way, that is, to reject the critique it offers of respect as instrumentally valuable. One who wants only the effects he believes follow from treating others respectfully would do well to be prepared to treat others disrespectfully. But it is not at all clear that the argument succeeds in showing that no one cares about respect for its own sake. Now if it is possible to love respect for its own sake, then that love would simply take its place in one's life among the many other loves one has. A commitment to respect based on love of respect could not be judged wise or foolish to the degree that that commitment serves one's interests, for that commitment would be partly constitutive of one's interests.

Let us rewrite the argument that no one loves honesty for its own sake so that it is about respect. This is what we get: We can see that no one loves respect for its own sake–that is, no one loves for its own sake that people are treated respectfully–for no one able to treat people disrespectfully with impunity would any longer care whether he treated people respectfully.

Laid out more formally, the argument is:

1. Any person able to treat people disrespectfully without, thereby, suffering bad consequences would not hesitate to treat people disrespectfully when doing so would advance his projects.

Therefore: 2. No one loves respect for its own sake.

I directed you in the previous chapter, when we first encountered this argument, to explain where it goes wrong. So where *does* it go wrong? What flaw, if any, does it contain?

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Many people say that the above argument is faulty in that statement 1 is false–or, at least, in that we have no reason to accept statement 1 as true. We were asked to imagine a person able to tell lies and always to be believed or a person always able to treat others contemptuously without their noticing; and we were invited to accept that such a person would tell lies whenever he judged it useful to tell lies or would treat people disrespectfully whenever he judged it useful to do so. But we can refuse that invitation and declare instead that not everybody in such changed circumstances would set honesty or respectfulness aside. Perhaps we have in mind an anecdote about someone who could have got away with a lie and knew he could but who didn't lie, even though he realized he would suffer for telling the truth.

This criticism of the argument might well be sound. If you think it sound, how might someone who rejects it respond to it? Could that response be criticised?

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Another criticism of the argument is that it doesn't explain *why* no one values honesty for its own sake. It doesn't show that no one *could* value honesty for its own sake. It simply concludes that, as a matter of fact, no one does value honesty for its own sake. Perhaps that it doesn't explain why no one values honesty for its own sake isn't a flaw in the argument, but

that it doesn't is at least unsatisfying. If it is true that no one values honesty for its own sake, we would like to know why it is true that no one values honesty for its own sake.

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There is a third criticism of this argument, one perhaps more subtle than either criticism described above. I think it is the most serious criticism. This criticism begins by noting that as it stands, the argument presented above is incomplete. It is missing a premise, a premise to connect the first statement to the conclusion.

Now, that a particular presentation of an argument fails to list all the premises of that argument is not itself a criticism of the argument as an argument. It might be a fault in the presentation, but it is not a fault in the underlying argument itself. Noting that a premise is missing merely means that we have some work to do. We have to formulate that premise and add it to our presentation of the argument.

What, then, is the premise that has gone missing? What statement is needed to link statement 1 to the conclusion so that statement 1 supports the conclusion? (Take another look at the formal presentation of the argument above. Take a few minutes to try to formulate the missing premise.)

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What's missing, I think, is this: No one who loves honesty for its own sake would forsake honesty were his circumstances to change. The general principle expressed here is that if one loves X for its own sake, then one will continue to be committed to X whatever happens next. Perhaps Shakespeare put this principle best: Love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds (Sonnet CXVI). If neither you change nor the object that you love changes, then you will continue to be committed to that object whatever else changes. On the other hand, if you lose your commitment to that object when circumstances change, then your previous commitment to it could not have been a commitment derived from love.

Adding this premise to our formal presentation of the argument, we get:

1. Any person able to treat people disrespectfully without, thereby, suffering bad consequences would not hesitate to treat people disrespectfully when doing so would advance his projects.
2. No person who loves respect for its own sake would treat people disrespectfully even were he able to do so without, thereby, suffering bad consequences.

Therefore: 3. No one loves respect for its own sake.

The criticism of this argument that I think most serious concerns 2, the premise according to which love is not love which alters when it alteration finds. I think this premise is false. Now certainly love is an attitude that does not alter quickly or easily. If you love something, then you will most likely continue to love it through whatever changes you meet with in your circumstances. Yet, as changes in one's life mount up, one's affections can change and eventually one might find oneself out of love. (Remember, the only changes relevant here are changes in one's circumstances. That one might cease to love a person were she to change in some significant way is not a counter-example to the principle in question. Nor is that one might cease to love something as one matures or declines or after one has been conked on the head.)

Consider just how many things a person might love for their own sakes. A person might love his spouse and his children, music (or some styles of music, or some particular pieces of music), hockey, antiques, the colour red, his profession, reading about advances in biology, and much else beside. Some of his loves are stronger than others, of course, and generate more and stronger commitments. He will find his life going well to the extent that he is able, given his talents and circumstances, to honour these loves and fulfil the commitments they engender. Now, should his circumstances change in one way or another, he will find it easier to honour some loves and more difficult to honour others. Perhaps it will become so easy to honour one love that his devotion to that love will eclipse one or more of his other loves. That other love will fade, slowly or quickly, and eventually could disappear entirely. But that in changed circumstances he no longer loves for its own sake his job, say, does not imply that he didn't in fact love it for its own sake. His love of his job simply lost out in the battle for his time and energy in these new circumstances.

Now consider a person who, as in the argument we have been considering, was to all appearances until her circumstances changed committed to treating people with respect, but who now, in changed circumstances, doesn't care one way or the other about respect. Her circumstances changed such that she can honour other of her loves as efficiently and deeply as she never could before, but only if she loses her commitment to respect. And, so, she lost her commitment to respect. Does that indicate that her commitment to respect was not in the first place based on love of respect? No. Her commitment might have been merely instrumental all along, but it also might not have been. She might well have loved respect for its own sake but lost that love as her affections were reshuffled in consequence of her new power.

The argument that no one loves honesty or respect for its own sake fails, then, for one or both of two reasons. It fails either because it's false that any person who could be dishonest or disrespectful with impunity would be dishonest or disrespectful or because it's false that if one's commitment to honesty or respect changes in response to changes in one's circumstances, that commitment was not rooted in a love of honesty or respect for its own sake.

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Of course, that an argument fails to give us reason to believe its conclusion does not mean that that conclusion is false. Perhaps it is true nonetheless that no one loves honesty or respect for its own sake. Perhaps it is true that all commitment to honesty or respect is commitment to an instrument supposed useful in securing something else. If we are to assert that a person could love honesty or respect for its own sake, we will need a good argument to the conclusion that honesty or respect can be loved for its own sake. Think about the matter now. What considerations do you think tell in favour of the idea that honesty or respect is something a person could love for its own sake?

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One consideration that I think goes a long way is that people seem capable of loving just about anything. People love turtles and trees (and individual turtles and trees), they love cars and trucks, they love exercising, they love the smell of napalm in the morning, they love destitution and denigration, they love inflicting pain, they love being in pain. If these things can be liked or loved for their own sakes, then honesty and respect can be liked or loved for their own sakes, too.

Empirical evidence that people do love honesty and respect for their own sakes is not hard to find, though its significance is very much open to doubt. Evidence here includes any anecdote about a person who was honest or respectful when he believed being honest or respectful would be to his detriment. And it includes the hurt and anger many of us feel at the lies told to and the contempt manifested toward people, especially those people far away from us, people we will never encounter. We can doubt the significance of this evidence, for it might be possible to explain it away without supposing that anyone loves honesty or respect for its own sake. But until it is explained away, we are not unreasonable in supposing that honesty or respect is very well a thing towards which a person could have a strong positive affective attitude, an attitude as strong as liking or loving.

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We will end our discussion of the ethics of lying with a question. The question we will end with is pretty much the question with which we began this chapter, only made a little more precise. The question with which we began this chapter was: Should we care to treat others respectfully? To make this question more precise and to motivate our concern to have an answer, let us review some of the central contentions we have endorsed, if only provisionally, in the chapters of this Part of the book to this point.

1) A person committed to honesty is one who rarely, if ever, tells a lie, even on those occasions when he understands that it would be safe and efficient for him to lie. That an action he could perform would involve telling a lie is, for a person committed to honesty, a very strong reason not to perform that action, a reason that, for him, outweighs much that he might find in favour of performing it.

2) A person's commitment to honesty can have one or both of two sources. It can derive from that person's assessment of the instrumental value of being so committed. Or it can derive from a love (or other positive affective attitude) of honesty for its own sake.

3) It is foolish for one to be committed to honesty as an instrument. Or, at least, it is foolish for an intelligent and resourceful person to be committed to honesty as an instrument. Except in maybe a couple sorts of situation (friends, practices), it is better from the perspective of one's life as a whole not to care whether one is lying but instead to consider directly in the case at hand what will best further your interests.

4) Some people love honesty for its own sake. We assert this provisionally, on the grounds that the only argument of which we are aware that no one loves honesty for its own sake fails and on the grounds both that there is reason to think it possible to love honesty for its own sake and that there is evidence that one or another person does love it for its own sake.

Now, then, our question:

Is it *wise* to love honesty for its own sake? Or is it foolish? Should *you* love honesty for its own sake?

To answer this question (this set of questions), we need to find our way through more than a few philosophical problems. Among them are: whether a love for something for its own sake can be wise or foolish (perhaps such loves are ultimate); how a love for something for its own sake could be wise or foolish; what counts as evidence of the wisdom or foolishness of loving something for its own sake; whether finding a reason for a love immediately reveals no love at all but an instrumental commitment; whether the costs and penalties of loving honesty for its own sake make that love inevitably foolish; whether a love

of honesty is ever something innate and incorrigible and what its being innate and incorrigible would mean for wisdom or foolishness; and whether we have good reason to be committed to honesty even if such a commitment is inevitably foolish from the perspective of our lives going well.

So: *Should* you love honesty for its own sake?