

Background

Sam Harris (b. 1967) is an American author and neuroscientist who has written a number of books examining ethics and morality from a scientific and philosophical perspective, including *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (2014), *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Values* (2010), *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), and *The End of Faith* (2004). Harris is a self-described secularist and a critic of organized religions. This excerpt from *Lying*, a long essay published in 2011, advocates always telling the truth regardless of the circumstances.



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. Whatever the circumstances, even in cases where most good people would lie without a qualm, Howard nearly always found truths worth telling.

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 all around me the consequences of others’ failure to live by this principle.

That experience remains one of the clearest examples in my 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 regularly struggle to keep appearances and reality apart. By wearing cosmetics, a woman seeks to seem younger or more beautiful than she otherwise would. But honesty does not require that she issue continual 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 or conceal important facts to the detriment of others.

The boundary between lying and deception is often vague. 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 cell phone: “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 magicians, poker players, and other harmless dissemblers off the book, while illuminating the 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 demands a correct understanding of the world or of other people’s opinions — 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. Of course, if one is not sure whether or not something is true, representing one’s degree of uncertainty is a form of honesty.

Leaving these ambiguities aside, communicating what one believes to be both true and useful is surely different from concealing or distorting that belief. The *intent* to communicate honestly is the measure of truthfulness. And most of us 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.

¹⁵ We have all stood on both sides 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. The liar often imagines that he does no harm so long as his lies go undetected. But the one lied to rarely shares this view. The moment we consider our dishonesty from the perspective of those we lie to, we recognize that we would feel betrayed if the roles were reversed.

A friend of mine, Sita, was once going to visit 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 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 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 of deception 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 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. Another found that 38 percent of encounters among college students contain lies.⁵ Lying is ubiquitous, and yet 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 less satisfying relationships.⁶

25 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 on 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. Knowing that we told the truth in the past leaves us with nothing to keep track of. We can simply be ourselves in every moment.

In committing to being 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 they would want to have if you were in their shoes.

But it may take practice to feel comfortable with this way of being in the world — to cancel plans, decline invitations, negotiate contracts, critique others' work, all while being honest

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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?

Q: 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. Of course, we all have associations that must persist in some form, whether we enjoy them or not — with family, in-laws, colleagues, employers, and so forth. I'm not denying that tact can play a role in minimizing conflict. Holding one's tongue, or steering a conversation toward topics of relative safety, is not the same as lying (nor does it require that one deny the truth in the future).

Q: Honesty can force any dysfunction in your life to the surface. Are you in an abusive relationship? A refusal to lie to others — How did you get that bruise? — would 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. If we have no recourse but lies, our lives can unravel only so far without others' noticing.

Q: Telling the truth can also reveal ways in which we want to grow but haven't. I remember learning that I had been selected as 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. And 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. [...]

* 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?"

35 "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?"

40 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 there's no way I can pull this off. My style is somewhere between boring and very boring."

45 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 about the age of four, once they have achieved a hard-won awareness of the mental states of others.⁷ But we have no reason to believe that the social conventions that happen to stabilize in primates like ourselves at about 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.

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 although 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 reality⁸ — 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 on the freedom of those we care about.

A primal instance:

50 “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 distraction 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. What 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. So I answered my friend’s question very directly: “No one would ever call you ‘fat,’ but if I were you, I’d want to lose twenty-five pounds.” That was two months ago, and he is now fifteen pounds lighter.⁹ Neither of us knew that he was ready to go on a diet until he 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.

55 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 know that her greatest desire is to get married and start a family. You also believe that many men would 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 into 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.¹⁰

In many circumstances in life, 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 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 that 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, often background truths are not — and these can be communicated as well, deepening the friendship. In the examples above, the more basic truth is that you love your friends and want them to be happy, and they 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 should know about himself seems the quintessence of arrogance. What attitude could be more disrespectful of those we care about?

Notes

- 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]. But whether a form of self-deception exists that is really tantamount to “lying to oneself” is still a matter of controversy. There is no question that we can be blind to facts about ourselves or about the world that we really *should* see — and the research on cognitive bias is fascinating — but the question remains whether we see the truth and unconsciously convince ourselves otherwise, or simply do not see the truth in the first place. In any case, truly believing one's own falsehoods when in dialogue with others is tantamount to honesty. Thus, it seems that 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