Lying

Sam Harris

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Among the many paradoxes of human life, this is perhaps the most peculiar and consequential: *We often behave in ways that are guaranteed to make us unhappy*. Many of us spend our lives marching with open eyes toward remorse, regret, guilt, and disappointment.And nowhere do our injuries seem more casually self-inflicted, or the suffering we create more disproportionate to the needs of the moment, than in the lies we tell to other human beings. Lying is the royal road to chaos.

As an undergraduate at Stanford I took a seminar that profoundly changed my life. It was called “The Ethical Analyst,” and it was conducted in the form of a Socratic dialogue by an extraordinarily gifted professor, Ronald A. Howard.[1] Our discussion focused on a single question of practical ethics:

Is it wrong to lie?

At first glance, this may seem a scant foundation for an entire college course. After all, most people already believe that lying is generally wrong—and they also know that some situations seem to warrant it.

What was so fascinating about this seminar, however, was how difficult it was to find examples of virtuous lies that could withstand Professor Howard’s scrutiny. Even with Nazis at the door and Anne Frank in the attic, Howard always seemed to find truths worth telling and paths to even greater catastrophe that could be opened by lying.

I do not remember what I thought about lying before I took “The Ethical Analyst,” but the course accomplished as close to a firmware upgrade of my brain as I have ever experienced. I came away convinced that lying, even about the smallest matters, needlessly damages personal relationships and public trust.

It would be hard to exaggerate what a relief it was to realize this. It’s not that I had been in the habit of lying before taking Howard’s course—but I now knew that endless forms of suffering and embarrassment could be easily avoided by *simply telling the truth*. And, as though for the first time, I saw the consequences of others’ failure to live by this principle all around me.

This experience remains one of the clearest examples in my own life of the power of philosophical reflection. “The Ethical Analyst” affected me in ways that college courses seldom do: It made me a better person.

What Is a Lie?

Deception can take many forms, but not all acts of deception are lies. Even the most ethical among us occasionally struggle to keep appearances and reality apart. By wearing cosmetics, a woman seeks to seem younger or more beautiful than she otherwise would. Honesty does not require that she issue a continual series of disclaimers—"I see that you are looking at my face: Please be aware that I do not look this good first thing in the morning..." A person in a hurry might pretend not to notice an acquaintance passing by on the street. A polite host might not acknowledge that one of her guests has said something so stupid as to slow the rotation of the earth. When asked "How are you?" most of us reflexively say that we are well, understanding the question to be merely a greeting, rather than an invitation to discuss our career disappointments, our marital troubles, or the condition of our bowels. Elisions of this kind can be forms of deception, but they are not quite lies. We may skirt the truth at such moments, but we do not deliberately manufacture falsehood.

The boundary between lying and deception is often vague. In fact, it is even possible to deceive with the truth. I could, for instance, stand on the sidewalk in front of the White House and call the headquarters of Facebook on my cellphone: "Hello, this is Sam Harris. I'm calling from the White House, and I'd like to speak to Mark Zuckerberg." My words would, in a narrow sense, be true—but the statement seems calculated to deceive. Would I be lying? Close enough.

To lie is to intentionally mislead others when they expect honest communication.[2] This leaves stage magicians, poker players, and other harmless dissemblers off the hook, while illuminating a psychological and social landscape whose general shape is very easy to recognize. People lie so that others will form beliefs that are not true. The more consequential the beliefs—that is, the more a person's well-being depends upon a correct understanding of the world—the more consequential the lie.

As the philosopher Sissela Bok observed, however, we cannot get far on this topic without first distinguishing between truth and truthfulness—for a person may be impeccably truthful while being mistaken.[3] To speak truthfully is to accurately represent one's beliefs. But candor offers no

assurance that one's beliefs about the world are true. Nor does truthfulness require that one speak the *whole* truth, because communicating every fact on a given topic is almost never useful or even possible.

Leaving these ambiguities aside, communicating what one believes to be both true and useful is surely different from concealing or distorting those beliefs. The *intent* to communicate honestly is the measure of truthfulness. And most people do not require a degree in philosophy to distinguish this attitude from its counterfeits.

People tell lies for many reasons. They lie to avoid embarrassment, to exaggerate their accomplishments, and to disguise wrongdoing. They make promises they do not intend to keep. They conceal defects in their products or services. They mislead competitors to gain advantage. Many of us lie to our friends and family members to spare their feelings.

Whatever our purpose in telling them, lies can be gross or subtle. Some entail elaborate ruses or forged documents. Others consist merely of euphemisms or tactical silences. But it is in believing one thing while intending to communicate another that every lie is born.

We have all stood on either side of the divide between what someone believes and what he intends others to understand—and the gap generally looks quite different depending on whether one is the liar or the dupe. Of course, the liar often imagines that he does no harm as long as his lies go undetected. But the one lied to almost never shares this view. The moment we consider our dishonesty from the point of view of those we lie to, we recognize that we would feel betrayed if the roles were reversed.

A friend of mine, Sita, was once visiting the home of another friend and wanted to take her a small gift. Unfortunately, she was traveling with her young son and hadn't found time to go shopping. As they were getting ready to leave their hotel, however, Sita noticed that the bath products supplied in their room were unusually nice. So she put some soaps, shampoos, and body lotions into a bag, tied it with a ribbon she got at the front desk, and set off.

When Sita presented this gift, her friend was delighted.

"Where did you get them?" she asked.

Surprised by the question, and by a lurching sense of impropriety, Sita sought to regain her footing with a lie: “Oh, we just bought them in the hotel gift shop.”

The next words came from her innocent son: “No, Mommy, you got them in the bathroom!”

Imagine the faces of these two women, briefly frozen in embarrassment and then yielding to smiles of apology and forgiveness. This may seem the most trivial of lies—and it was—but it surely did nothing to increase the level of trust between these two friends. Funny or not, the story reveals something distasteful about Sita: She will lie when it suits her needs.

The opportunity to deceive others is ever present and often tempting, and each instance casts us onto some of the steepest ethical terrain we ever cross. Few of us are murderers or thieves, but we have all been liars. And many of us will be unable to get safely into our beds tonight without having told several lies over the course of the day.

What does this say about us and about the life we are making with one another?

The Mirror of Honesty

At least one study suggests that 10 percent of communication between spouses is deceptive.[4] Another has found that 38 percent of encounters among college students contain lies.[5] However, researchers have discovered that even liars rate their deceptive interactions as less pleasant than truthful ones. This is not terribly surprising: We know that trust is deeply rewarding and that deception and suspicion are two sides of the same coin. Research suggests that all forms of lying—including white lies meant to spare the feelings of others—are associated with poorer-quality relationships.[6]

Once one commits to telling the truth, one begins to notice how unusual it is to meet someone who shares this commitment. Honest people are a refuge: You know they mean what they say; you know they will not say one thing to your face and another behind your back; you know they will tell you when they think you have failed—and for this reason their praise cannot be mistaken for mere flattery.

Honesty is a gift we can give to others. It is also a source of power and an engine of simplicity. Knowing that we will attempt to tell the truth, whatever the circumstances, leaves us with little to prepare for. We can simply be ourselves.

In committing to be honest with everyone, we commit to avoiding a wide range of long-term problems, but at the cost of occasional, short-term discomfort. However, the discomfort should not be exaggerated: You can be honest and kind, because your purpose in telling the truth is not to offend people: You simply want them to have the information you have, and would want to have if you were in their position.

But it can take practice to feel comfortable with this way of being in the world—to cancel plans, decline invitations, critique others' work, etc., all while being honest about what one is thinking and feeling. To do this is also to hold a mirror up to one's life—because a commitment to telling the truth requires that one pay attention to what the truth is in every moment. What sort of person are you? How judgmental, self-interested, or petty have you become?

You might discover that some of your friendships are not really that—perhaps you habitually lie to avoid making plans, or fail to express your true opinions for fear of conflict. Whom, exactly, are you helping by living this way? You might find that certain relationships cannot be honestly maintained.

And real problems in your life can be forced to the surface. Are you in an abusive relationship? A refusal to lie to others—How did you get that bruise?—might oblige you to come to grips with this situation very quickly. Do you have a problem with drugs or alcohol? Lying is the lifeblood of addiction. Without recourse to lies, our lives can unravel only so far without others' noticing.

Telling the truth can also reveal ways in which we want to grow, but haven't. I remember learning that I was to be the class valedictorian at my high school. I declined the honor, saying that I felt that someone who had been at the school longer should give the graduation speech. But that was a lie. The truth was that I was terrified of public speaking and would do almost anything to avoid it. Apparently, I wasn't ready to confront this fact about myself—and my willingness to lie at that moment allowed me to avoid doing so for many years. Had I been forced to tell my high school principal the truth, he might have begun a conversation with me that would have been well worth having.

Two Types of Lies

Ethical transgressions are generally divided into two categories: the bad things we do (acts of commission) and the good things we fail to do (acts of omission). We tend to judge the former far more harshly. The origin of this imbalance remains a mystery, but it surely relates to the value we place on a person's energy and intent.

Doing something requires energy, and most morally salient actions require conscious intent. A *failure to do* something can arise purely by circumstance and requires energy to rectify. The difference is important. It is one thing to reach into the till and steal $100; it is another to neglect to return $100 that one has received by mistake. We might consider both behaviors to be ethically blameworthy—but only the former amounts to a deliberate effort to steal. Needless to say, if it would cost a person *more* than $100 to return $100 he received by mistake, few of us would judge him for simply keeping the money.[7]

And so it is with lying. To lie about one's age, marital status, career, etc. is one thing; to fail to correct false impressions whenever they arise is another. For instance, I am occasionally described as a "neurologist," which I am not, rather than as a "neuroscientist," which I am. Neurologists have medical degrees and specialize in treating disorders of the brain and nervous system. Neuroscientists have PhDs and perform research. I am not an MD, have no clinical experience, and would never dream of claiming to be a neurologist. But neither do I view it as my ethical responsibility to correct every instance of confusion that might arise on this point. It would simply take too much energy. (A Google search for "Sam Harris" and "neurologist" currently returns tens of thousands of results.) If, however, a person's belief that I am a neurologist ever seemed likely to cause harm, or to redound to my advantage, I would be guilty of a lie of omission, and it would be ethically important for me to clear the matter up. And yet few people would view my failure to do so as equivalent to my falsely claiming to be a neurologist in the first place.

In discussing the phenomenon of lying, I will focus on lies of commission: lying at its clearest and most consequential. However, most of what I say is relevant to lies of omission and to deception generally. I will also focus on

“white” lies—those lies we tell for the purpose of sparing others discomfort—for these are the lies that most often tempt us. And they tend to be the only lies that good people tell while imagining that they are being good in the process.

White Lies

Have you ever received a truly awful gift? The time it took to tear away the wrapping paper should have allowed you to steel yourself—but suddenly there it was:

“Wow…”

“Do you like it?”

“That’s amazing. Where did you get it?”

“Bangkok. Do you like it?”

“When were you in Bangkok?”

“Christmas. Do you like it?”

“Yes… Definitely. Where else did you go in Thailand?”

The careful observer will see that I have now broken into a cold sweat. I am not cut out for this. Generally speaking, I have learned to be honest even when ambushed. I don’t always communicate the truth in the way that I want to—but one of the strengths of telling the truth is that it remains open for elaboration. If what you say in the heat of the moment isn’t quite right, you can amend it. I have learned that I would rather be maladroit, or even rude, than dishonest.

What could I have said in the above situation?

“Wow… does one wear it or hang it on the wall?”

“You wear it. It’s very warm. Do you like it?”

“You know, I’m really touched you thought of me. But I don’t think I can pull this off. My style is somewhere between boring and very boring.”

This is getting much closer to the sort of response I’m comfortable with.

Some euphemism is creeping in, perhaps, but the basic communication is truthful. I have given my friend fair warning that she is unlikely to see me wearing her gift the next time we meet. I have also given her an opportunity to keep it for herself or perhaps bestow it on another friend who might actually like it.

Some readers may now worry that I am recommending a regression to the social ineptitude of early childhood. After all, children do not learn to tell white lies until around the age of four, after they have achieved a hard-won awareness of the mental states of others.[8] But there is no reason to believe that the social conventions that happen to stabilize in primates like us around the age of eleven will lead to optimal human relationships. In fact, there are many reasons to believe that lying is precisely the sort of behavior we need to outgrow in order to build a better world.

But what could be wrong with truly “white” lies? First, they are still lies. And in telling them, we incur all the problems of being less than straightforward in our dealings with other people. Sincerity, authenticity, integrity, mutual understanding—these and other sources of moral wealth are destroyed the moment we deliberately misrepresent our beliefs, whether or not our lies are ever discovered.

And while we imagine that we tell certain lies out of compassion for others, it is rarely difficult to spot the damage we do in the process. By lying, we deny our friends access to reality—and their resulting ignorance often harms them in ways we did not anticipate. Our friends may act on our falsehoods, or fail to solve problems that could have been solved only on the basis of good information. Rather often, to lie is to infringe upon the freedom of those we care about.

A primal instance:

“Do I look fat in this dress?”

Most people insist that the correct answer to this question is always “No.” In fact, many believe that it’s not a question at all: The woman is simply saying, “Tell me I look good.” If she’s your wife or girlfriend, she might even be saying, “Tell me you love me.” If you sincerely believe that this is the situation you are in—that the text is a distractor and the subtext conveys the entire message—then so be it. Responding honestly to the subtext would not

be lying.

But this is an edge case for a reason: It crystallizes what is tempting about white lies. Why not simply reassure someone with a tiny lie and send her out into the world feeling more confident? Unless one commits to telling the truth in situations like this, however, one finds that the edges creep inward, and exceptions to the principle of honesty begin to multiply. Very soon, you may find yourself behaving as most people do quite effortlessly: shading the truth, or even lying outright, without thinking about it. The price is too high.

A friend of mine recently asked me whether I thought he was overweight. In fact, he probably was just asking for reassurance: It was the beginning of summer, and we were sitting with our wives by the side of his pool. However, I'm more comfortable relying on the words that actually come out of a person's mouth, rather than on my powers of telepathy, to know what he is asking. So I answered my friend's question very directly:

"No one would ever call you 'fat,' but I think you could probably lose twenty-five pounds." That was two months ago, and he is now fifteen pounds lighter. Neither of us knew that he was ready to go on a diet until I declined the opportunity to lie about how he looked in a bathing suit.

Back to our friend in the dress: What is the truth? Perhaps she does look fat in that dress, but it's the fault of the dress. Telling her the truth will allow her to find a more flattering outfit.

But let's imagine the truth is harder to tell: Your friend looks fat in that dress, or any dress, because she *is* fat. Let's say she is also thirty-five years old and single, and you happen to know that her greatest desire at this moment in life is to get married and start a family. You believe that many men might be disinclined to date her at her current weight. And, marriage aside, you are confident that she would be happier and healthier, and would feel better about herself, if she got in shape.

A white lie is simply a denial of these realities. It is a refusal to offer honest guidance in a storm. Even on so touchy a subject, lying seems a clear failure of friendship. By reassuring your friend about her appearance, you are not helping her to do what you think she should do to get what she wants out of life.

There are many circumstances in life in which false encouragement can be very costly to another person. Imagine that you have a friend who has spent

years striving unsuccessfully to build a career as an actor. Many fine actors struggle in this way, of course, but in your friend's case the reason seems self-evident: He is a terrible actor. In fact, you happen to know that his other friends—and even his parents—share this opinion but cannot bring themselves to express it. What do you say the next time he complains about his stalled career? Do you encourage him to "just keep at it"? False encouragement is a kind of theft: it steals time, energy, and motivation a person could put toward some other purpose.

This is not to say that we are always correct in our judgments of other people. And honesty demands that we communicate any uncertainty we may feel about the relevance of our own opinions. But if we are convinced that a friend has taken a wrong turn in life, it is no sign of friendship to simply smile and wave him onward.

If the truth itself is painful to tell, there are often background truths that are not—and these can be communicated as well, deepening the friendship. In the two examples above, the more basic truth is that you love your friends and want them to be happy, and both of them could make changes in their lives that might lead to greater fulfillment. In lying to them, you are not only declining to help them—you are denying them useful information and setting them up for future disappointment. Yet the temptation to lie in these circumstances can be overwhelming.

When we presume to lie for the benefit of others, we have decided that *we* are the best judges of how much they should understand about their own lives —about how they appear, their reputations, or their prospects in the world. This is an extraordinary stance to adopt toward other human beings, and it requires justification. Unless someone is suicidal or otherwise on the brink, deciding how much he can know about himself seems the quintessence of arrogance. What attitude could be more disrespectful of those we care about?

While preparing to write this book, I asked friends and readers for examples of lies that had affected them. Some of their stories appear below. I have changed all names to protect the innocent and the guilty alike.

Many people shared stories of family members who deceived one another about medical diagnoses. Here is one:

My mother was diagnosed with MS when she was in her late

30s. Her doctor thought it was best to lie and tell her that she didn't have MS. He told my father the truth. My father decided to keep the truth to himself because he didn't want to upset my mother or any of their 3 children.

Meanwhile, my mother went to the library, read up on her symptoms, and diagnosed herself with MS. She decided not to tell my father or their children because she didn't want to upset anyone.

One year later, when she went to the doctor for her annual checkup, the doctor told her she had MS. She confessed that she knew but hadn't told anyone. My dad confessed that he knew but hadn't told anyone. So they each spent a year with a secret and without each other's support.

My brother found out accidentally about a year later, when my mother had breast cancer surgery. The surgeon walked into the room and essentially said, "This won't affect the MS." My brother said, "What MS?" I think it was a couple more years before anyone told me or my sister about Mom's MS….Rather than feeling grateful and protected, I felt sadness that we hadn't come together as a family to face her illness and support each other.

My mother never told her mother about the MS, which meant that none of us could tell friends and family, for fear that her mother would find out. She didn't want to hurt her mother. I think she deprived herself of the opportunity to have a closer relationship with her mother.

Such tales of medical deception were once extraordinarily common. In fact, I know of at least one instance within my own family: My maternal grandmother died of cancer when my mother was sixteen. She had been suffering from metastatic melanoma for nearly a year, but her doctor had told her that she had arthritis. Her husband, my grandfather, knew her actual diagnosis but decided to maintain this deception as well.

After my grandmother's condition deteriorated, and she was finally hospitalized, she confided to a nurse that she knew that she was dying. However, she imagined that she had been keeping this a secret from the rest

of her family, her husband included. Needless to say, my mother and her younger brother were kept entirely in the dark. In their experience, their mother checked into the hospital for “arthritis” and never returned.

Think of all the opportunities for deepening love, compassion, forgiveness, and understanding that are forsaken by white lies of this kind. When we pretend not to know the truth, we must also pretend not to be motivated by it. This can force us to make choices that we would not otherwise make. Did my grandfather really have *nothing* to say to his wife in light of the fact that she would soon die? Did she really have *nothing* to say to her two children to help prepare them for their lives without her? These silences are lacerating. Wisdom remains unshared, promises unmade, and apologies unoffered. The opportunity to say something useful to the people we love soon disappears, never to return.

Who would choose to leave this world in such terrible isolation? Perhaps there are those who would. But why should anyone make this choice for another person?

Trust

Jessica recently overheard her friend Lucy telling a white lie: Lucy had a social obligation she wanted to get free of, and Jessica heard her leave a voicemail message for another friend, explaining why their meeting would have to be rescheduled. Lucy's excuse was entirely fictitious—something involving her child's getting sick—but she lied so effortlessly and persuasively that Jessica was left wondering if she had ever been duped by Lucy in the past. Now, whenever Lucy cancels a plan, Jessica suspects she might not be telling the truth.

These tiny erosions of trust are especially insidious because they are almost never remedied. Lucy has no reason to think that Jessica has a grievance with her—because she doesn't. She simply does not trust her as much as she used to, having heard her lie without compunction to another friend. Of course, if the problem (or the relationship) were deeper, perhaps Jessica would say something—but, as it happens, she feels there is no point in admonishing Lucy about her ethics. The net result is that a single voicemail message, left for a third party, has subtly undermined a friendship.

We have already seen that children can be dangerous to keep around if one wants to lie with impunity. Another example, in case there is any doubt: My friend Daniel recently learned from his wife that another couple would be coming to stay in their home for a week. Daniel resisted. A week seemed like an eternity—especially given that he was not at all fond of the husband. This precipitated a brief argument between Daniel and his wife in the presence of their young daughter.

In the end, Daniel gave in, and the couple was soon standing on his doorstep with an impressive amount of luggage. Upon entering the home, the unwelcome husband expressed his gratitude for being allowed to stay in Daniel's guest room.

"Don't be silly, it's great to see you," Daniel said, his daughter standing at his side. "We love having you here."

“But, Dad, you said you didn’t want them to stay with us.”

“No I didn’t.”

“Yes you did! Remember?”

“No, no…that was another situation.” Daniel found that he could no longer maintain eye contact with his guests and thought of nothing better than to lead his daughter away by the hand, saying, “Where is your coloring book?” He spent the rest of the week struggling to swim free of the resulting riptide of awkwardness.

There is comedy here, of course—but only for others. And what do our children learn about us in moments like these? Is this really the example we want to set for them? Failures of personal integrity, once revealed, are rarely forgotten. We can apologize, of course. And we can resolve to be more forthright in the future. But we cannot erase the bad impression we have left in the minds of other people.

A wasteland of embarrassment and social upheaval can be neatly avoided by following a single precept in life: *Do not lie*.

Faint Praise

There have been moments in my life when I was devoted to a project that was simply doomed, in which I had months—in one case, *years*—invested, and where honest feedback could have spared me an immense amount of wasted effort. At other times, I received frank criticism just when I needed it and was able to change course quickly, knowing that I had avoided a lot of painful and unnecessary work. The difference between these two fates is hard to exaggerate. Yes, it can be unpleasant to be told that we have wasted time, or that we are not performing as well as we imagined, but if the criticism is valid, it is precisely what we most need to hear to find our way in the world.

And yet we are often tempted to encourage others with insincere praise. In this we treat them like children—while failing to help them prepare for encounters with those who will judge them like adults. I'm not saying that we need to go out of our way to criticize others. But when asked for our opinion, we do our friends no favors by pretending not to notice flaws in their work, especially when those who are not their friends are bound to notice these same flaws. Saving our friends disappointment and embarrassment is a great kindness. And if we have a history of being honest, our praise and encouragement will actually mean something.

I have a friend who is a very successful writer. Early in his career, he wrote a script that I thought was terrible, and I told him so. That was not easy to do, because he had spent the better part of a year working on it—but it happened to be the truth. Now, when I tell him that I love something he has written, he knows that I love it. He also knows that I respect his talent enough to tell him when I don't. I am sure there are people in his life he can't say that about. Why would I want to be one of them?

Secrets

A commitment to honesty does not necessarily require that we disclose facts about ourselves that we would prefer to keep private. If someone asks how much money you have in your bank account, you are under no ethical obligation to tell him. The truth could well be, “I’d rather not say.”

So there is no conflict, in principle, between honesty and the keeping of secrets. However, it is worth noting that many secrets—especially those we are asked to keep for others—can put us in a position where we will be forced to choose between lying and revealing privileged information. To agree to keep a secret is to assume a burden. At a minimum, one must remember what one is not supposed to talk about. This can be difficult and lead to clumsy attempts at deception. Unless your work requires that you keep secrets—which doctors, lawyers, psychologists, and other professional confidants do routinely—it seems worth avoiding.

Stephanie and Gina had been friends for more than a decade when Stephanie began to hear rumors that Gina’s husband, Derek, was having an affair. Although Stephanie did not feel close enough to Gina to raise the matter directly, a little snooping revealed that almost everyone in her circle knew about Derek’s infidelity—except, it seemed, Gina herself.

Derek had not been discreet. He was in the film business, and his mistress was an aspiring actress. Once, while traveling with Gina and the kids on vacation, he had booked this woman a room in the same hotel. He later hired her as a production assistant, and she now accompanied him on business trips and even attended events where Gina was present.

As Gina’s friend, Stephanie wanted to do whatever she could to help her. But what was the right thing to do? She was a second-tier friend, and the person who had told her of Derek’s affair had sworn her to secrecy. She also knew women who were closer to Gina than she was—why hadn’t one of them said something?

Stephanie saw Gina a few more times—they had been having lunch regularly for years—but found that she could no longer enjoy her company. Gina would speak about the completion of her new home, or about plans for

an upcoming trip, and Stephanie felt that by remaining silent she was participating in her friend's ultimate undoing. Simply having a normal conversation became an ordeal of acting as if nothing were the matter. Whether Gina knew about her husband's behavior and was keeping it a secret, was self-deceived, or was merely a victim of his cunning and the collusion of others, Stephanie's pretense began to feel indistinguishable from lying. As if by magic, the two friends quickly grew apart and have not spoken for years.

I was close enough to this situation to find it sickening. I am related to Stephanie and had met Gina and Derek on several occasions. Although I had no independent relationship with them, I knew a few people who had direct knowledge of Derek's philandering and were quietly severing relationships with him—all while keeping Gina in the dark (or allowing her to keep herself there). It was simply uncanny to see someone living under a mountain of lies and gossip, surrounded by friends but without a friend in the world who would tell her the truth. And this was Derek's final victory: People who could no longer abide him because of his unconscionable treatment of his wife nevertheless helped maintain his lies.

Lies in Extremis

Kant believed that lying was unethical in all cases—even in an attempt to stop the murder of an innocent person. Like many of Kant's philosophical views, his position on lying was not so much argued for as presumed, like a religious precept. Though it has the obvious virtue of clarity—*Never tell a lie*—in practice, this rule can produce behavior that only a psychopath might endorse.

A total prohibition against lying is also ethically incoherent in anyone but a true pacifist. If you think that it can ever be appropriate to injure or kill a person in self-defense, or in defense of another, it makes no sense to rule out lying in the same circumstances.[9]

I cannot see any reason to take Kant seriously on this point. However, this does not mean that lying is easily justified. Even as a means to ward off violence, lying often closes the door to acts of honest communication that may be more effective.

In those circumstances where we deem it *obviously* necessary to lie, we have generally determined that the person to be deceived is both dangerous and unreachable by any recourse to the truth. In other words, we have judged the prospects of establishing a real relationship with this person to be nonexistent. For most of us, such circumstances arise very rarely in life, if ever. And even when they seem to, it is often possible to worry that lying was the easy (and less than truly ethical) way out.

Let us take an extreme case as a template for others in the genre: A known murderer is looking for a boy whom you are now sheltering in your home. The murderer is standing at your door and wants to know whether you have seen his intended victim. The temptation to lie is perfectly understandable—but merely lying might produce other outcomes you do not intend. If you say that you saw the boy climb your fence and continue down the block, the murderer may leave, only to kill someone else's child. You might, even in this unhappy case, believe that lying was necessary and that you did all you could to protect innocent life. But that doesn't mean someone more courageous or capable than you couldn't have produced a better result with the truth.

Telling the truth in such a circumstance need not amount to acquiescence. The truth in this case could well be, “I wouldn’t tell you even if I knew. And if you take another step, I’ll put a bullet in your brain.” But if lying seems the only option, given your fear or physical limitations, it clearly shifts the burden of combating evil onto others. Granted, your neighbors might be better able to assume this burden than you are. But *someone* must assume it. If nothing else, the police must tell murderers the truth: Their behavior will not be tolerated.

In any case, it is far more common to find ourselves in situations in which, though we are tempted to lie, honesty will lead us to form connections with people who might otherwise have been adversaries. In this vein, I recall an encounter I had with a U.S. Customs officer upon returning from my first trip to Asia, nearly twenty-five years ago.

The year was 1987, but it might as well have been the Summer of Love: I was twenty, had hair down to my shoulders, and was dressed like an Indian rickshaw driver. For those charged with enforcing our nation’s drug laws, it would have been only prudent to subject my luggage to special scrutiny. Happily, I had nothing to hide.

“Where are you coming from?” the officer asked, glancing skeptically at my backpack.

“India, Nepal, Thailand…” I said.

“Did you take any drugs while you were over there?”

As it happens, I had. The temptation to lie was obvious—why speak to a *customs officer* about my recent drug use? But there was no real reason not to tell the truth, apart from the risk that it would lead to an even more thorough search of my luggage (and perhaps of my person) than had already commenced.

“Yes,” I said.

The officer stopped searching my bag and looked up. “Which drugs did you take?

“I smoked pot a few times… And I tried opium in India.”

“Opium?”

“Yes.”

“Opium or heroin?

“It was opium.”

“You don’t hear much about opium these days.”

“I know. It was the first time I’d ever tried it.”

“Are you carrying any drugs with you now?”

“No.”

The officer eyed me warily for a moment and then returned to searching my bag. Given the nature of our conversation, I reconciled myself to being there for a very long time. I was, therefore, as patient as a tree. Which was a good thing, because the officer was now examining my belongings as though any one item—a toothbrush, a book, a flashlight, a bit of nylon cord—might reveal the deepest secrets of the universe.

“What is opium like?” he asked after a time.

And I told him. In fact, over the next ten minutes, I told this lawman almost everything I knew about the use of mind-altering substances.

Eventually he completed his search and closed my luggage. One thing was perfectly obvious at the end of our encounter: We both felt very good about it.

A more quixotic self stands revealed. I’m not sure that I would have precisely the same conversation today. I would not lie, but I probably wouldn’t work quite so hard to open such a novel channel of communication. Nevertheless, I continue to find that a willingness to be honest—especially about truths that one might be expected to conceal—often leads to much more gratifying exchanges with other human beings.

Of course, if I had been carrying illegal drugs, my situation would have been very different. One of the worst things about breaking the law is that it puts one at odds with an indeterminate number of other people. This is among the many corrosive effects of having unjust laws: They tempt peaceful and (otherwise) honest people to lie so as to avoid being punished for behavior that is ethically blameless.

Mental Accounting

One of the greatest problems for the liar is that he must keep track of his lies. Some people are better at this than others. Psychopaths can assume this burden of mental accounting without any obvious distress. That is no accident: They are *psychopaths*. They do not care about others and are quite happy to sever relationships whenever the need arises. Some people are monsters of egocentricity. But there is no question that lying comes at a psychological cost for the rest of us.

Lies beget other lies. Unlike statements of fact, which require no further work on our part, lies must be continually protected from collisions with reality. When you tell the truth, you have nothing to keep track of. The world itself becomes your memory, and if questions arise, you can always point others back to it. You can even reconsider certain facts and honestly change your views. And you can openly discuss your confusion, conflicts, and doubts with all comers. In this way, a commitment to the truth is naturally purifying of error.

But the liar must remember what he said, and to whom, and must take care to maintain his falsehoods in the future. This can require an extraordinary amount of work—all of which comes at the expense of authentic communication and free attention. The liar must weigh each new disclosure, whatever the source, to see whether it might damage the facade that he has built. And all these stresses accrue, whether or not anyone discovers that he has been lying.

Tell enough lies, however, and the effort required to keep your audience in the dark quickly becomes unsustainable. While you might be spared a direct accusation of dishonesty, many people will conclude, for reasons that they might be unable to pinpoint, that they cannot trust you. You will begin to seem like someone who is always dancing around the facts—because you most certainly are. Many of us have known people like this. No one ever quite confronts them, but everyone begins to treat them like creatures of fiction. Such people are often quietly shunned, for reasons they probably never understand.

In fact, suspicion often grows on *both* sides of a lie: Research indicates that

liars trust those they deceive less than they otherwise might—and the more damaging their lies, the less they trust, or even like, their victims. It seems that in protecting their egos, and interpreting their own behavior as justified, liars tend to deprecate the people they lie to.[10]

Integrity

What does it mean to have integrity? It means many things, of course, but one criterion is to avoid behavior that readily leads to shame or remorse. The ethical terrain here extends well beyond the question of honesty—but to truly have integrity, we must not feel the need to lie about our personal lives.

To lie is to erect a boundary between the truth we are living and the perception others have of us. The temptation to do this is often born of an understanding that others will disapprove of our behavior. Often, there are good reasons why they would.

Pick up any newspaper and look at the problems people create for themselves by lying—problems that seem to require more lies to mitigate. It is simply astonishing how people destroy their marriages, careers, and reputations by saying one thing and doing another. Tiger Woods, John Edwards, Eliot Spitzer, Anthony Wiener—these are men whose names now conjure images of the most public self-destruction. Of course, their transgressions weren't merely a matter of lying. But deception was what prepared the ground for their humiliation. One can get divorced without having to issue a public apology. It is even possible to live a frank and utterly unconventional life of sexual promiscuity, or exhibitionism, without paying the penalties these men paid. Many lives are almost scandal-proof. Vulnerability comes in pretending to be someone you are not.

Big Lies

Most of us are now painfully aware that our trust in government, corporations, and other public institutions has been undermined by lies.

Lying has precipitated or prolonged wars: The Gulf of Tonkin incident in Vietnam and false reports of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were both instances in which lying (at some level) led to armed conflict that might otherwise not have occurred. When the truth finally emerged, vast numbers of people grew more cynical about U.S. foreign policy—and many have come to doubt the legitimacy of any military intervention, whatever the stated motive.

Big lies have led many people to reflexively distrust those in positions of authority. As a consequence, it is now impossible to say anything of substance on climate change, environmental pollution, human nutrition, economic policy, foreign conflicts, pharmaceuticals, and dozens of other subjects without a significant percentage of one's audience expressing paralyzing doubts about even the most reputable sources of information. Our public discourse appears permanently riven by conspiracy theories.

Of course, certain controversies arise because expert opinion has come down on both sides of an important issue. Some questions are genuinely unsettled. But confusion spreads unnecessarily whenever people in positions of power are caught lying or concealing their conflicts of interest.

Consider the widespread fear of childhood vaccinations. In 1998, the physician Andrew Wakefield published a study in *The Lancet* linking the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine to autism. This study has since been judged to be an "elaborate fraud," and Wakefield's medical license has been revoked.[11]

The consequences of Wakefield's dishonesty would have been bad enough. But the legacy effect of other big lies has thus far made it impossible to remedy the damage he has caused. Given the fact that corporations and governments sometimes lie, whether to avoid legal liability or to avert public panic, it has become very difficult to spread the truth about the MMR vaccine. Vaccination rates have plummeted—especially in prosperous, well-educated communities—and children have become sick and even died as a result.

An unhappy truth of human psychology is probably also at work here, which makes it hard to abolish lies once they have escaped into the world: We seem to be predisposed to remember statements as true even after they have been disconfirmed. For instance, if a rumor spreads that a famous politician once fainted during a campaign speech, and the story is later revealed to be false, some significant percentage of people will recall it as a fact—even if they were first exposed to it in the very context of its debunking. In psychology, this is known as the “illusory truth effect.” Familiarity breeds credence.

One can imagine circumstances, perhaps in time of war, in which lying to one’s enemies might be necessary—especially if spreading misinformation was likely to reduce the loss of innocent life. Granted, the boundary between these conditions and the cases of gratuitous or malignant deception cited above might be difficult to spot—especially if lying to one’s enemies also entails lying to one’s friends. In such circumstances, we might recognize a good lie only in retrospect. But war and espionage are conditions in which human relationships have broken down or were never established in the first place; thus the usual rules of cooperation no longer apply. The moment one begins dropping bombs, or destroying a country’s infrastructure with cyber attacks, lying has become just another weapon in the arsenal.

The need for state secrets is obvious. However, the need for governments to deceive their own people seems to me to be exiguous to the point of nonexistence—an ethical mirage. Just when you think you’ve reached it, the facts tend to suggest otherwise. And the harm occasioned whenever lies of this kind are uncovered seems all but irreparable.

I suspect that the telling of necessary lies will be rare for anyone but a spy—that is, if we grant that espionage is necessary in today’s world. It is rumored that spies must lie even to their own friends and family. I am quite sure that I could not live this way myself, however good the cause. The role of a spy strikes me as a near total sacrifice of personal ethics for a larger good—whether real or imagined. It is a kind of moral self-immolation.

In any case, we can draw no more daily instruction from the lives of spies than we can from the adventures of astronauts in space. Just as most of us need not worry about our bone density in the absence of gravity, we need not consider whether our every utterance could compromise national security.

The ethics of war and espionage are the ethics of emergency—and are, therefore, necessarily limited in scope.

Conclusion

As it was in *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, and *Othello*, so it is in life. Most forms of private vice and public evil are kindled and sustained by lies. Acts of adultery and other personal betrayals, financial fraud, government corruption—even murder and genocide—generally require an additional moral defect: a willingness to lie.

Lying is, almost by definition, a refusal to cooperate with others. It condenses a lack of trust and trustworthiness into a single act. It is both a failure of understanding and an unwillingness to be understood. To lie is to recoil from relationship.

By lying, we deny others a view of the world as it is. Our dishonesty not only influences the choices they make, it often determines the choices they *can* make—and in ways we cannot always predict. Every lie is a direct assault upon the autonomy of those we lie to.

And by lying to one person, we potentially spread falsehoods to many others—even to whole societies. We also force upon ourselves subsequent choices—to maintain the deception or not—that can complicate our lives. In this way, every lie haunts our future. There is no telling when or how it might collide with reality, requiring further maintenance. The truth never needs to be tended in this way. It can simply be reiterated.

The lies of the powerful lead us to distrust governments and corporations. The lies of the weak make us callous toward the suffering of others. The lies of conspiracy theorists raise doubts about the honesty of whistleblowers, even when they are telling the truth. Lies are the social equivalent of toxic waste—everyone is potentially harmed by their spread.

How would your relationships change if you resolved never to lie again? What truths might suddenly come into view in your life? What kind of person would you become? And how might you change the people around you?

It is worth finding out.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for the editorial work of my wife and collaborator, Annaka Harris. The editor’s job is always crucial, but with this essay my debt to Annaka is especially great, because the topic itself was her idea. I was, in fact, writing on assignment. In all my work, Annaka improves the content, structure, tone, and syntax—true love takes no greater form than this...

I am also indebted to my mother, whose comments improved the essay throughout, and to my friends Emily Elson, Tim Ferriss, and Seth Godin for their very helpful notes. LYING also benefitted from the expert copy editing of Martha Spaulding.

Other Books by Sam Harris

The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B003V1WT72/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=wwwsamharri02-20

Letter to a Christian Nation

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000JMKTNM/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=wwwsamharri02-20

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B000VUCIZE/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=wwwsamharri02-20

About the Author

Sam Harris is the author of the New York Times bestsellers, *The End of Faith*, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and *The Moral Landscape*. *The End of Faith* won the 2005 PEN Award for Nonfiction.

Mr. Harris's writing has been published in over fifteen languages. He and his work have been discussed in *Newsweek*, *TIME*, *The New York Times*, *Scientific American*, *Nature*, *Rolling Stone*, and many other journals. His writing has appeared in *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *The Times* (London), *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic*, *The Annals of Neurology*, and elsewhere.

Mr. Harris is a Co-Founder and CEO of Project Reason, a nonprofit foundation devoted to spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society. He received a degree in philosophy from Stanford University and a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA. Visit his blog at www.samharris.org .

Notes

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[1] Howard has put much of his material in book form: R.A. Howard and C.D. Korver, *Ethics for the Real World: Creating a Personal Code to Guide Decisions in Work and Life* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press, 2008). While I do not entirely agree with how the authors separate ethics from the rest of human values, I believe readers will find this a very useful book.

[2] Some have argued that evolution must have selected for an ability to deceive oneself, thereby making it easier to mislead others [see William von Hippel and Robert Trivers, "The Evolution and Psychology of Self-deception," *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2011): 1–16; discussion 16–56.] Whether self-deception actually exists is still a matter of controversy, however. There is no question that we can be blind to facts about ourselves or about the world that we really *should* see—but truly believing one's own falsehoods is tantamount to honesty. Thus, we need not worry about self-deception for the time being.

[3] S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

[4] B.M. DePaulo and D.A. Kashy, "Everyday Lies in Close and Casual Relationships," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74, no.1 (Jan. 1998): 63–79.

[5] B.M. DePaulo, et al.,"Lying in Everyday Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 5 (1996): 979–995.

[6] P. J. Kalbfleisch, "Deceptive Message Intent and Relational Quality," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 20, nos. 1–2 (2001): 214–230; T. Cole, "Lying to the One You Love: The Use of Deception in Romantic Relationships," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 18, no. 1 (2001): 107–129.

[7] There is a related distinction in practical ethics between negative and positive injunctions: Negative injunctions are actions we should avoid; positive injunctions are actions we should perform. The asymmetry between these two sets is impressive: We can comply with an infinite number of negative injunctions without expending any energy at all—I can abstain from

killing, stealing, or vandalizing others' property without getting out of my chair. Positive injunctions, however, demand that I *do* something—raise funds for a specific charity, for instance—and whatever I choose to do will compete with all the other ways I could use my time and attention.

Another important difference between negative and positive injunctions is that it is quite clear when one has fulfilled the former, whereas the latter are often beset by ambiguities. I can be absolutely certain I have not committed murder today. But with respect to any act of generosity, I may always wonder whether I have given enough, to the right people, in the right way, for the right purpose, etc.

To not lie is a negative injunction, and it takes no energy to accomplish. To tell the *whole* truth, however, is a positive injunction—requiring an endless effort at communication.

[8] K.A. Broomfield, E.J. Robinson, and W.P. Robinson, "Children's Understanding about White Lies," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2002): 47–65.

[9] Bok (1999) makes the same point.

[10] B.J. Sagarin, K. Rhoads, and R.B. Cialdini, "Deceiver's Distrust: Denigration as a Consequence of Undiscovered Deception," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 11 (1998): 1167–1176.

[11] http://healthland.time.com/2011/01/06/study-linking-vaccines-to-autism-is-fraudulent/

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