Chapter 12
Reasons Not to Lie

Should we be concerned not to lie? Do we, that is, have any good reason to avoid telling lies? Or, alternatively, should the fact that something we might do can be described as lying be of little or no interest to us?

1. The range of lying demarcated

To tell a lie is to attempt to deceive someone by intentionally representing oneself to that person as believing something one in fact believes is false. Suppose Roger wants to talk to Sally. Martha believes that Sally is at home but Martha doesn't want Roger to bother Sally. Roger asks Martha where's Sally. Martha tells Roger that Sally is at the library. Martha has lied to Roger, for Martha has said something she believes to be false to Roger with the intention of getting Roger to believe what she said.

To tell a lie to someone is to attempt to deceive that person. If one is not attempting to deceive a person, one is not lying, even if what one says is something one believes false. Actors on a stage or storytellers or jokers are not lying, then, even though they seem to declare to be true propositions they believe are false. They are not lying because they do not intend to deceive their hearers (or, in the case of jokers, they don't intend the deception to last).

Moreover, to tell a lie to someone is to attempt to deceive that person by speaking something, a proposition, that one believes to be false. Whether indeed the proposition is false doesn't matter; what matters is that the speaker believes it is false. The speaker speaks the sentence she believes false while giving every indication that she is speaking sincerely, that she is speaking something she believes true. If one doesn't believe the sentence is false, one is not lying, even if the sentence is false and as a result of one's speaking it someone is mistaken about something important. Likewise, one is not lying when one speaks something one believes, though one's belief is false. Martha intends by speaking the false sentence "Sally is at the library" to get her hearer to believe that Sally is at the library, but Martha is not lying by speaking this false sentence, for Martha mistakenly believes that Sally is at the library.

Finally, one lies to a person when one attempts to deceive that person by representing oneself as believing something one doesn't believe whether that person is deceived or not. It is no part of the concept of a lie that the intention to deceive is fulfilled. That one's attempt to deceive goes nowhere doesn't mean that one isn't lying.

It is an implication of this conception of lying that not all attempts to deceive someone, not even all attempts to deceive someone by speaking something, are instances of lying. Sometimes one can deceive someone by speaking truthfully; in such cases one doesn't lie, even though one said what one said intending thereby to deceive. Roger asked Martha, "Are there any bananas in the house?" and Martha responded, "I haven't bought any for a long time." Roger took this to mean that there are no bananas in the house, just as Martha hoped he would. But Martha did not lie to Roger, for indeed she hadn't bought any bananas for a

long time, even though Martha both believes there are bananas in the house and intended by saying what she did to get Roger to believe the opposite. Martha has deceived Roger, and she meant to deceive him, but she did not lie to him.

Now, of course, to distinguish attempts to deceive that consist in telling lies from attempts to deceive that do not consist in telling lies is not in itself to find one type of deception less worse than another (though, indeed, on some views lying to deceive is worse than other methods of deceiving). It is merely to note a difference, thereby to mark out our territory. Still, our territory, lying, is not sharply bounded. There's a fuzzy area between cases of deception that clearly involve lying and cases of deception that clearly do not involve lying. Perhaps one can tell lies by speaking parts of propositions ("in the bathroom," for instance, spoken to get someone to believe that Sally is in the bathroom when the speaker believes she is not in the bathroom). Perhaps one can lie by pretending to speak ironically or by speaking a metaphor. Suppose in the example above Martha had said "Sorry, I haven't bought any for a long time" (and Martha in fact was sorry she hadn't bought any in a long time). Would that addition of "sorry" turn Martha into a liar? We don't need to answer this question. Our territory, though its borders are vague, is well enough demarcated by noting both that not all spoken falsehoods are lies and that not all attempts to deceive involve telling lies.

Our account of lying: One tells a lie when one speaks a proposition that one believes is false intending, thereby, to deceive a hearer into thinking that that proposition is true.

2. Lying and the opposite of lying

What is the opposite of lying? "Telling the truth," most would answer. Most, then, are wrong about the opposite of lying. The opposite of lying is, simply, not lying. There are at least three ways in which one might not lie or, indeed, engage in any deception at all, only one of which involves telling the truth, at least in the sense of "telling the truth" meant in the answer most would give.

"Where is Sally?" Roger asks you. You believe that Sally is at home. Telling the truth to Roger, then, consists in responding "Sally is at home." That's one way not to lie to Roger in response to his question, but it is not the only way.

"Where is Sally?" Roger asks you. You believe that Sally is at home. You say nothing, or just a quick "See you later," and you walk away. You have not answered Roger's question. That's a second way not to lie. You have not told Roger (what you believe) is the truth regarding where Sally is. But you haven't attempted to deceive him, either, and so you haven't lied to him.

"Where is Sally?" Roger asks you. You believe that Sally is at home. You say to Roger "I won't say" or "That's none of your business" or "You should leave Sally alone right now." You might want to explain to Roger why you won't say or why it's none of his business or why he should leave Sally alone right now. In explaining your response to Roger you mustn't speak falsely, of course, for then you would be telling a lie. But if you do believe that Sally's whereabouts right now is none of Roger's business or that Roger should leave Sally alone right now, you have not lied to Roger in telling him so. Of course, you might elect not to explain yourself to Roger. "I won't say" you say, and you're done with it. You

have not deceived Roger about anything and, so, you haven't lied to him, even though he remains without the information he seeks.

This point, the point that answering a question directly and truthfully is not the only option open to a person who wishes not to lie, very often gets overlooked in discussions of the ethics of lying. It is an important point, one we shouldn't overlook, for we shouldn't seek to justify our telling a lie by pleading that telling the truth would have had awful consequences, awful consequences for people who don't deserve them, when we could have denied our questioner the information she seeks without lying to her. Maybe telling the truth would have had the awful consequences we feared. Still, telling a lie might not have been our only way of avoiding these awful consequences.

3. Never say "never tell a lie"

We will pursue four separate lines of argument each of which attempts to show us that we have good reason to avoid lying. If any of these arguments succeeds, we have good reason generally to be honest. None of these lines of argument shows, though, or, indeed, is intended to show, that we can never have better reason in some situation, all things considered, to tell a lie than not to tell a lie. That is, none seeks to show that we should never tell a lie. We need to be aware even before we consider the first of these lines of argument that we are not concerned either to defend or to refute the idea that lying, or anything else, is absolutely something we should never do. Being aware that we are not discussing absolute injunctions will enable us to steer clear of a great many irrelevant worries.

We will, then, discuss the ethics of lying without supposing that there are any absolutes anywhere, any sorts of action that we absolutely must either perform or refrain from performing.

4. The most obvious reason not to lie criticised

In this part of the book we will consider in detail four separate lines of argument each meant to show that often enough–in all, perhaps, but rare and extreme cases–we have good reason not to lie. In this particular chapter we will present these lines of argument uncritically, so that we gain an understanding of how they are supposed to work overall. In the following chapter we will confront each line of argument with worries and objections. (You will be directed to seek to improve the arguments by reformulating them in light of the worries and objections we will raise.) And so, if all goes well, we will see whether we do in fact have good reason to be honest people and, if we do, how strong our reasons are.

But before we begin let us examine perhaps the most obvious reason not to lie. The most obvious reason is not among our four. It goes like this: If you tell a lie, you might get caught telling that lie. If you are caught telling a lie, you might have to suffer certain bad consequences. (These bad consequences could include fines or imprisonment, but will at least include loss of friends or loss of trust.) You don't want to suffer these bad consequences. So you have reason not to lie. We can call this argument the argument from bad consequences for oneself.

The argument from bad consequences fails to give us reason not to lie in either of two situations. It fails to give us reason not to lie either when we are reasonably confident we can get away with our lie or when we reasonably anticipate that the good consequences of lying

will outweigh whatever bad consequences might follow. Certainly we should refrain from lying when lying would put at risk things that matter to us. But lying doesn't always put at risk things that matter to us–or, at least, often the risk is one we would be foolish not to accept given the good that lying can produce.

The argument from the bad consequences to ourselves of lying gives us no reason to refrain from lying when we judge lying to be the best way, overall, to accomplish our end. That's a shortcoming in the argument, at least if one is looking for a general reason not to lie and not just a reason not to lie when lying is a bad gamble. And yet, one might ask, can we ever reasonably judge in a set of circumstances that lying is the best way, overall, to accomplish our end? We might think that we can get away with some particular lie, but we can always be wrong about that. No matter how careful we are, we can get caught. Moreover, we might think that we can bear the bad consequences of being discovered to have lied, and we can be wrong about that, too. We think we'll get off easy, and then down crashes our world. Finally, every time we lie successfully we are emboldened to lie again. Success at lying will cause us to take more and more chances and sooner or later our luck will run out. So, then, given that it is always possible that the liar will be caught, and given that the consequences of getting caught might well be more severe than the liar imagined, and given that successful lying breeds unsuccessful lying, wisdom, it seems, counsels us generally against lying, even when we reasonably believe we won't get caught and when we reasonably suppose that taking the risk of lying is worth it.

But this response to the shortcoming of the argument from bad consequences trades on an unduly pessimistic evaluation of our abilities and talents. Yes, the liar might always be found out (really?), but sometimes the chances of being found out are vanishing small. And yes, the liar might always have underestimated the severity of the penalty he'll suffer if he's caught, but often we can quite accurately estimate costs and penalties. In any case, we must always compare the penalty of being caught with the reward of lying successfully. If we are not to lie out of fear of being punished, we will miss whatever opportunities for reward lying can bring us. That reward can include power enough not to care whether one's dissembling is detected. In addition, often the penalty one must pay when caught diminishes as time passes, and sometimes it disappears totally. One need only skill enough to keep one's deception under wraps for a little while.

In the end, then, the argument against lying based on fear of the bad consequences for oneself of getting caught does not give us a strong reason always to be concerned to be honest (or, at least, to be concerned not to be untruthful). That argument doesn't give us a reason not to lie when, after due diligence, we judge lying to be an effective way, all things considered, of promoting our ends. Nonetheless, the bad-consequences-for-oneself argument serves an important function. It reminds us that there are many things to consider when tempted to lie and that we are not always, maybe not even usually, up to the task of considering them well.

5. The social contract

We're looking for an argument that gives us good reason to be honest people, people, that is, who refrain from lying even when they could get away with it and even when lying would further their ends. The first line of argument meant to give us good reason to be honest revolves around the idea that by telling lies we violate a social contract it is in our own best

interests to maintain. If violating that contract weakens it and yet that contract is one we would do well to maintain, then we have good reason not to violate it.

The idea that we are party to a social contract useful to us in living our lives begins with the thought that our society is relatively stable and secure and prosperous. *Relatively* stable, secure, and prosperous, that is, for, of course, our society is far from perfect. But it could, and could easily, be much less stable, secure, or prosperous. Now stability, security, and prosperity are things you value. You want to live in a stable, secure, and prosperous society, both because you have less to fear and more to gain in such a society than you would in a different sort of society and because you are pleased that others in your society have less to fear and more to gain than they would otherwise. You would be much worse off in your pursuit of your ends were you living in an unstable social system, or were you living under a constant and real threat of harm to property or life, or were your fellow citizens impoverished. (Acknowledging that the society in which you live is relatively stable, secure, and prosperous need not and should not lead you into complacency. You should continue to work for improvements even as you prize what you already have. And that you value stability, security, and prosperity doesn't mean that you don't value other things–equality, say, or diversity or freedom–any less. In fact, you might be willing to trade some amount of stability, security, or prosperity for an increase in equality or diversity or freedom, provided, of course, that such a trade is a good way of gaining that increase and in the hope that you will recover the loss later.)

What makes possible the stability, security, and prosperity we enjoy? Well, representative government, fair and regular elections, a free and concerned and responsible press, a host of other public and private institutions, ...the list goes on. But what makes these things possible? It would seem that, at a deep level, what makes for stability, security, and prosperity is people's belief that we all know the rules, both the written and unwritten ones. Not *only* the belief that we all know the rules, of course, but also our expectation that we will all play by these rules. When others play by the rules, then, you can properly expect to reap the rewards of the game simply by playing by the rules yourself. And that's the social contract we have forged. I agree to play by the rules so long as you play by them, and you agree to play by them so long as I play by them. We might well compete with each other now and again, of course, but when we do compete we compete without cheating or threatening each other. Things go better for both of us that way.

If this social contract is the deep foundation (or at least a part of it) of our society's, or of any society's, stability, security, and prosperity, then, since I value stability, security, and prosperity in my society, I have good reason to abide by the contract. Now, whatever the rules are in my society, I've contracted not to cheat by breaking a rule. (If I wish to change one of the rules, I must seek to change it only by following the proper procedure.) If I begin to break the rules, I render the contract void and, thereby, increase the chance of calamity, for it is not in other peoples' interests to play by the rules when people (me, for instance) are cheating. And so I have good reason to play by the rules.

What, though, are the rules described in this social contract, the contract to which I am a party? Certainly one of these rules, continues this line of argument, is the rule to tell the truth, or at least not to lie. When we lie and deceive we gain advantages for ourselves at the expense of others. Sooner or later others will come, rightly, to wonder whether we are telling

the truth and, so, they will stop trusting us. When this happens we, in turn, will not trust them. But trust that others are not deceiving one and not scheming against one are essential to social cooperation, and social cooperation is essential to working and living together successfully. Thus, this argument concludes, an important part of the social contract on which our stability, security, and prosperity rests is the rule not to deceive others by lying to them.

There might be exceptions to the rule, of course, cases that the rule properly doesn't cover. Lying to your friend so that he doesn't find out about his surprise birthday party, for instance, does not endanger the social contract and, so, does not fall under the rule. Lying to maintain one's privacy perhaps also doesn't count. But standardly, goes this line of thought, we should not lie, for when we lie we violate the social contract on which rests the stability, security, and prosperity that we enjoy in our society.

6. Respect for others

In lying to a person we manifest disrespect toward that person, whether we intend to manifest disrespect or not. Indeed, we manifest disrespect even if we intend to help that person. And that's a reason not to lie.

How is it that to lie to a person is always to treat that person disrespectfully? Well, to treat a person with respect is to acknowledge in your behaviour that she has plans and projects and feelings and that her plans and projects and feelings matter to her. Part of her self-image is her sense that she is not an object to be used in furthering the purposes of others but an agent pursuing her own purposes. So, respectful treatment always involves letting the other person make up her own mind whether she wishes to join you in your pursuit of some end.

To treat someone disrespectfully, then, is to ignore the fact that her projects and feelings are just as important to her as your projects and feelings are to you, and to act in indifference or worse to her sense of herself as an agent in the world. Now when you lie to someone, no matter for what reason, you treat that person as an object to be manipulated to further your own ends. In lying to a person, you seek to enlist that person in your endeavour independently of her willingness to join you. You are not leaving her free to join you or not to join you according to her own appreciation of her own preferences and needs. She isn't free to join you or not according to her own appreciation of her situation because you have misled her about the facts of her situation. You are attempting through your lie to manipulate her independently of her will, and that is to ignore the fact that she is a person. And that is to treat her disrespectfully.

We all know what it feels like to be treated with disrespect. It is to feel slighted or to feel degraded, perhaps to appear little in one's own eyes. We feel the particular unpleasant emotion of having been wronged when we become aware that we have been used by another in his pursuit of his ends. It is not, though, the chance that a person will feel degraded should she discover she has been lied to that gives us a reason not to lie. Her feeling degraded is simply an appropriate reaction to what we have done. It is, rather, simply that we would treat her disrespectfully were we to lie to her that is our reason not to lie to her, whether we can get away with lying or not.

Is lying to someone always to treat them disrespectfully? Sometimes, after all, one might note, we lie to a person in order to protect them or to encourage them or otherwise to

bring them benefits. We might lie to Sally to prevent her from hanging out with Martha, rightly thinking that of late Martha has been nothing but bad news for Sally. Or we might lie to Sally to cheer her up or to help her over a bad stretch in her life. When Sally is feeling all right again she might even thank us for our having lied to her. We might lie to Sally in order to get her to make the right career choices, and we might, thereby, succeed in making her much more contented with her life than she would have been otherwise. Because we lied to her when and as we did for her sake, not for our own, our lies are not manifestations of disrespect for Sally; on the contrary, they are expressions of our care and concern for her. Or, at least, that's one way of thinking about it.

We might very well have someone's best interests in mind when we lie to them. We might lie benevolently or paternalistically to a person and we might, thereby, succeed in producing benefits for her as we could not have succeeded had we not lied. But though it is out of care and concern for Sally that we lie to her, still, in lying to her we are manipulating her for our own ends, and that is to treat her disrespectfully. That our ends in the case are Sally's welfare and well being rather than any selfish end we have is not relevant to the matter whether we are using Sally. We are using Sally when we lie to her, even though we lie to her for her own good.

On this line of argument, then, there are no exceptions. We always have a strong reason not to lie, at least so long as we are concerned not to treat people disrespectfully. This is not to say that we should never lie to a person. That we have a strong reason in a case not to lie to a person does not itself imply that we don't have an even stronger reason to lie to them. It might be that Sally's own good is more important to us in a case than is our concern not to treat Sally disrespectfully. If, in a case that comes to hand, we can see no effective way of promoting Sally's good without lying to her, and Sally's good means more to us than treating Sally respectfully does, then we have, all things considered, sufficient reason to lie to her even though lying to her is to treat her disrespectfully.

We always have a strong reason not to lie, then, though that reason might be overridden by other reasons, at least so long as we are concerned not to treat people disrespectfully. Do we have any reason always to be concerned to treat people respectfully? If we do, we can remove the "at least" qualification and state directly that we always have a strong reason not to lie.

Here is an argument meant to show that indeed we always do have good reason to treat people respectfully. We ourselves do not want to be treated disrespectfully. Being treated disrespectfully offends our dignity and, so, we demand respectful treatment. Now we know, just by interacting with other people, that they, too, possess dignity. (We could be wrong about this. For all we can know, others could be automatons. Still, there is good evidence that they do possess dignity and no evidence that they don't.) So, we must realize, others are just like us in the important respect that they and we possess dignity. Now, if I am to demand respectful treatment at the hands of others in virtue of my possessing dignity, I must, on pain of self contradiction, honour the demand by others for respectful treatment at my hands. (I cannot consistently take dignity to require respectful treatment in my case but not to require respectful treatment in another's case.) Thus, it doesn't matter whether I care, in pursuing my ends, to treat another person respectfully or not; I always have strong reason to treat a person respectfully, I always should care.

If I always have strong reason to treat people respectfully and to lie to a person is to treat her disrespectfully, I always have strong reason not to lie to a person. Does the argument of the previous paragraph show that we always have strong reason to treat people respectfully? If it fails to show this, where does it go wrong? If it goes wrong, is there another argument that does succeed in showing it? Perhaps you are doubtful about the claim that we always have strong reason to treat people respectfully. If you are, can you show by argument that that claim is false?

7. The greater good

That giving money to the United Way, or that supporting a proposed by-law to remove cigarettes from corner stores, or that holding open the door for the man pushing the baby stroller would, overall, increase the amount of happiness or contentment or satisfaction in the world is, for many of us, a reason to give money or to support the by-law or to hold open the door. We prefer that people and other animals be happy rather than unhappy and, so, we take the fact that our performing such-and-such an action would promote happiness to be a solid reason for performing that action. Looking at it from the other direction, then, that an action we could perform would cause suffering and misery is, for many of us, a reason not to perform it.

Of course, many of the things we might do will cause both happiness and unhappiness; some of the people and others affected by what we do will be benefitted, others won't, and others will be made worse off. By giving money to the United Way, for instance, we have less money to spend on family or friends. So, of two actions we could perform, that one action will bring *more* happiness overall to the world than the other will is, for those who care about the happiness of people and others generally, a reason to perform that action instead of the other. (That the other action will bring more happiness to people one likes or loves, though, is a reason to perform the other action rather than the one.)

Now, then, what can we say about lying from the perspective of a concern that people and others be happy or satisfied rather than unhappy or unsatisfied? Should a person who is concerned that people and others be happy also be concerned to avoid lying? The answer, one might think, is a heavily qualified "yes."

"Yes" because of the bad consequences for happiness of lies that are discovered to be lies. Even lies told with the best of intentions for the happiness of all can backfire and cause more unhappiness than happiness.

We need here to distinguish between what *will* happen as a result of performing some specific action and what *could* or *might* happen as a result of performing it. Sally lies to Martha about Albert, and what in fact happens is that all three, Sally, Martha, and Albert, are happier than they would have been had Sally done anything other than tell that lie. So, given that Sally cares about the overall happiness of the three of them, Sally's knowing that telling that lie to Martha will have the best consequences overall would give Sally a good reason to tell that lie. But Sally cannot know that telling that lie will have the best consequences overall. Sally cannot know for sure what will result. Sally can think, and think truly, that telling the lie will have the best results for the happiness of her group, and she can have excellent reason for so thinking. Still, at the moment she goes ahead and tells the lie, she cannot rule out that telling the lie will have bad consequences. That is, she cannot be sure she

will be believed, she cannot be sure that no one will discover the lie, she cannot be sure whatever telling the lie is supposed to prevent won't happen anyway. (This point is independent both of the topic of scepticism about knowledge of the external world (Part III) and the topic of scepticism about inductive reasoning (Part IX).)

Sally can have good reasons for thinking the future will unfold in one way and yet the future unfolds differently. Now Sally certainly would have good reason to lie to Martha were Sally to know that lying would bring about the best consequences, but Sally cannot know this. All Sally could ever have, then, are reasons for thinking that lying to Martha *most likely* will bring about better consequences than will any other of the options for action she envisions. If Sally is to reason well about what to do, she must keep in mind that if she lies, she might not be believed, she might be found out, her lie might not work, and so on. That is, she must keep in mind ways in which what she's contemplating doing could go wrong. Moreover, she must also keep in mind how much happiness and unhappiness would follow should any of these things actually go wrong.

Sally cannot know what will happen, but maybe she can imagine a range of what might happen; having a set of possibilities in mind, Sally might, by thinking carefully, come to a conclusion about what most likely will happen. That's the best she can do before she acts.

A person who avoids lying has a policy not to lie or has a habit of being truthful. That is, in most cases she doesn't lie or even consider lying, even though lying might well serve her purpose. Occasionally the thought of lying will occur to her, and then, if she is concerned to promote happiness, she will ask herself whether lying or not lying would have the best consequences overall. But most often she will be truthful.

Why, then, should Sally, concerned, as she is, for the happiness of everyone her act will touch, be concerned to avoid lying? She should be concerned to avoid lying because the risk of her lie producing unhappiness is too great a risk for her to accept. Better to take the unpleasant consequences of not lying rather than to risk the terrible consequences of a lie gone bad, even in face of the wonderful consequences that would be produced by a lie gone good.

That's the "yes" answer to the question should one be concerned not to lie. What, then, are the heavy qualifications on this answer?

The qualifications begin with the fact that frequently lies serve the purposes they are meant to serve and serve those purposes well. Take, for instance, those lies we call white lies or little white lies. White lies are usually self-serving lies, told to get oneself out of a jam, or to impress someone, or to flatter someone or ingratiate oneself with her. To be a white lie, a lie must be such that it isn't likely that it will be discovered to be a lie, it doesn't put the person to whom it is addressed at risk of harm, and, if it were ever found out, it would bring no significant harm to anyone or anything, except perhaps to the liar's reputation. Suppose it is Victor's turn to bring coffee cream to work this morning but Victor forgot all about it until he stepped into the staff lounge. Allie is at the counter making coffee. Victor says, "I couldn't get cream this morning. The store I stopped at was all out and I didn't have time to go somewhere else. I'll run out during my break." Victor's story is plausible enough. Even if one or another of his co-workers has doubts no one is going to bother to check it out. No one is put at any risk by lacking the truth of the matter. On the other hand, Victor's telling the truth would put people in a bad humour. Victor himself would suffer at least a little from looking bad in their eyes. Victor understood all this and took it into account when deciding to

lie. By telling a little white lie, Victor succeeded in avoiding making a bad situation worse, just as he intended.

So the injunction to avoid lying includes an exception for white lies. (This is not a recommendation that one seek to tell white lies, of course. It's just simply that when considering telling a white lie, the fact that it's a lie is neither here nor there.)

Take, as another instance, those falsehoods we speak as the proper convention to follow in certain situations. "I gave at the office"; "Pleased to meet you"; "I'll call tomorrow"; "No, I have no change": these are examples of sentences people insincerely speak as the correct or useful thing to say in the appropriate context. (Maybe speaking them doesn't count as lying. After all, when we speak them, we don't intend to deceive. We don't care one way or the other whether we are believed.) The injunction to avoid lying includes an exception for these falsehoods as well.

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A person concerned to promote happiness through her actions should, then, adopt honesty as a rule of thumb–but only as a rule of thumb. That what she proposes to do on some occasion can be described as telling a lie is, for her, essentially without significance. What is of significance is the effect that what she proposes to do will have on happiness. She notes that often enough lies are found out and, when they are, the consequences for happiness can be very bad. And so she adopts, but merely as a rule of thumb, honesty as her standard policy.

8. The virtue of honesty

A final reason a person might have for being honest is that honesty is a virtue, dishonesty a vice.

A trait of character is a virtue if having it tends to make one's life go well from one's own point of view–or, at least, a trait of character is a virtue if lacking it almost ensures that one's life will not go well. Being honest is a virtue, then, if lacking honesty effectively prevents one from living successfully.

What is it to live successfully? Psychologists tell us that people who rate high in happiness, contentment, and satisfaction typically possess these three characteristics: 1) they have deep emotional commitments to a select circle of people (let us call these their friends, though some might also be members of their family); 2) they are on good terms with and enjoy many of the people with whom they interact on a regular basis (their colleagues, their neighbours, their family and their in-laws, the clerks in the local grocery store); and 3) they see themselves as important contributors to a large continuing project (they might contribute to this project in their job or profession, or outside of work in a hobby or as a volunteer). People, that is, who have no good friends, or who don't enjoy warm relations with people with whom they regularly interact, or who have meaningless jobs and no outside interests, are usually unhappy or miserable.

There are, of course, many different and even incompatible ways of life that people find satisfying and in which they find happiness. Two happy people or two people who both find their lives worth living might well live by and honour different and even conflicting values. Still, we are told, all people who are happy or who perceive their lives as worth living, or almost all of them, have these three things in common: they are and have good friends, they are

friendly neighbours and colleagues, and they strive to contribute to a project larger than themselves.

The claim that honesty is a virtue, that being honest enables one to live a life worth living, is the claim that being honest is necessary to establishing and maintaining one or more of 1), 2), and 3). Dishonest people will lack close friends, or won't be on good terms with the others around them, or will find their pursuits meaningless or unfulfilling.

Let us see how each of these might be. Let us begin with close friends. A close friend is someone you like and respect, someone, moreover, whose fortunes matter deeply to you. Now to lie to a person is to treat that person merely as a means to your own end (even if your end is that person's well being). But to treat a person merely as a means to your own end is to treat her disrespectfully. Since respect is essential to friendship, essential to creating and maintaining the intimacy between friends, a person given to lying when it suits his narrow purposes isn't going to be able to cultivate or maintain friendships.

This result, that lying is incompatible with friendship, isn't merely a matter of one's supposed friend finding out that one has lied to her, though that certainly will end the friendship (at least for a time; it might recover). It is actually that in lying to one's supposed friend, one has stepped outside the relation of friendship. The person to whom one lies, the person one treats disrespectfully, is, for the time of the lie, simply not one's friend. In lying to a person, one does not treat that person as one's friend.

Consider now one's relations with neighbours and co-workers and clerks. Here, unlike with close friends, it is primarily a matter of reputation rather than reality. A dishonest person who has not been found out and who, thereby, doesn't suffer under a bad reputation, might be able to maintain friendly and warm relations with neighbours, co-workers, and other acquaintances. She might be as able to maintain warm relations as a person who actually is honest. But while honesty itself is not essential to maintaining friendly relations with others, a reputation for dishonesty will sour everything. When neighbours, co-workers, or acquaintances think one dishonest, they will avoid one as far as possible. They won't greet one with a smile. Now a good, though not inevitable, way to avoid gaining a reputation for dishonesty is to be honest. If you don't lie to others, they won't discover that you have lied to them, and they won't, then, think you dishonest. So, it turns out, being honest is a good way to see that your relations with others don't sour.

Finally, consider the role honesty plays in one's meaningful pursuits. This is the area in which honesty really proves itself a virtue. The idea is that what makes a practice in which one participates meaningful and not just an activity like washing the dishes or watching television is that in that practice one attempts to meet certain standards, standard of excellence. In meeting the standards of excellence of a practice, one finds meaning and purpose. Now meeting standards of excellence is not easy. It takes work, practice, concentration, and commitment. A hockey player, for instance, if she is to meet the standards of excellence of her sport, must practice to improve her skills and must work hard to bring these skills together into her play. She must, if she is to contribute to a well-played game of hockey, understand and admit to herself her weaknesses and the weaknesses of her teammates. She must, that is, see clearly what needs improvement and what it might take to improve it. She cannot deceive herself or her teammates about these things if she is to contribute as best she can to the sport of hockey. This habit or principle she has, though, of not deceiving herself or others, even at the

cost of her or their feelings and the risk of alienating others from her, looks an awful lot like honesty. So, this argument concludes, honesty is a virtue, for it makes possible one's attaining those goods–such as a well-played game, or a philosophical insight, or a good harvest–that give point and purpose to the activities that matter to us, the practices in which we participate. (We will examine these ideas more deeply when we discuss the life of accomplishment, in Part XII of this book.)

The upshot of these lines of argument is that one has a strong reason to be honest despite the benefits lying might on occasion bring to one. One has a strong reason to be honest, to be the sort of person who, on principle or by habit, refrains from lying, for life typically goes better for honest people than it goes for dishonest people. Honest people are more likely to have good friends, to enjoy friendly relations with others, and to find success in meaningful pursuits than are dishonest people. Since generally a person lives well so long as she has close friends, friendly relations with others, and success in meaningful pursuits, and given that honesty is necessary for each of these things, one does well to be honest.