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False Excuses: Honesty, Wrongdoing, and Moral Growth

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To advocate dishonesty as morally acceptable or even praiseworthy is a tricky business for both philosophers and laypersons. Since successful lies depend upon a presumption of truthfulness, it seems imprudent to announce the possibility of deception in advance. Despite such worries, many recent moral and psychological accounts of honesty have argued for a more positive view of deception. In *The Varnished Truth*, David Nyberg questions the assumption that "truthfulness and morality go together in a clear and simple way."[1] In *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!*, Charles Ford sympathetically examines the psychology of lying and self-deception.[2] In *The Liar's Tale*, Jeremy Campbell argues that "for better or worse, lying... is not an artificial, deviant, or dispensable feature of life."[3] On such accounts, dishonesty with ourselves and others is a natural phenomenon often serving a useful and necessary function in everyday life. While these authors have introduced much-needed complexity and realism into the debate about the moral worth of absolute honesty, they often overlook the more subtle and long-term consequences of our choices between truth and falsehood. Unseen harms and benefits lurk in these decisions because they often concern the messy intersection of interpersonal relations, self-understanding, and moral life. We find such hidden complexity in one familiar type of lie: the false excuse. In telling a false excuse, a person denies responsibility for a misdeed through deliberate deception, thereby shielding himself from the negative consequences of the truth about that misdeed. At first glance, we seem to have powerful inducements to tell such lies and few reasons to avoid them. However, digging deeper, we find that false excuses can significantly damage the foundations of our moral character, particularly our capacity for moral growth.

1. The Anatomy of False Excuses

In the modern philosophical and psychological literature on deception, false excuses are most often classified as "self-defense lies."[4] We tell self-defense lies to protect our apparent interests such as by feigning a medical emergency to avoid a speeding ticket. George Serban nicely captures the essence of such

lies in writing that "self-defense lies are the most common protective methods used by people to get out of any major or minor troubles that are thought to have unpleasant consequences for them."[5]

False excuses are self-defense lies in which the troubles being evaded are the result of our own misdeeds. A false excuse is a deception disavowing wrongdoing so as to avoid harm to the self. A student's pretended offense at his teacher's suspicion of plagiarism, a father's refusal to admit abusing his runaway teenage son even to himself, a woman's accusation of a co-worker for her loss of important documents, and a wife's rationalization of an affair are all examples of false excuses. Faced with knowledge or suspicion of failing our own moral standards, false excuses allow us to avoid the wounds often incurred by honest acknowledgement of such failures to ourselves and others.

False excuses are closely related to two other types of self-defense lies, but nevertheless distinct from them: other-excusing lies and appeasement lies. In other-excusing lies, the wrongdoing of another person is concealed because the liar believes the truth to reflect poorly upon himself by association. A woman might lie to her friends about the full extent of her boyfriend's criminal past so that they will not think less of her for dating him. In appeasement lies, the judgment of wrongdoing is based upon moral standards held by others that the liar does not share. Thus a young woman might dishonestly deny a sexual relationship with her boyfriend to her devoutly Catholic grandmother to avoid an uproar, even though she herself has no moral qualms about premarital sex. Although the motives, forms, and consequences of other-excusing lies and appeasement lies are often similar to those of false excuses, the differences warrant excluding them from consideration in this analysis.

Despite the narrow definition of false excuses as only concerning dishonesty about our own failures of our own moral standards, false excuses exhibit remarkable diversity. In their classification of excuses, psychologists Sandra Sigmon and C.R. Snyder argue that disassociation from an action occurs on "two primary dimensions," "linkage-to-act" and "valence-of-act."[6] Linkage-related excuses include bare denials, alibis, and blaming others, as well as denial of control, denial of intent, and denial of true self.[7] Valence-related excuses include minimization, justification, and derogation.[8] These methods of disavowal are found in both false excuses aimed at deceiving the self and those aimed at deceiving others.

2. Weighing the Costs and Benefits of False Excuses

In the wholly invented tale of young George Washington and the cherry tree, six-year-old George tries out his new hatchet upon "the body of a beautiful young English cherry-tree," thereby destroying it.[9] When his father, who had earlier impressed upon his son the absolute necessity of honesty, asks young

George if he knows who killed the cherry tree, George "staggers under [the tough question] for a moment" before exclaiming, "I can't tell a lie. I did cut it with my hatchet."[10] George's father is so overjoyed with his son's "act of heroism" that the destruction of the cherry tree becomes insignificant to him.[11] This story, fabricated shortly after Washington's death by Mason Weems, a biographer intent upon instilling moral virtue in America's youth, is clearly intended to warn children away from concealing their bad behavior with false excuses. The story is most striking for its lack of realism, as revealing the truth about his bad deed carries no penalty for young George whatsoever.

In reality, an honest confession may soften the blow of a wrong, but will rarely fully compensate for it. A woman who reveals an adulterous affair to her husband in an attempt to salvage her marriage may well be commended by her husband for her honesty but still served by him with divorce papers. Honesty with ourselves is often no easier, given the painful emotions evoked by moral failure. A man's guilt for betraying his friend's confidence, after all, is unlikely to be outweighed by the simple pride of telling himself the truth. In short, the incentives to deceive ourselves and others about misdeeds often precisely mirror the incentives to avoid such misdeeds in the first place.

We tell false excuses to others largely for fear that knowledge of our wrongdoings will damage the good opinion in which others hold us. We do not want our friends to think us inconsiderate, our family to think us ungrateful, our co-workers to think us lazy, or the police to think us criminal. Such negative judgments can end friendships, strain family relations, diminish prospects for a promotion, and even land us in jail. Once bad acts are done, it would seem prudent to conceal them through false excuses so as to maintain the trust and confidence in which others hold us.

That certain kinds of lies may preserve trust in our relationships seems backwards, since most philosophers have argued that dishonesty endangers it.[12] We ought always be honest, on this view, because otherwise we risk losing the mutual trust that makes relationships possible. Aesop's fable of the shepherd boy perfectly illustrates this principle, since by falsely crying wolf, the young shepherd squanders the possibility of help from the villagers when the wolf does actually threaten his flock.

Thus a concern for preserving trust in relationships paradoxically gives rise to two contradictory arguments, one favoring honesty, the other false excuses. But in fact, the argument for false excuses merely exposes the limitations of the trust argument for honesty. To be plausible, the trust argument must presume that lying poses a major risk to our relationships while honesty does not. However plausible this premise may be for most lies, it is often wrong in the case of false excuses, given that honesty about wrongdoings can seriously damage or even destroy a relationship. Consequently, false excuses may be pragmatically justified on the same grounds that philosophers so often use to justify honesty generally, namely the preservation of trust in relationships.

But of course, this argument is myopic, as we are far better off simply avoiding such relationship damaging misdeeds in the first place.

Another justification for false excuses concerns the awkwardness and embarrassment to the listener that may result from an honest disclosure of wrongdoing. False excuses, on this view, are a socially necessary shield against awkward and inappropriate revelations of private thoughts and actions.[13] An executive might actually prefer her assistant to falsely blame his absence from an important meeting on traffic rather than to honestly admit to losing track of time during a lunchtime rendezvous with a new lover on the grounds of "Too much information!" In general, being duped by false excuses may well be preferable to routinely being confronted with the sordid details of the lives of our friends, family, and associates. The strength of this privacy-based argument for false excuses, however, largely depends upon supposed difficulty of honestly protecting private matters. But honesty and etiquette are not at odds unless we wrongly presume that honesty requires us to reveal our private actions, thoughts, and feelings to any inquirer.[14] The executive's assistant, for example, could honestly admit to losing track of time without offering any further embarrassing details.

The most obvious danger of deceiving others with false excuses is that they might discover the true nature of even the most carefully-crafted lies. After all, lies cannot erase the unpleasant facts, but only partially obscure them from view. A revelation of dishonesty may damage trust in a relationship by raising uncomfortable questions about one person's regard and affection for the other. In fact, the damage of a lie to trust may well spread beyond the immediate relationship between the deceiver and the deceived; third parties who learn of the deception may rightly wonder whether the liar has been and will be completely honest with them. Therefore dishonesty does not merely endanger trust within a relationship, but also reputation within the larger community.

Additionally, if a false excuse fails, if the lie and the misdeed it conceals are brought to light, the loss of trust may be magnified because the lie constitutes "a separate offense from what it is intended to mask."[15] Underlying the common reprimand "You did that and now you are lying about it!" is the idea that lying does compound the wrong of original offense, that it adds insult to injury.[16] Thus false excuses may be seen as a sort of double-or-nothing bet in which the stakes have been raised by the deception. This problem of compounding offenses is particularly relevant to minor misdeeds, where the wrong of the original act may be grossly overshadowed by the wrong of the subsequent lie. Lying to conceal the loss of a friend's book, a failure to run an errand, or some other small transgression would obviously be a pointless gamble. But when serious wrong has been done, the additional offense of dishonesty seems like a trivial risk in comparison to the benefits of avoiding confession. Why fret over the discovery of a lie or two when an adulterous affair or the embezzlement of company funds might be revealed?

A third danger of false excuses to others concerns the possibility of a slippery slope of lies. A single deception may not adequately quell all questions and doubts for all people; additional lies may be needed to prop up the original excuse.[17] But each new lie along this slippery slope increases the risk of "detection and exposure by anyone with access to the facts."[18] Furthermore, such slippery slopes of deception substantially tax our attention, memory, and emotions, resources that could be used for more productive and pleasant purposes. Even maintaining a simple deception, such as falsely blaming a coworker for a problem with a client, may prove difficult over time, as the liar must not only track who has been told which truths and which lies, but also anticipate alternate sources of information, explain away contradictory evidence, and identify the tangle of relevant logical implications.[19] To make matters worse, the liar may need to update this complex matrix of information in a few short seconds, all while controlling non-verbal indicators of deception and anxiety. Examples from recent history, such Jayson Blair's fabrications of the news at the New York Times, Bill Clinton's denials of a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinski, the Catholic Church's protection of known pedophile priests, and Enron's concealment of its financial woes, highlight the real-life consequences of failed slippery slopes. Of course, that a single, seemingly innocent false excuse might cascade into a life of deception is probably more often the stuff of fiction than of fact. Nevertheless, given the difficulties of maintaining a deception on the slippery slope, we cannot ignore the possibility that, in the quest to conceal a moral failure, the first lie will not be the last.

Given these consequences of telling others false excuses, we might be tempted to conclude that the only serious difficulty with this type of lie is the risk of discovery. If that were true, then perhaps we ought to simply cultivate our skills of deception, so as to be more careful and effective liars. Yet whatever others might think, the liar is still faced with his own knowledge of the wrongdoing. Such is why a more complex picture emerges with the recognition that false excuses told to others are often deeply intertwined with those told to the self. Self-deceptive excuses are not simply erroneous internal explanations of our actions, but erroneous explanations that we know or suspect to be false. Generally speaking, we maintain a belief in the false excuse despite the doubts by purposefully minimizing our awareness of some or all of the relevant facts. Thus a corporate executive who falsifies earnings reports might avoid "explicit consciousness" of her moral failure by refusing to "spell-out" the nature of her act in relation to her fiduciary duty.[20] Or she might nurture the self-deceptive excuse by "sharpening…[her] mental focus" on the exonerating facts about orders from the chief executive officer, while "blurring [her] focus" on the implicating facts about her easy complicity with those orders.[21] Whatever the method, the basic aim of self-deceptive excuses is to render wrongdoing "unreal" to ourselves.[22]

When coupled with lies to other people, self-deceptive excuses reinforce the corresponding other-deceptive excuses by rendering them more plausible, consistent, and sincere. By immersing ourselves in our own lies, we forgo the need to remember multiple stories and thus can more clearly see the network of "logical implications and possible contradictions" surrounding the lie.[23] We are also "less likely to display incongruent nonverbal behavior" that might indicate prevarication.[24] In these ways, self-deception makes the slippery slope of lies more manageable. Additionally, if the lies are ever discovered, others are more likely to excuse the liar on the grounds that at least he believes what he says. Thus false excuses told to others are often more robust and durable when supported by self-deception.

More importantly, although self-deceptive excuses do not obliterate our misdeeds, they hold out the promise of an uneasy truce with them by white-washing our moral history. Self-deceptive excuses dull the harsh sting of the emotions associated with honest acknowledgement of our moral failures, such as "guilt and remorse for harming others," "shame for betraying our own ideals," and "self-contempt for not meeting even our minimal commitments."[25] They also preserve our self-image as reasonable and moral people, allowing us to continue thinking well of ourselves. By blaming the doctored earnings reports on orders from above, our corporate executive both assuages her guilt for contributing to the collapse of the company and preserves her self-concept as an honest and responsible executive. The self-deceptive excuse also spares the executive the humiliation of amends, the expense of restitution, and the trouble of reshaping her moral character.[26] In these ways, self-deceptive excuses insulate us from the most immediate and pressing costs of moral failure.

In light of such considerations, many philosophers and psychologists have defended limited self-deception in recent years as a natural, moral, and even indispensable means of maintaining positive self-image. For example, Robert Solomon argues that, in light of our "flaws and failings," clearly understanding our thoughts, desires, and motivations can be "devastating to our self-image and sense of self."[27] David Nyberg maintains that "given the distance between what we are and what we wish we were, some amount of other-deception and self-deception is an essential requisite for carrying on."[28] Sigmon and Snyder more cautiously argue that false excuses "are an adaptive accommodation of reality that generally work well in intrapersonal and interpersonal situations."[29] This type of argument for self-deception is most often defended on the basis of a host of psychological studies on biases towards the self, such as those discussed by Shelley Taylor in *Positive Illusions*. The studies show, for example, that when asked about themselves, "most people mention many positive qualities and few, if any, negative ones."[30] When pressed to document their faults, people "downplay [them] as unimportant or dismiss them as inconsequential."[31] Moreover, people tend to regard themselves not only as good, but also as "better than others and above average on most of their qualities"

to the point that one survey showed that ninety percent of drivers considered themselves better than average.[32] These studies seem to support the idea of self-deception as an integral part of a normal person's self-concept.

However, as Thomas Gilovich argues in *How We Know What Isn't So*, self-deception motivated by a desire for positive self-image is not the only plausible interpretation of the data; a cognitive hypothesis of unintentional bias also fits the facts.[33] Our lofty estimates of our driving skills, for example, can stem from information asymmetries, such as our lack of attention to other drivers unless their driving is dangerous and our limited knowledge of how our driving affects others. We can be unwittingly biased by the fact that we are well aware of our own aggravation with other drivers, but generally ignorant of their aggravation with us. As such, self-deception may not be as prevalent as its defenders assume. Additionally, Taylor herself explicitly excludes self-deceptive excuses from her analysis by differentiating between mere positive illusions and defense mechanisms like "repression and denial, which deal with threatening information by pushing it out of awareness."[34]

From a more philosophical perspective, even proof of the widespread use of self-deceptive excuses to preserve positive self-image would indicate little about the necessity or morality of such deception. Just because a violent man can rationalize beating his pregnant girlfriend as well-deserved in his own mind does not mean that he must or ought do so. Furthermore, perhaps we should worry less about damage to self-image *per se*, as diminished self-regard may be a justly deserved consequence of wrongdoing. Violent abusers of pregnant women, after all, do not deserve to think well of themselves. People who occasionally steal office supplies, callously spread rumors about acquaintances, and sometimes forget to feed the dog perhaps deserve to think a little less well of themselves for these failings. Positive self-image, in short, is not an unconditional moral good, deserved by all people regardless of moral character. From a more sympathetic perspective, we recognize that honesty about our moral failings does not require us to dwell upon them and that the work of moral redemption can itself be a significant source of pride. A businessman who misses yet another important client meeting due to chronic disorganization will likely find that the immediate pain of honest self-assessment is more than offset by the pleasure of overhauling his habits of disorganization so as to never miss a meeting again. In the end, people can avoid the honesty versus self-image dilemma by simply refraining from the immoral acts that motivate self-deception in the first place.

More generally, the argument for maintaining positive self-image through self-deceptive excuses faces an uphill battle of objections based upon the very nature of self-deception. Like the deception of others, self-deception does not alter the facts, but merely conceals them from view. As a result, self-deception is unlikely to effectively erase all awareness of and emotional response to wrongdoing and cannot be contained and controlled to only selected beliefs.

These two considerations indicate that the immediate emotional relief provided by self-deception may come at the steep price of longer-term emotional and cognitive harms.

First, given that we must already know or suspect the truth in order to deceive ourselves, a self-deceptive excuse seems unlikely to eradicate all our awareness of a moral failure. In fact, if self-deception did completely blind us to the truth, it would be difficult to explain how people come to see through their past self-deceptions or why people living a lie often suffer from anxiety attacks, neuroses, and other psychological pathologies.[35] As such, our common descriptions of self-deceptive excusers as knowing the truth "in their hearts" or "on some level" seem apt.[36]

The fundamental difficulty for the self-deceiver is that the facts denied are often intimately related to facts still accepted as true. With self-deceptive excuses, unwelcome reminders of our wrongdoings may creep into awareness on occasion despite our best efforts to remain ignorant. The news that friends are divorcing due to the discovery of an affair may remind us of our own infidelity, forcing us to push the unpleasant truth out of mind yet again. Additionally, individuals harmed by our wrongdoings may not play along with our pretenses of moral innocence; a former friend's animosity, a spouse's depression, or a child's withdrawal can contradict and confuse our self-deceptions.[37] Any continued awareness of the wrongdoing whitewashed by self-deception is likely to be accompanied by uncomfortable doubts and painful feelings. Instead of eliminating the painful emotions associated with moral failure, self-deceptive excuses may only tend to drive them underground to fester and emerge in the future as deep-rooted, diffuse anxieties and fears.[38] Because self-deception "leaves the facts denied as real as ever," reminders of our moral failures, even if only vague and fuzzy, will be difficult to avoid entirely.[39]

The second basic danger of self-deceptive excuses is that self-deceptions cannot be contained and controlled to only desired issues. Indeed, no process aiming at "voluntary blindness, numbness, dull-mindedness, and ignorance" can be carefully monitored and regulated by consciousness, for to do so would bring the unpleasant facts too much and too often into the spotlight of full, explicit awareness.[40] As with the previous problem of lingering awareness of the misdeed, the difficulty of isolating and limiting self-deception originates in the tension between the facts denied by the self-deception and those still accepted as true. Any active conflict between the true and false beliefs pressures the self-deceiver to either admit the self-deception or deceive himself further to preserve it.[41] In her essay "What is Wrong with Self-Deception?" Marcia Baron examines this "rippling effect" of self-deception in detail, arguing that "the need to see things a certain way, despite the evidence, becomes increasingly demanding, leading one to gaze, and to focus and interpret what one sees, in a way that supports the shaky view that one has duped oneself into taking."[42] A student who cheats on an exam might tell himself that he

just did not have time to study, but in order to make that excuse plausible to himself, he will also have to explain away the ten movies he watched in the week before the exam, the reading he failed to do during the semester, and his tendency to sleep through class. Satisfactorily explaining away these facts may require still further self-deceptions, particularly if other people question his excuses. Self-deceptive excuses thereby risk a slippery slope of self-deception similar to that of other-deception. But because we cannot consciously and meticulously construct our self-deceptions in the way we can craft our lies, we are necessarily largely ignorant of and powerless to prevent the destructive, expanding effects of self-deception.

One significant and common unintended consequence of this expansive quality of self-deceptive excuses is injustice in our judgments of others. In order to preserve our illusion of moral goodness, any suggestion of immorality will have to be discounted or explained away and very likely others will be blamed for our failures.[43] Thus a salesman might dismiss the criticism of his high-pressure techniques by his boss as an expression of envy for his greater success. According to psychological studies, this strategy of "reframing" in which a person "derogates the source of the negative feedback" is a common method of avoiding the sting of a negative evaluation.[44] But by using it, we unjustly judge others as bad in order to unjustly judge ourselves as good. Self-deception about our moral wrongs is thus not a neat and tidy process with no effects beyond the belief of a single, isolated falsehood protecting positive self-image, as its advocates so often portray it as being. Self-deceptive excuses do not eliminate awareness of our misdeeds, nor can they be limited to only certain unpleasant truths. In the long run, they may often pose a greater risk to positive self-image than the misdeeds they attempt to conceal.

3. The Effects of False Excuses on Moral Growth

As any rider of horses knows, the best antidote to the self-doubt brought on by failure is to get back on the horse. The principle that we ought to persevere despite fear of another failure applies to moral pursuits as well as equestrian ones. But we also do not wish to repeat our moral failures, any more than a rider wishes for a second or third bone-jarring fall. To avoid committing the same misdeeds over and over again, we must take specific action to change our habits and moral character. As part of that process of moral improvement, we must both acknowledge our bad acts and motivate ourselves to change. The primary danger of false excuses to our moral character is their capacity to undermine these two necessary preconditions of moral improvement, by blinding us to our moral flaws and diminishing incentives for reform. False excuses promote moral stagnation whether or not others ever discover the truth.

The argument that false excuses may blind us to our character defects is fairly simple, at least in the case of self-deceptive excuses. Moral growth cannot occur in the abstract; we must identify particular deficiencies to be ameliorated. We cannot simply will ourselves to become better people; we must resolve to be more attentive to our children, more patient with our co-workers, more assertive in refusing burdensome favors, and so on. However, knowledge of such particular deficiencies is precluded by self-deceptive excuses, for we will not see any pattern of moral failures if we refuse to acknowledge the individual failures themselves. A woman who rationalizes her malicious comments to a friend as merely blunt and honest will see no reason to be any more thoughtful or sensitive in the future. Simply put, unwillingness to admit our mistakes prevents us from correcting or learning from them.[45]

Additionally, each individual self-deceptive excuse may contribute to a habit of deceiving ourselves about our bad acts in the long run, thereby diminishing our general capacity to identify moral flaws. Self-deceptive excuses may reinforce self-deception as a "familiar and useful strategy" for avoiding unpleasant facts about ourselves.[46] They can focus attention on the immediate desire for psychological relief from painful emotions rather than on the demands of good moral character. They may promote "callousness toward the truth" when our positive self-regard is at stake.[47] They can encourage recklessness toward the possibility of future bad acts, for such wrongdoings will soon be a mere dim memory with the help of more self-deception. They can atrophy the skills of moral courage that help us acknowledge and cope with moral failure.[48] They may erode "tendencies to open-minded reflection and self-scrutiny."[49] In these and other ways, individual self-deceptive excuses may incline us toward a habit of self-deception, thereby degrading our general capacity to discern our character defects.

Although false excuses told to others do not directly undermine our power to identify our moral flaws, they may do so indirectly by fostering self-deceptive excuses. We may lose sight of the truth in an overzealous attempt to make the lie plausible to others. Our subconscious may, over time, reshape our memories in order to "harmonize past events with... cultivated self-image."[50] We may use another person's acceptance of a false excuse as evidence of its soundness in the process of deceiving ourselves.[51] Even if we initially construct other-deceptive excuses with full knowledge of our deviance from fact, over time the distinction between the truth and the lie may thus be blurred in our own minds.

In addition to concealing our character flaws, false excuses also inhibit moral growth by diminishing the natural incentives for moral change that emerge with wrongdoing. By insulating us from the negative judgments of ourselves and others, false excuses waste the significant motivational force that such judgments often carry in the form of internal painful feelings and external penalties. One of the most powerful incentives for moral improve-

ment is the constellation of painful feelings naturally evoked by moral failure, such as guilt, shame, embarrassment, and remorse. By engaging in a process of moral redemption, including making amends and transforming moral habits, we can free ourselves from the burden of such painful emotions and prevent ourselves from repeating the experience.[52] Thus a hurtful remark to a friend may motivate us to be more thoughtful and sensitive in the future largely because we are consciously pained by the harm we caused her. As such, a willingness to temporarily tolerate the painful emotions of moral failure is often an integral part of the process of moral growth.

Alternatively, we can choose to mask, diminish, and diffuse such feelings of self-reproach through false excuses. Self-deception dulls our feeling of having fallen short of our own moral standards; deception of others numbs us to having violated other people's reasonable expectations of us. By pacifying the emotional responses of ourselves and others in these ways, however, we remove significant motive for moral improvement. Thus a hot-tempered father who falsely convinces himself and his wife that he maintained control in an argument with his teenage son shields himself from the dual emotional stings of failing his own standards and those of his wife that might induce him to exert greater control over his temper in the future. Generally speaking, relying on false excuses to assuage a guilty conscience or fend off the feeling that we have disappointed others squanders incentives to do better in the future.

False excuse-making also corrupts our incentives for moral improvement by protecting us from the external penalties that others often justly impose upon us in response to a wrongdoing. The discovery of misdeeds can shake relationships, damage reputations, close off opportunities, and generally wreak havoc in our lives. By adopting a policy of honesty about our wrongdoings, the possibility of such negative consequences motivates us to choose a course of action wisely from the beginning. Additionally, we are doubly motivated not to repeat our misdeeds, lest we be judged as callous and indifferent to harms knowingly caused. After all, a woman who reveals a friend's secret once may be excused as ignorant, but revealing the secret again, this time in full knowledge of the harms, will likely bring into doubt the sincerity of her friendship. By steering us away from moral failure in general and repeated moral failure in particular, a policy of honesty about our bad acts encourages us to attend to our moral development. Conversely a willingness to use false excuses to evade the external penalties of our bad acts eliminates that motivational force. People cannot, after all, penalize us for harms they do not know us to have caused.

False excuses may also diminish motivation for moral improvement by keeping us ignorant of the full nature and extent of the harm we cause. One common method of discouraging the repetition of a bad act is for the aggrieved parties to explain to the wrongdoer the damage done by the wrong, so that he

does not underestimate the potential harms in future decision-making. By warding off such dialogue, false excuses may prevent us from learning the breadth and depth of the damage our actions cause. As a result, we might not as diligently avoid similar wrongdoing in the future as we would in full knowledge of the harms. In a similar vein, false excuses may prevent us from taking advantage of the insight and assistance that other people can offer in the process of moral improvement. Friends, family, and advisors may help us better understand common motivations for misdeeds, show us unthought-of harms of our actions, offer useful strategies for reforming bad habits, alert us to early signs of slipping back into our old ways, strengthen our resolve to change when we become discouraged, and celebrate with us after we have deftly managed a difficult situation. But we close ourselves off to such aid by concealing our misdeeds with false excuses. As a result, moral change may feel hopelessly beyond our reach, when all we need is the assistance precluded by our dishonesty.

Dishonestly excusing our misdeeds to ourselves and others thus inhibits the process of moral growth in myriad ways. By concealing areas of moral weakness, false excuses conceal the necessity of and the opportunities for moral growth. Self-deceptive excuses diminish the positive motivational force of the painful emotions of moral failure, while false excuses to others diminish the positive motivational force of the penalties for wrongdoing imposed by others. Clearly then, false excuses are an effective but unsavory method of perpetuating our character flaws.

However, this catalog of the dangers of false excuses to our moral characters is far from complete. Tara Smith, for example, argues that dishonesty makes resolving our problems more difficult in the long run. She writes,

> Dishonesty postpones addressing the underlying facts, however distasteful, that led a person to lie. It deters him from taking steps to try to change certain facts or alleviate a problem.... Often, the longer one neglects the problems one denies, the more entrenched and more difficult to correct they become.[53]

Thus false excuses now may make the problems in our lives and our moral shortcomings more difficult to address later.

Robert Cialdini's work on the psychology of influence indicates that false excuses may erode the substance and force of our moral principles due to "our nearly obsessive desire to be (and to appear) consistent with what we have already done."[54] In accordance with this principle of consistency, one common strategy of excusing wrongdoing is to create unreasoned exceptions to moral principles by shifting the line between right and wrong. For example, a student might convince himself that copying his friend's homework was not really cheating because that friend gave him permission. Mutual consent thus

becomes an exception to his principle against claiming credit for the work of another. This rationalization may then pave the way for future cheating with permission, whether on homework, papers, or exams. After gutting our moral principles in this fashion, we may not even need to bother with false excuses to conceal future wrongs.

An aphorism by Eric Hoffer chillingly suggests that the rationalization of wrongdoing may lead to its unnatural repetition:

> The attempt to justify an evil deed has perhaps more pernicious consequences than the evil deed itself. The justification of a past crime is the planting and cultivation of future crimes. Indeed, the repetition of a crime is sometimes part of a device of justification: we do it again and again to convince ourselves and others that it is a common thing and not an enormity.[55]

False excuses may thus instigate a vicious cycle of immorality and deceptive rationalization.

4. Defending Honesty

The virtue of honesty has perhaps held too lofty a position in Western philosophy. Because honesty has often been assumed to be of unquestionable moral value, arguments for it have generally focused on the readily apparent consequences of the discovered lie, such as the loss of trust in relationships. But many everyday lies defy such easy treatment, perhaps because they are fairly safe from detection or seem to benefit our relationships. As a result, critiques of honesty have flourished in recent years, effectively pointing out the obvious holes and weaknesses of the traditional arguments.

However, the superficial costs and benefits of lies can be misleading, as we have seen in the case of false excuses. At first glance, concealing misdeeds through dishonesty seems to do us a great service, preserving the good opinion of others and ourselves in spite of our all-too-human failings. Upon closer examination, we find not only that these benefits are largely illusory, but also that false excuses imperil our capacity for moral improvement by concealing our character flaws and diminishing our motivation for change. Unlike most traditional arguments for honesty, this argument from moral development focuses on the substantial harm the liar does himself, even if the deception is never unmasked by others. If other types of lies, such as lies to protect privacy or spare feelings, risk similarly hidden harms, then bringing such harms to light may provide the virtue of honesty with a more robust defense against the modern arguments for dishonesty than the traditional approach can offer.[56]

Notes

1. David Nyberg, *The Varnished Truth: Truth Telling and Deceiving in Ordinary Life* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 10.
2. See Charles Ford, *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!: The Psychology of Deceit* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996).
3. Jeremy Campbell, *The Liar's Tale: A History of Falsehood* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 14.
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