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Becoming Honest: Why We Lie and What Can Be Done About It

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Abstract
While there is more to being honest than not lying, becoming the sort of person who does not lie unjustifiably is essential to becoming an honest person. This paper will provide an account of the underlying psychology of a certain kind of lie: namely, morally unjustified lies we tell due to a perceived benefit to ourselves. The proposal is that such lies naturally spring from a personal orientation to the world that centers on self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement. This analysis suggests that a way to refrain from lying is to engage in a relationally-connected way of life that brings about an alternative orientation to the world in which one's protection, preservation, and reputation are secure apart from lying. An aspect of this new orientation will be the emerging willingness to relinquish control over the perceived disadvantages of honesty. So, on this view, lying (and other forms of dishonesty) is largely unnecessary when the perceived disadvantages are no longer viewed as a threat to one's secure standing in the world.

Key Words
Honesty, lying, virtue, vice, character, attachment theory.

1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the question of how we become the kinds of persons who

do not lie. While there are morally justifiable lies (e.g., lying to save a life), in many

cases in which lying is an attractive option, morally justifying reasons are nowhere in

sight.[1] What often is in sight is our own personal benefit—we commonly lie to gain an

advantage or avoid some disadvantage. This chapter argues that one path to becoming

honest is to develop an underlying sense of relational safety, well-being, and acceptance

that undermines, or at least significantly weakens, self-serving motivations to lie.

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[1] For the remainder of this chapter, when we speak of becoming the sort of person who refrains from lying, we are assuming cases of morally unjustified lies.

We begin by isolating the nature of lies told to benefit oneself. We then identify a weakness with a direct approach to virtue formation, which motivates the development of an alternative pathway of virtue formation. Our alternative proposes a set of practices embedded in an overall way of life as the means to undercut some central motivations of self-serving lies. These central motivators to lie—self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement—can be weakened by practices aimed at a relationally connected way of life. These relational connections—i.e., secure interpersonal attachments—provide the social-emotional support that brings about safety (protection), well-being (preservation), and acceptance (enhancement) that can enable truth telling. We conclude by considering one practical objection to this alternative account of the formation of honesty.

2. Why We Lie

One common way to manage information that others possess is to lie.[2] When we lie we affirm a statement that we believe to be false with the intention that others take what we say as true or treat us as if it were true.[3] This is an imprecise definition in that it does not cover all putative cases of lying. For instance, the "bald-faced lie" is an assertion made with full knowledge that everyone knows it is false. While the assertor does not intend others to take what he says as true or even to treat him as if it were true, his false statement nevertheless counts as a lie.[4] Nonetheless, persons typically lie with the

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[2] The social psychologist Bella DePaulo's research found that, on average, persons lie 1.5 times a day. See DePaulo 2004: 306.
[3] On this definition, asserting what one believes to be false with the intent to deceive is sufficient to count as lying even if what one asserts turns out to be true. On other definitions, asserting a false statement is a necessary condition for lying, such that a person can intend to lie but fail to do so if the statement they believe false is in actual fact true. Nothing in our paper hangs on this debatable point. For further discussion, see Carson 2010: 17–26.
[4] See Sorenson 2007.

intention to deceive. Indeed, it is this intention that on many occasions plays a part in *why*

persons lie.

For instance, when a child says she has brushed her teeth and she knows she has

not, she intends that her parent believe her claim or at least treat her as if it were true. In

the latter scenario, the parent may suspect the child of lying but decide not to make her

brush her teeth, which is good enough for the child.[5] The intention to have others believe

what one says is true or treat one as if what one says is true exposes a common

motivation for lying: we frequently lie due to some perceived benefit to ourselves that we

judge the deceit will likely bring about. For example, we lie about the age of our child to

save money on a movie ticket, or to a friend about why we are late for an appointment to

avoid our friend's disappointment, or about having read a certain book to maintain the

appearance of being well read.

Bella DePaulo's research on lying found that the distinction between self-serving

motives and other-oriented motives helpfully categorized her participants' motivations

for lying. DePaulo observed that self-serving lies "are told to protect or enhance the liar

psychologically, or to protect or promote the liar's interests. …The more instrumentally

oriented self-centered lies are told in the service of the liar's personal gain or

convenience."[6]

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[5] There are many cases like this. I might tell the police officer who pulls me over that I haven't
had any alcohol to drink even though I did have one drink. The police officer may not believe me,
but he treats me as if what I said were true because he does not suspect me of being intoxicated.
[6] DePaulo 2004: 309–310. For a similar distinction, see Leib and Shalvi (this volume). While
other-oriented motives for lying are significant, this chapter's focus is on self-serving motives.
DePaulo did find that self-serving lies outpaced other-oriented lies two-to-one, and that more
serious lies were more likely to be of the self-serving sort (DePaulo 2004: 311, 317). For a
discussion of the other-oriented motive, see DePaulo 2004: 310–311 and DePaulo 2008: 288–
293. See also Miller 2013: 286–305 for further discussion of DePaulo's research and motivations
for lying.

In many situations, of course, telling the truth is what brings personal gain or convenience and is, therefore, the easy thing to do. "Would you like fries with that?" "When would you prefer to meet?" "In order to be paid, please provide your social security number." In such instances, truth telling is deeply habituated and lying is the furthest thing from our minds. But when there is a perceived benefit in getting others to respond to us by means of a falsehood, truth telling is often difficult and lying is often tempting. The truth, as the saying goes, hurts. And when veracity is going to hurt the speaker, the desire to lie can arise. To be sure, undetected lying can save us from loss, increase our fortunes, and guard our reputation, when to tell the truth in such instances comes with a cost in these areas of our lives.

3. A Weakness with Direct Approaches to Becoming Honest

Truth telling in situations in which lying is tempting can bring about costly repercussions, and those costs can be painful disincentives to truth telling. The problem is not simply that the cost-benefit analysis in some cases favors lying. Acting viciously can often lead to personal gain of some sort. The problem we have in mind attaches itself to direct approaches to virtue acquisition. By "direct approaches" we mean formative pathways that recommend practicing actions in accordance with virtue as the primary means to bring about virtuous dispositions. In other words, these direct approaches operate on the basic notion that persons become just primarily by direct efforts to act in

just ways, that persons become honest primarily by direct efforts to act in honest ways,

and so on.[7]

These direct approaches typically depend upon the idea that practicing actions in

accordance with virtue must be accompanied by an incipient experience of appropriate or

proper pleasure in doing good that serves to reinforce the inclination to act in the virtuous

manner again.[8] For instance, Nancy Sherman observes

> On Aristotle's view, practice would be neither necessary nor sufficient
>
> for acquiring states and abilities if it did not yield derivative pleasures.
>
> For it is the pleasure proper to a particular activity that impels us to
>
> perform that activity the next time with greater discrimination and
>
> precision.[9]

On this understanding, acting virtuously is by nature pleasant, and it is in tasting the

pleasures of virtue that persons learn to enjoy virtue for what it is. This experience of

appropriate pleasure in acting virtuously serves to reinforce and refine the underlying

motivational psychology characteristic of the virtue.

The problem—or better, weakness—of these direct approaches is that at times the

experience of appropriate pleasure when acting virtuously is overridden by the painful

consequences of so acting. In such a case, acting according to virtue is not reinforced by

the pleasure of so acting. For instance, the attempt to courageously protect the one being

bullied can end up with both the bully and the one bullied turning on the courageous

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[7] It is important to note that Aristotle's utilization of direct efforts to acquire virtue would not count as a "direct approach," in that Aristotle emphasized other necessary ingredients (e.g., a good upbringing, a good city, good laws, friendship, etc.) in the development of virtue. The "direct approaches" we have in mind here are reductions of Aristotle's view.

[8] See, for instance, Burnyeat 1980: 75–78 and Sherman 1989: 184–190.

[9] Sherman 1989: 184.

protector, such that the courageous one finds herself feeling more pain in her courageous

act than proper pleasure. Instead of being left with a desire to repeat her courageous

action, she finds herself thinking, "I'll never do that again." Thus, it seems that for direct

approaches to work, enough needs to go right in the practice of virtue that an experience

of proper pleasure is likely to arise without an overriding experience of pain.[10]

While appropriate pleasure can be overridden by pain in the attempt to form any

virtue, the formation of honesty (especially where lying is expected to bring a benefit to

oneself) is particularly vulnerable to this problem. When the truth is told on occasions

when lying is tempting, money can be lost, friends can be disappointed, and reputations

can be tarnished. Whatever appropriate pleasure inheres within the practice of truth

telling on such occasions, the overriding felt experience can be one of pain, loss, or

embarrassment.

The negative felt experience in refraining from lying is perhaps particularly

prevalent among children, who are regularly testing boundaries under the seemingly

omniscient eye of parents or guardians. Even though a young child may not yet be adept

at lying ("I didn't eat the cookie," said with crumbs on the sides of the child's mouth and

the half-eaten cookie gripped tightly in his hand), the child is often adept at predicting

what will happen if the parent learns the truth of the matter. The parent's discovery of the

truth often leads to some painful consequence for the child (e.g., loss of dessert for the

rest of the week) and so the child is attracted to the possibility of lying. The lie becomes

an efficient means to avoid negative consequences, and if there is a family dog or pre-

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[10] For more on this point, see Curzer 2002: 150–154 and Porter 2012: 136–138. To be clear, we are merely claiming that the direct approach can get derailed in this way on some occasions and that on such occasions some sort of additional formative process needs to be provided.

verbal sibling to blame for the missing cookie, the lie can be effective as well. This is why some parents adopt the following strategy when they suspect their children of lying about having done *x* (e.g., who ate the cookies?): the parent says to the child, "if you tell the truth about *x*, you won't get in trouble." These parents realize that the consequences of telling the truth loom so large for the child that lying seems worth the risk. The parent who promises no negative consequences not only eliminates the cost of telling the truth, but also helps clear the way for an experience of proper pleasure in truth telling that thereby helps to habituate honesty.

Unfortunately, not all parents (or police officers, tax accountants, teachers, employers, insurance adjustors, neighbors, spouses, friends, and others to whom persons are tempted to lie) promise no negative consequences to help elicit the truth. Rather, the painful consequences for letting the truth be known are often waiting to flood in, and the experience of appropriate pleasure is liable to get lost in the mix. This is not to say that the proper pleasure of truth telling fails to arise at all when one tells the truth, but rather, whatever proper pleasure arises gets swamped by the overall experience of loss and embarrassment, especially when the stakes are high.[11] When a costly truth has been told and the truth-teller, awash in the pain, is asked, "But doesn't it at least feel good to have told the truth?" a plausible response is, "No, the whole thing feels horrible." Thus, when it comes to refraining from lying, it can be difficult to prime the virtue formation pump with the experience of appropriate pleasure.

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[11] Curzer 2002 goes further and argues that "virtuous acts are *not* typically overall pleasant *even for the virtuous*, let alone for the learners" (150, author's emphasis).

4. An Alternative Path to Becoming Honest

But the direct approach is not the only available pathway for acquiring virtue. Another option is what might be thought of as an indirect approach to virtue formation. This approach is "indirect" in that it does not directly practice the acts in accord with virtue, but instead, first, seeks to identify the underlying psychology of virtuous behavior (and/or the underlying psychology of vice) and, second, pursues an overall way of life that is conducive to bringing about this underlying psychology. This way of life is not a direct attempt to practice the behavior in accord with virtue; rather, the practices involved in the way of life are indirectly related to the acquisition of the virtue in question. These practices provide what Nancy Snow has referred to as the "personality scaffolding" for the formation of virtuous dispositions. Snow understands "personality scaffolding" as "the psychological structures and mechanisms that can help or hinder the development, sustenance, and exercise of virtue."[12] This is to say, the indirect formative process looks to a set of activities that constitutes an overall way of life, and this way of life engenders the beliefs, valuations, desires, emotions, and attitudes that make up at least some of the requisite underlying psychology conducive to acquiring the virtue in question. On this indirect approach, the virtue formation pump is primed prior to the practice of behavior that accords with virtue.

In this way, the indirect pathway meets the direct approach halfway in that indirect formation is complemented by the actual practice of behavior in accordance with virtue, with the latter serving to reinforce the underlying psychology as well as the way of life that preceded it. What indirect formation adds is an alternative way of approaching

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[12] Snow 2013: 131.

virtue formation. In particular, it helps cultivate the personality scaffolding that makes the experience of appropriate pleasure more likely in the process of virtue acquisition, and is thereby particularly suited for the formation of honesty when the pain of acting honestly would otherwise outweigh the felt experience of pleasure.[13]

In order to pursue an indirect formation process when it comes to refraining from self-serving lies, we first identify the underlying motivations for these lies as well as a set of activities that would undermine these particular motivations. One plausible conceptualization of the liar's underlying motivations is that lying, especially when due to a perceived personal benefit, springs from a personal orientation to the world that centers on certain deeply entrenched human concerns such as self-protection (will I be able to keep the goods that I have?), self-preservation (will I be able to obtain the goods that I need?), and self-enhancement (will I be able to ensure that others will think well of and accept me?). This is to say, the perception of a personal benefit to oneself can be understood as a judgment based on desires to avoid the loss of goods already possessed (self-protection), gain goods for oneself going forward (self-preservation), and maintain or improve others' view of oneself (self-enhancement). While there is nothing wrong, in principle, with these concerns, when the fulfilment of them is threatened by truth telling, lying can be a tempting means to protecting against loss, gaining goods, and enhancing one's standing. As long as we see ourselves as under threat in terms of protection, preservation, and enhancement, we can be tempted to lie.[14] While there are no doubt

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[13] For more on this notion of personality scaffolding, see Snow 2018: 75–78.

[14] Of course, this analysis presses the question of the morality of lying. Do certain types of threat to one's own (or another's) well-being morally justify lying in order to avoid the threatened outcomes? Even on a positive answer to that question, many types of threat to one's own (or another's) well-being are presumably inadequate to morally justify lying.

other motivations for self-serving lies, a large class of such lies plausibly stems from one or more of these desires.[15]

This analysis suggests that a way to become honest, at least when it comes to refraining from lying due to a perceived personal benefit, is to engage in a process of reorienting oneself to the world such that one does not experience oneself as under as much threat in terms of protection, preservation, and acceptance by others. In particular, this reorientation involves an alternative way of seeing oneself such that one's protection, preservation, and acceptance by others are judged as sufficiently secure apart from lying. This sort of secure sense of self is not a guaranteed constant. Thus, a set of practices that make up such a way of life would need to be engaged in order to develop the sense that one will be able to maintain the goods that one has, obtain the goods that one needs, and ensure that others think well of and accept one. This underlying psychology will diminish the motivation to lie in order to protect, preserve, and enhance others' view of oneself. Indeed, to the degree that this alternative sense of self emerges, the desire to lie can fade away since being honest in this way no longer erodes one's secure standing in the world. In other words, whatever perceived cost might come from truth telling will not be sufficient to override one's secure sense of self.

For instance, consider Sam, who tried to get a few additional things finished at the office and once again left late. Still far from home, his spouse phones and says, "You said

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[15] For comparison, Gillath and colleagues consider three motivations for lying: achievement, power, and intimacy (Gillath et al. 2010: 849). DePaulo's research found that many lies, including the most serious lies, are told for self-centered motives (DePaulo 1994: 309–311, 317). Moreover, Kashy and DePaulo found that lies are more frequently told by persons who care deeply about what others think of them (Kashy and DePaulo 1996: 1050). Annette C. Baier discusses similar motivations for lying that she refers to as our "self-protective and self-assertive ends" (Baier 1993: 281).

you'd be home by 5:30. It is 6:00. You knew I needed the car. What happened?" Sam has

a choice. He could either tell the truth and own up to his decision to stay late, or he could

lie, blaming his lateness on heavy traffic. It seems plausible to suppose that what is at

stake here is Sam's self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement. That is to

say, if Sam tells the truth he stands to lose certain goods he currently has (harmony with

his spouse), he puts in jeopardy future goods he hopes to gain (an enjoyable evening with

his spouse), and he tees up his spouse's disappointment and rejection. With these goods

under threat, the temptation to lie looms large. But if Sam feels generally secure

regarding these goods, then he stands a better chance—due to that state of mind—of

having the capacity to tolerate the negative fallout of telling the truth.

It is important to note that what we are calling a "secure sense of self" is not

primarily a sense of material or physical security, but instead a sense of relational

security. This is a secure sense that when I am unable to hold onto what I have, when I

don't have what I need, and/or when I am rejected by some, there are one or more others

who will help restore what has been lost, provide for me, and/or stand by me. Often, these

are the sorts of relational goods that are under threat; but even when material and

physical goods are under threat, a sense of relational safety, security, and acceptance can

serve to diminish the temptation to lie. So, on this pathway of virtue formation, it is the

relational way of life that Sam has cultivated in previous days, weeks, and months that

shapes his way of being in the world and that heavily influences his capacity to tolerate

the pain of truth telling.

5. A Relationally-Connected Way of Life and Becoming Honest

Within philosophy, the recent return to seeing philosophy as involving the cultivation of an overall way of life helps promote this indirect, relational pathway of virtue acquisition.[16] For instance, Pierre Hadot has argued that all ancient philosophical schools (e.g., Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, etc.) envisioned philosophy as consisting "not merely in speaking and discoursing in a certain way, but also in being, acting, and seeing the world in a specific way … . Philosophy is not merely discourse but a choice of life, an existential option, and a lived exercise."[17] Within these philosophical schools, acquiring virtue involved immersion in a form of life which included exercises (e.g., dietary regimes, meditation, contemplation, etc.) that formed the inner life of the subject and predisposed him or her for the acquisition of virtue. On this conception of virtue formation, virtuous action springs from an overall personal orientation to reality that is maintained by the practices that constitute a particular way of life.

For instance, ancient Stoicism is an overall way of life that encourages the practice of meditating on one's inevitable death as a means to eradicate fear and worry about the conditions that would hasten one's death.[18] By meditating on one's death through the lens of Stoic doctrine—according to which one's death, like everything else that happens, is simply part of the unfolding of God's perfectly rational will for the universe—one can become rightly indifferent to continued existence.[19] In this way, the

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[16] See Hadot 1995 and 2004, Cooper 2012, and Snow 2016b.

[17] Hadot 2004: 220.

[18] Robertson 2010: 165–168.

[19] There is an important distinction in Stoicism between "preferred indifferents" and "non-preferred indifferents," where becoming rightly indifferent to a naturally valuable thing is not to deny that one still prefers that thing. See Reydam-Schils 2006: 59–69.

Stoic attempts to detach from her self-concerns, re-envisioning her life from a God's-eye

point of view. In this regard, Epictetus writes,

> Why don't you reflect, then, that for man the source of all evils, and of his
>
> meanness of spirit and cowardice, is not death itself, but rather the fear of death?
>
> It is to confront this that you must train yourself, and it is towards that end that all
>
> your reasonings, all your studies, and all your readings should be directed, and
>
> then you'll recognize that it is in this way alone that human beings can attain
>
> freedom.[20]

On this conception of Stoicism, virtuous action springs from an overall personal

orientation to reality that is maintained by indirect practices that constitute a Stoic way of

life.[21]

Confucianism is another example of indirect virtue acquisition by means of an

overall way of life. Snow writes, "Confucian paradigms stress virtue cultivation as

structured immersion into a way of life … . This focus on the outer life is meant to

structure attention in specific ways so as to create a kind of inner life. We cultivate the

inner by attending to the outer."[22] In particular, intentional engagement with various

kinds of ritual propriety (or *li*), music, classic texts, and other "situational factors" are

meant to shape affect and cognitions "in ways intended to elicit virtuous response, and,

eventually, through habituated practice, virtuous dispositions."[23] Snow concludes that this

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[20] Epictetus 2014: 216 (*Discourses* 3.26.38–39).
[21] See Cooper 2012: 214–225 and Gill 2018.
[22] Snow 2016a: 149.
[23] Snow 2016a: 151.

"total immersion in a way of life … is deliberate and a more global form of virtue development" than other more standard paradigms of virtue development.[24]

On these indirect models of virtue acquisition, the practice-habituation process is not directed towards practicing the virtuous behavior itself, but is directed towards immersion in an overall way of life that brings about the inner states and dispositions underlying the virtuous response. However, it is important to note that it is not that the direct pathway of practice-habituation is wrong-headed as much as it is truncated when considered separately from an overall way of life. Indeed, what Aristotle thought of as the importance of a "good upbringing" for the development of virtue can be helpfully extended to include a good way of living throughout one's life.[25] This is to say, one way of understanding the importance of a good upbringing is that it tills the psychological soil in which direct practice of virtuous acts takes root. And yet, within contemporary psychological theory and research, it is widely maintained that the social-emotional benefits of a good upbringing are not an all-or-nothing childhood affair, but rather a lifelong developmental task sensitive to a person's choices.[26]

To illustrate, let us assume that some subset of lies for personal benefit is motivated by the fear that if the truth were known, others would view us negatively, leading to our being relationally rejected. On this assumption, social-emotional practices that reinforce the unconditional positive regard of significant persons in our lives would mitigate this fear. So, if Sam is confident in the unconditional acceptance of significant

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[24] Snow 2016a: 151. Snow juxtaposes Confucian virtue formation with her own "folk" approach to virtue acquisition and Julia Annas's broadly Aristotelian "expertise" paradigm.

[25] Aristotle writes, "That is why we need to have had the appropriate upbringing—right from early youth, as Plato says—to make us find enjoyment or pain in the right things; for this is the correct education" (*Nichomachean Ethics* 1104b11–13).

[26] For example, Thompson 2015: 297.

others in his life (perhaps including his spouse), then he will find it easier to face up to

his spouse's negative feelings and tell the truth regarding his lateness. The way of life

Sam needs to practice in order to be prepared to keep from lying is a relationally-

connected one. In psychological terminology, the sort of relationship in question can be

helpfully characterized as a "secure attachment."[27]

Rooted in the research of John Bowlby, a secure attachment is understood as a

type of interpersonal relationship in which the one who is securely attached possesses an

abiding confidence in the emotional availability, attunement, and care of significant

others. Attachment theory is:

> built on the core observation that security-enhancing caregivers or
>
> "attachment figures" (usually beginning with parents or other primary
>
> care providers in childhood) help a child develop positive mental
>
> representations of self and relationship partners. They also support the
>
> development of effective means of regulating emotions and coping with
>
> threats and stressors. Children and adults with a history of supportive
>
> attachment relationships are notably less defensive, more mindful of
>
> their feelings, more genuinely empathic, and more open in
>
> communicating with relationship partners.[28]

Conversely, persons with an unreliable and neglectful relational history tend to develop

insecure attachments that bring about attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance.

Anxiously attached individuals have a negative evaluation of self that includes chronic

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[27] For more on attachment theory, see Cassidy 2008, Thompson 2016, Bowlby 1988.
[28] Gillath et al. 2010: 842.

anxiety about intimacy/closeness, jealousy, fears of abandonment/neglect, and a high

need for approval from close others, rather than a secure sense of self.[29] Attachment

avoidant individuals possess a negative evaluation of others that includes fears of

intimacy/closeness and a lack of trust in the availability of others, rather than a

confidence in the acceptance and support of close others.[30]

The crucial idea on this social-emotional formative path is that securely attached

individuals are confident of the protection of others in times of loss (i.e., protection), of

the care of others in times of need (i.e., preservation), and of the acceptance of others in

the face of rejection (i.e., acceptance). This is to say, securely attached individuals can

come to have a habituated sense of self that involves the internalized meaning that

because I am cared for by competent others "I will be protected," "I will be alright," and

"I will be accepted." This secure sense of self militates against the fear that "I will lose

too much," "I won't have enough," and "I will be rejected," thereby undermining the

central motivations to lie for personal benefit.

Consider the example of the temptation to cover-up a sex scandal out of the fear

of losing one's job, spouse, and reputation. The temptation to lie is fierce precisely

because protection, preservation, and enhancement are on the line. How should one

counsel the one facing the temptation to engage in a cover-up? Does the wise counselor

recommend the direct practice of honest behavior in the face of the massive temptation to

lie? Or does the wise counselor say, "You are never going to be able to face up to the

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

truth without some help. I will gather a group of your closest friends and we will stand by you no matter what and help you face up to the truth."

Of course, such an indirect move is possible only if there is a wise counselor to call and close friends to gather, as well as openness to being aided in this way. The practices required to develop and maintain a secure relational context are varied, and much depends, according to attachment theory, on one's early relational experience—that is, whether or not one had a good or "good-enough" upbringing.[31] If one's upbringing was not "good enough," then corrective relational experiences are needed and there are practices whereby persons can seek these out (e.g., therapy, trust-building exercises, practices related to post-traumatic growth, intentional friendship, etc.). Once a person is committed to the value of being known and accepted by safe others, a way of life that involves self-awareness, transparent communication, confession and forgiveness, mindfulness of the other, meaningful relational interaction, and so on can be intentionally cultivated. Practices such as these help establish a relationally-connected way of life leading to a way of being in the world—a habituated personal orientation to reality—that gradually sublimates self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement to an alternative way of seeing oneself so that one's protection, preservation, and reputation are sufficiently secure apart from lying. A fundamental aspect of this new orientation is an emerging willingness to relinquish control over the perceived disadvantages of honesty. So, on this view, lying (and perhaps other forms of dishonesty) is largely unnecessary when the costs of truth telling are no longer seen as a threat to one's secure standing in the world.

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[31] For the notion of "good-enough" parenting, see Winnicott 2005: 144–148.

6. Empirical Evidence for the Relationship Between Secure Attachment and Honesty

This theoretical connection between secure attachment to others and truth telling

has had limited but promising empirical investigation. Several studies have found

significant associations between insecure attachment and increased frequency of lying.[32]

For instance, Ennis and his team hypothesized that in many cases persons lie to influence

and make a good impression on others, and that insecurely attached individuals have a

particular need to utilize deception to accomplish these social interaction goals.[33] Based

on a self-report measure of frequency of lying and a measure that assessed attachment

style, Ennis et al. found a significant positive correlation between relational attachment

anxiety and the frequency of telling self-centered lies to both strangers and best friends.[34]

Building off previous studies, Omri Gillath and his colleagues conducted a series

of studies that demonstrated both an association between insecure attachment and lying

as well as an association between secure attachment and truth telling. In summarizing

their research, Gillath et al. write, "Taken together, the studies indicate that attachment

security allows a person to forgo various kinds of defenses and be more open and honest

with others and more true to oneself."[35] While more empirical work is needed to

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[32] Cole 2001; Vrij et al. 2003; Ennis et al. 2008.

[33] Ennis et al. 2008: 106.

[34] Ennis et al. 2008: 113. It should be noted that the positive correlation found with anxiously attached individuals was not as strong with an avoidant attachment style. Since avoidant attachment is characterized by independence and autonomy, this weaker correlation could be due to the tendency for relationally avoidant individuals to lack concern about how they are perceived by others.

[35] Gillath et al. 2010: 853. While the research exploring the role of attachment in predicting virtuous behavior more generally is not extensive at this point, some studies have found a meaningful connection. For instance, Carissa Dwiwardani and her fellow researchers found a significant relationship between secure attachment and self-reported behaviors associated with humility, gratitude, and forgiveness. See Dwiwardani et al. 2014.

demonstrate a causal connection between secure attachment and truth telling, these empirical studies showing a significant correlation between the two provide additional support to the proposed theoretical connection.

7. An Objection to the Alternative Indirect Pathway

Despite the conceptual and empirical connection between secure, social-emotional support and not lying, a worry remains. The proposal offered is that the development of securely attached relationships brings about social-emotional support that aids one in refraining from lies that are perceived to benefit oneself. But, of course, the development of those very types of relationships would surely require that one refrain from lies that are perceived to benefit oneself. In other words, refraining from lying to others is needed to develop the secure attachments that are purported to enable one to refrain from lying to others. As Aristotle himself worries: it can appear that to do what it takes to develop a given virtue, one must already possess that virtue.[36] If so, virtue formation doesn't get off the ground.

Further, if one has to be honest in order to enter into a relational way of life that cultivates honesty, then the empirical correlation between secure attachment and honesty does not support the notion that secure attachment is causally connected with honesty. Instead, the explanation of why securely attached persons lie less than insecurely attached persons is that honest people already tend to be securely attached. If that is correct, the presence of the virtue of honesty is what explains the correlation, not any sort of causal connection between secure attachment and honesty.

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[36] *Nichomachean Ethics* II.4. See Porter 2012: 137–138.

But is honesty (or a lack of dishonesty) required to develop the sorts of securely attached relationships that have been conceptually and empirically linked to honesty? While there is no doubt that lying to benefit oneself breaks down relational trust and security, there are several ways that relational connections of the required sort could be developed. First, a minimal amount of honest behavior that falls short of fully-formed honesty is sufficient to begin developing friendships of the requisite sort. Over time, these gradually maturing friendships might incrementally support the development of honesty both in the friendships themselves as well as in other relational contexts. Much like an alcoholic can be sober enough to commit to an Alcoholics Anonymous group that then helps him maintain and develop sobriety, someone struggling with lying can be honest enough to commit to practices of friendship that then help him maintain and develop his honesty.

Second, parents and other adult caregivers often deal with regular self-serving lies amongst children with whom they are nevertheless able to form close interpersonal connections. In these cases, the parent is able to tolerate the lies and provide relational encounters that promote a sense of relational safety, well-being, and acceptance. Such relational encounters can even include confronting the child with his or her lies with the aim of repairing the rupture in the relationship (e.g., through apology and forgiveness). Some psychological theory and research suggest that ruptures in interpersonal relationships—like getting caught in a lie—that are addressed and repaired are important to the development of interpersonal closeness.[37] So, being caught lying in a developing relationship, if addressed and repaired, can be a part of developing the sort of relational

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[37] See, e.g., Kohut 1984 and Tronick 2006.

connection that is needed to refrain from lying. Furthermore, while tolerating the self-serving lies of children is in some sense developmentally appropriate, there can be appropriate ways to extend such toleration and relational connection to adult relationships.

In these ways, one does not have to refrain from lying in order to develop the kinds of secure interpersonal relationships that can assist one in refraining from lying. While this successful response does not show that the correlation between secure attachment and honesty is a causal one, it certainly leaves open that interpretation of the data.

8. Conclusion

The indirect path of virtue formation presented here proposes that persons who regularly tell the truth—even when the truth hurts—do so in part because they are relationally situated in such a way that the desires to lie for the purpose of self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement are muted. They are relationally safe, secure, and accepted. As such, they are largely unmoved by the need to improve their lot or standing—at least, at the cost of lying to do so. This overall orientation to the world, so the argument goes, emerges from a way of life constituted by practices that cultivate certain kinds of securely attached relationships which provide needed social-emotional support. It is the social-emotional support and the way of being it engenders that inoculates one against temptations to lie to benefit oneself.

Of course, there are other aspects of honesty besides truth telling (e.g., respecting others' property, rule-following, forthrightness, promise-keeping, etc.).[38] Will practicing a relationally connected way of life, as described in this chapter, help enable one to refrain from stealing, cheating, withholding important information, promise breaking, and the like? Presumably so, at least to the extent that persons perform these actions partly in search of self-protection, self-preservation, and self-enhancement. The sort of social-emotional support envisioned in this chapter might go a long way towards meeting the relational needs that could otherwise motivate dishonest acts in these and other ways.[39]

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[38] For discussion of various forms of honesty, see Miller 2017 and Roberts and West (this volume).

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