

Dishonesty: A Natural Outgrowth of Social Norms

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This evening I resolved to become more dishonest.

It may seem unusual to make such a resolution. After all, is not honesty a cherished and universal virtue? Is not dishonesty one of those accusations that is met with denial or rational, rather than scorn or incredulity as being unworthy of desire at all? Why, then, have I determined to be more dishonest?

Because honesty is like sodium in the turbulent waters of social circles. Properly mixed with chlorine, it soaks right in, causing no disturbance and reducing the tendency for relationships to freeze; but, in the wrong solution, it is destructive in the extreme.

My problem is, I don't know what that social chlorine is.

I am, perhaps, an unusual case. After all, it was not till I was nearing twenty-two that I first began to develop an ordinary peer group, and still longer before I first decided to ask a girl on a date. Gifted with a ready curiosity and glib tongue, I have tended otherwise to associate with those decades my senior and to treat my temporal equals as almost a foreign species.

Some people, no doubt, do at least know what the chlorine is; but I think the social push for dishonesty is fundamental even to them.

My first lie, or at least the first I can recall, is imprinted in my memory prior to any other memories¹, so I cannot assert my age with any certainty. I could talk and walk reasonably well, so three seems a good guess, though it could have been two or four; I really don't know. I was standing on the staircase of the home I lived in until I was four and a half and had just kicked some item off of a step onto the floor. My father, though out of my line of vision, saw the occurrence and asked me in a very unpleasant tone, "Did you kick that off the step?"

¹Except the squid cake. Wet, jiggly pink cake with a hard chocolate shell that was always sweaty, sitting on the table...

I had no reason to lie. I experienced no guilt of conscience to cover up, I had no sense that anything was worth disguising; but my father had just asked me a question. I knew that kind of question had two possible answers; and it seemed pretty clear to me which one Dad wanted, so I gave it.

Now, I am not criticizing my father, who is one of the best men I know. If it had not been him, it wouldn't have taken long for someone else to say the same thing anyway. "Are you afraid of...?" "Did you just...?" "Did you forget to...?"—these are strange and troubling questions to me, because they are nearly always said when (a) the answer is "yes", and (b) it is clear the speaker would be more pleased if the answer were "no".

Why do we do this? Why, while children are barely out of their infancy, do we pit their fundamental desires to please against their naïve truthfulness? Are we *trying* to breed dishonesty? There will be plenty of troubling situations in the life to come without our introducing into the lives of mere toddlers an apparent contradiction between two inborn virtues.

So I was taught to lie in my early childhood. How does that impact my recent resolution to become less honest? I give the above example merely because it is one of society's dishonesty plugs that is both common to most people's experience and outside of their immediate concerns, so it can be looked at more or less objectively. Of course, that *exact* same motive continues unchanged, except in the details of the scope of the lies, in my life today; but it is not the main source of my reinforcement.

Far worse than the superficial desire to give people what they want to hear is the powerful and nearly universal problem of "reading in."

"Reading in" takes two main forms, though they are both the same at the root. First, there is the "reading in" between the lines. For example, a few days ago I thought to myself, "self, maybe [name withheld] would appreciate a little something. Why don't I draw her a picture." Since myself, thus addressed, could provide no reasons not to do so, I drew a simple sketch of a goofy fellow grinning, folded it up, and dropped it in the honey pot for delivery by the ward honey pot people. Within twenty-four hours, two people independently came up to me to ask me what it means. It doesn't mean anything. It's just a goofy little picture, to be enjoyed as a goofy little picture, or discarded if not enjoyable. If I didn't say it, I didn't say it, and a picture doesn't say much of anything.

The other form of "reading in" is "reading in" side a narrow box. For example, I was once in the habit of wearing knickerbockers and argyle socks more days than not. I did this because they are comfortable, because it saved the bother of deciding what to put on in the morning, and mostly because I thought they were particularly picturesque. In the book of some

people, though, none of those were even possible reasons. The only reason they could find was that I wanted to stand out. Trust me, I don't need argyle socks to end up more known than I care for. Since I was fourteen I have lived in a perpetual state of having my reputation travel faster than my feet.²

It is the problem of reading in that causes me to not want to be as honest as I am. When you have someone come to you in tears because they read an unforeseeable volume into an innocent expression there is a certain desire not to express anything ever again.

Now perhaps you are saying, "not everybody is so inclined. There are some people to whom you could say whatever you want to without any danger." To a degree, yes. I happen to live with one of them, and it is a great relief to spill the beans now and again. But even so, there are some things that still must be concealed for social comfort.

For example, though I don't much enjoy dating³, I do have a number of people I would love to take out and get to know better. There are some individuals I have concealed my interest from for a very long time for one simple reason: I like one or more of their roommates or close friends just as well as I like them. Once only I made the mistake of taking a girl on a first date, then taking her best friend on a first date the next week.

Ouch.

Now, I wish I were an honest man. I'm not, particularly, even within the realm where I know the chlorine that will let the honesty be palatable; and in those areas I offer no excuse and extend no blame. It is my own weakness and folly that has led me down that road. But in other areas I am dishonest because I literally know no better course. Social chemistry is extremely complicated because we give little signs and expect and train people to extrapolate meanings and "read in."

For my part, the explosions are worse than the ice.

Much worse.

So, I lie.

²This has contributed to my difficulty in putting much merit in what people say is nifty. If they think *I'm* noteworthy, are they to be trusted in other value judgments?

³The reasons are too multitudinous and interconnected to enter into here.