

Excuses Excuses

Undermining Moral Growth in the Concealment of Wrongdoing

“I have done that,” says my memory. “I cannot
have done that,” says my pride, and remains
inexorable. Eventually, memory yields.
— Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

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To advocate dishonesty or deception as occasionally 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 lies and deception in advance.

Despite such worries, many recent moral and psychological accounts of honesty have argued that deception (including self-deception) is integral to our interpersonal relations. David Nyberg's book *The Varnished Truth* questions the assumption that "truthfulness and morality go together in a clear and simple way" (Nyberg 1993, 10). Charles Ford's *Lies! Lies!! Lies!!!* sympathetically examines the psychology of lying and deception. In *The Liar's Tale* Jeremy Campbell argues that "for better or worse, lying... is not an artificial, deviant, or dispensable feature of life" (Campbell 2001, 14). On such accounts, dishonesty with oneself and with others is a natural phenomenon often serving a useful and necessary function in human life.

While these critiques of absolute honesty have introduced much-needed complexity and realism into the debate about its moral worth, they overlook some of the more subtle consequences of our choices between truth and falsehood. Unseen harms and benefits lurk in these choices because they concern the messy intersection of interpersonal relations, self-assessment, and moral life. Indeed, such complexity illustrates that a consequentialist justification for honesty cannot rely upon any single argument, but rather depends upon a patchwork of overlapping arguments, some broadly applicable, others more narrowly so.

We find such hidden complexities 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 that misdeed. False excuses are common because of the often powerful inducements to tell such lies and seemingly scant reasons to avoid them. However, by digging deeper, we find that false excuses can significantly damage one of our most precious assets: our moral character, particularly our capacity for moral growth.

The Anatomy of False Excuses

In the modern philosophical and psychological literature on deception, false excuses are most often classified as "self-defense lies" (Bok 1999, 79; Ford 1996, 30-1; Serban 2001, 144). We tell self-defense lies in order to protect our interests, both real and perceived, such as by feigning a medical emergency in order to avoid a speeding ticket. In *Lying: Man's Second Nature*, George Serban nicely captures the essence of such lies in writing "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" (Serban 2001, 144).

Self-defense lies become false excuses when the "major or minor troubles" being evaded are the result of our own misdeeds. *A false excuse is a lie disavowing self-perceived*

*wrongdoing so as to avoid harm to the self.*¹ A student's pretended offense at the suggestion that he plagiarized a paper, a co-worker's denial of losing important documents, a child's blaming the empty cookie jar on her younger sister, 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 harms that often come with acknowledgement of such failures.

False excuses are closely related to, but nevertheless distinct from, two other types of self-defense lies: other-excusing lies and appeasement lies. In other-excusing lies, the wrongdoing of another person is concealed because the liar believes it to reflect poorly upon himself. So, for example, a woman might conceal the full extent of her boyfriend's criminal past from her friends so they won't think poorly of her for associating with him. In appeasement lies, the judgment of wrongdoing comes from the moral standards of others, which the liar does not share. Thus a young woman might deny engaging in sexual relations with her boyfriend to her devoutly Catholic grandmother to avoid an uproar, even though she disagrees with her on the propriety of premarital sex. Although the motives, forms, and consequences of such lies are often similar to those of false excuses, there are enough differences to warrant excluding them from consideration in this analysis.

Despite this narrow definition of false excuses as only concerning dishonesty about our own failures of our own moral standards, false excuses do 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" (the causal connection between the person and the act) and "valence-of-act" (the judgment of the negative and positive consequences of the act) (Sigmon and Snyder 1993, 151-2). Linkage-related excuses include bare denials ("I didn't do it"), alibis ("I couldn't have done it"), and blaming ("He did it"), as well as denial of control ("I couldn't help it"), denial of intent ("I didn't mean to do it"), and denial of true self ("It wasn't really me") (Sigmon and Snyder 1993, 158-9). Valence-related excuses include minimization ("It wasn't so bad"), justification ("It wasn't wrong"), and derogation ("He deserved it") (Sigmon and Snyder 1993, 159-60). These methods of disavowal are seen in both false excuses aimed at deceiving others, as well as those aimed at deceiving the self. Regardless of these differences, all false excuses use deception to disavow culpability in order to avoid the harmful repercussions of an act believed to reflect poorly upon the moral agent's judgment, character, and/or personality.

As with most lies, the false excuses least likely to be detected are the simple ones, such as blaming lateness on unexpected traffic. Such small excuses are plausible, difficult to contradict, unlikely to require further dishonesty, and may even contain a bit of truth.

¹ The term "false excuses" is admittedly unsatisfactory, as it implies a category of lies both wider and narrower than outlined by this definition. Many lies excluded by this definition involve excuses, such as lies to avoid unpleasant tasks. And not all false excuses involve actual excuses, such as outright denials of wrongdoing. Nevertheless, the term "false excuses" does seem to be the standard term in the philosophy and psychology literature for this category of lies, and no better alternative comes to mind (Snyder 1985, 36).

Because they often seem harmless to both the deceiver and the deceived, arguing against such lies can be a rather difficult task.

Weighing the Obvious Costs and Benefits

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. 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.” George's father is so overjoyed with his son's “act of heroism” that the destruction of the cherry tree becomes insignificant (Weems 1996).

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 most striking feature of this story is its complete lack of realism; for young George, revealing the truth about his bad deed carries no penalty whatsoever.

In reality, an honest confession of wrongdoing may mitigate the underlying offense, but will rarely erase it.² A woman who reveals an adulterous affair to her husband in an attempt to save her marriage may still find herself served with divorce papers. A friend who confesses to missing a morning get-together due to oversleeping will probably be regarded as less reliable in the future. Thus, often the most powerful incentives to lie about misdeeds are the same incentives to refrain from such misdeeds in the first place.

Preserving trust through false excuses

More precisely, however, we tell false excuses because we fear that knowledge of wrongdoing 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, after all, can end friendships, strain family relations, diminish prospects for a promotion, and even land us in jail. So once a bad act is done, it would seem prudent to conceal it, to offer false excuses, so as to maintain the trust and confidence in which others hold us.

That certain kinds of lies may *preserve* trust and confidence in our relationships seems backwards, since, throughout history, most philosophers, from Kant to Mill to Bok, have argued that dishonesty *endangers* trust and confidence (Kant 1990, 403; Mill 1987, 294; Bok 1999, 18). We ought always be honest, this Argument from Trust says, because otherwise we risk losing the mutual trust that makes relationships (and thus society)

² If honesty did eliminate concern for the original transgression, there would be little incentive to conceal bad deeds through deception at all. In fact, there would be much less reason to avoid the bad acts in the first place!

possible.³ Aesop's fable of the shepherd boy perfectly illustrates this principle: By falsely crying wolf, the young shepherd squanders the possibility of help from the villagers when the wolf does actually threaten his flock (Aesop 2001).

But however much we may risk losing trust by telling lies, we also risk losing trust by honestly admitting wrongdoing. Indeed, the discovery of either a lie or a bad act can damage a relationship by raising uncomfortable (although perhaps ultimately unfounded) questions about one person's regard and affection for the other. So oddly enough, lies in the form of false excuses may sometimes be justified on the very same grounds that philosophers so often use to justify honesty: the preservation of trust.

Dangers of failed false excuses

Of course, the success of any particular false excuse is far from guaranteed; even the most carefully crafted lies may be uncovered. Herein lie the most obvious dangers of false excuses. 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” (Sullivan 2001, 135). Underlying the common reprimand “You did XYZ and now you're lying about it!” is the idea that lying does indeed compound the offense, that it “adds insult to injury” (Sullivan 2001, 136). Thus false excuses may be seen as a sort of double-or-nothing bet; the stakes (both in risk and reward) have been raised by the deception. This problem of compounded offense is particularly relevant to minor misdeeds, where the wrong of the lie may largely overshadow the wrong of the original misdeed. But in cases where serious wrong has been done, the additional offense of dishonesty is trivial in comparison to the benefits of avoiding confession. Why should we fret over the discovery of a lie when theft, adultery, or malice might be revealed?

Additionally, a single false excuse may not adequately quell all questions and doubts for all people; additional lies may be needed to prop up the original excuse (Bok 1999, 25). This slippery slope of dishonesty taxes our memory and cognitive processes, resources that could be better used for more productive and pleasant purposes. Additionally, each new lie increases the risk of “detection and exposure by anyone with access to the facts” (Peikoff 1991, 270). As many have noted, it is easy to tell one lie, but often hard to tell only one. That a single, seemingly innocent false excuse might cascade into a life of deception is probably more often the stuff of fiction than fact; nevertheless we cannot ignore the possibility that, in the quest to conceal a moral failure, particularly a serious one, the first lie will not be the last.

3 Some critiques of absolute honesty have correctly noted that the Argument from Trust often relies upon an equivocation between trust as “confidence in the truth of something” and as “confidence in some quality of a person or thing” (Nyberg 1993, 145). In *The Varnished Truth*, David Nyberg argues “trusting a person to look after your best interests is different from trusting a person never to deceive you” (Nyberg 1993, 146). Equivocation on the word “trust” can be avoided with a more complex argument, one highlighting the fact that dishonesty in any particular instance may indicate a relationship grounded in using and manipulation rather than in a “mutuality of affection, interest, and benevolence” (Friedman 1993, 189). Sissela Bok touches upon this issue in noting that victims of dishonesty have “few if any ways of distinguishing between lies told to them which are for good purposes and all the others” (Bok 1999, 87).

The role of self-deceptive excuses

Although these risks of damaging trust in our relationships provide powerful motives for either honesty or dishonesty in response to wrongdoing, false excuses, like most lies, are not necessarily so consciously calculating or Machiavellian.⁴ Self-deception is often integral to the process of creating false excuses, because “transparency to ourselves can be just as intolerable as transparency to others” (Solomon 1993, 42). Self-deceptive excuses may assuage the painful feelings of guilt, shame, and embarrassment that naturally emerge in response to a moral failure. They may “maintain and protect” our positive self-image, however unrealistic it may be (Sigmon and Snyder 1993, 151). By selectively attending to and interpreting only the facts that exonerate us of responsibility, we can effectively deceive ourselves about our moral culpability for both the misdeed and the subsequent lie (Sabini and Silver 1998, 117). Thus, just as other-deceptive excuses may preserve the good opinion in which others hold us, self-deceptive excuses may preserve the good opinion in which we hold ourselves.

Self-deceptive excuses may also inadvertently reinforce false excuses told to others by rendering them more plausible, consistent, and sincere. By immersing ourselves in our own lies, we forego the need to remember multiple stories and thus can more clearly see the network of “logical implications and possible contradictions” surrounding the lie (Solomon 1993, 42). We are also “less likely to display incongruent nonverbal behavior” that might indicate prevarication (Ford 1996, 276). Thus false excuses are often more robust and durable if supported by self-deception.⁵

Self-deception may also indirectly influence false excuses in the form of rationalizations for the false excuse itself. We may convince ourselves that we've already punished ourselves enough, that loved ones would be devastated to hear the truth, or that our motives will be misinterpreted if revealed. More strangely, we may justify a false excuse by an appeal to veracity, by claiming that the lie protects some more fundamental truth about ourselves, such as about our fairness, intelligence, or even truthfulness (Bok 1999, 84). Through these rationalizations, we convince ourselves that concealing the bad act with a false excuse will serve some higher moral ideal, thereby easing the guilt of a second moral offense.

Based upon the consequences of false excuses examined thus far, it might seem that the negative consequences associated with false excuses only arise if the truth is discovered.

4 “Therefore a prince will not actually need to have all of the qualities previously mentioned, but he must surely seem to have them” (Machiavelli 1971, 63).

5 Philosophers frequently exclude falsehoods originating in self-deception from the concept lies (Bailey 1991, 8; Solomon 1993, 52-3; Bok 1999, 13,16). After all, someone who is self-deceived, like someone who has been deceived by another person, apparently does not consciously intend to lie in telling the falsehood. However, this comparison is misleading, because the deception of others is a foreseeable consequence of the self-deceiver's efforts to suppress or avoid the truth. An attempt to deceive the self perhaps ought to be viewed as part of a broader attempt to deceive anyone and everyone, self and others.

However, these fairly obvious harms are not the only ones worth considering. Less evident, although perhaps more significant in the long-term, is the impact of false excuses upon a person's moral character.

The Effects of False Excuses Upon 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.” Climbing back on after a bad spill, in spite of the shaken nerves and queasy stomach, is the best way for the rider to reassert her natural sense of control and confidence. The principle that we ought to persevere despite fear of another failure applies just as well to moral pursuits as equestrian ones. But we also do not wish to repeat our moral failures, any more than the rider wishes to fall off a second time.

In order to avoid committing the same moral failures 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 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 necessary preconditions of moral improvement, blinding us to our moral flaws and diminishing motivation to change. Regardless of whether others ever discover the truth or not, false excuses put us at risk of moral stagnation.

Concealing moral flaws

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. However, such deficiencies are precisely the facts concealed by self-deceptive excuses. And in the process of concealing these “flaws and failings” of the self, we also conceal the need for moral change (Solomon 1993, 42). Thus 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 having made a mistake prevents us from learning from or correcting it (Branden 1994, 93).

Additionally, as with false excuses to others, a single self-deception may not adequately insulate us from knowledge of our wrongdoing. A student who cheats on an exam might tell himself that he just didn't have time to study. But in order to make that excuse plausible to himself, he will also have to explain away the sixteen 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. Each of these facts, because they contradict his original false excuse, will require yet another self-deception. Thus a single self-deceptive excuse may send us down a slippery slope of further lies, particularly if others raise unthought-of objections. As Marcia Baron notes, we may “deceive ourselves more and more lest the earlier self-deception emerge in its true colors” (Baron 1988, 438).

In the long run, each individual self-deceptive excuse may contribute to a habit of deceiving ourselves about our bad acts, thereby diminishing our general capacity to

identify moral flaws. Self-deceptive excuses may reinforce the principle that self-deception is an effective strategy for avoiding unpleasant facts about ourselves. They can train attention on the immediate desire for psychological relief from painful emotions rather than on the demands of good moral character.⁶ They may promote “callousness towards the truth” when our positive self-regard is at stake (Solomon 1993, 48). They can encourage recklessness towards the possibility of future bad acts, for such wrongdoings can soon be forgotten with the help of more self-deception. They can atrophy the skills of moral courage that help us acknowledge and cope with moral failure (Milo 1984, 111). In these ways (among others), particular self-deceptive excuses may incline us towards a habit of self-deception, thereby risking our general capacity to identify patterns in our actions indicative of character defects in need of correction.

Although false excuses told to others do not directly undermine our capacity to identify our moral flaws, they may indirectly contribute to 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” (Serban 2001, 166). We may use another’s acceptance of a false excuse as evidence of its validity in the process of deceiving ourselves (Baumeister 1993, 177; Ford 1996, 263). Robert Solomon argues for just such an intimate connection between deception and self-deception in arguing “we fool ourselves in order to fool others, and we fool others in order to fool ourselves” (Solomon 1993, 43). So even if we initially construct other-deceptive excuses with full knowledge of our deviance from the facts, over time the distinction between the truth and the lie may be blurred.

Thus, self-deceptive excuses directly inhibit moral development by dimming awareness of our character flaws, with false excuses to others often serving a supportive role. In general, the more concretely we identify our flaws, the easier it will be to find a method of fixing them (Norem 2001, 122). For example, we can find a solution to our habit of procrastination more easily if we identify our problem as related to our irregular schedule and poor planning. But of course, we can only arrive at such concrete judgments by scrupulously and honestly attending to our particular wrongdoings.

Doubting defenses of self-deception

In recent years, many philosophers and psychologists have defended the preservation of positive self-image through self-deception as natural, necessary, and morally acceptable (Solomon 1993; Sigmon and Snyder 1993; Nyberg 1993, 81-108). Such arguments generally depend upon three premises: that self-esteem grounded in truth is not possible, that self-deception effectively erases knowledge of wrongdoing, and that self-deception can be contained and controlled. If these premises were true, then perhaps it would be

⁶ In “The Habituation of Character” Nancy Sherman argues that learning to focus attention on the salient details of a moral situation is integral to habituating virtue (Sherman 1999, 241-4). Although she doesn’t address the issue directly, we can safely infer that part of habituating vice thus concerns training the attention to notice the wrong, misleading, or unimportant details of a moral situation.

better to conceal our moral failings from ourselves. However, all of these premises are at best dubious.

One of the most common arguments in favor of self-deceptive excuses is that self-deception is a requirement of positive self-esteem (Baumeister 1993, 177; Nyberg 1993, 85; Sigmon and Snyder 1993, 149; Solomon 1993, 42). To clearly understand our thoughts, desires, motivations, and behavior would be “devastating to our self-image and sense of self” (Solomon 1993, 42). However, the fact that many or even most people use self-deception to create feelings of self-esteem indicates nothing about the necessity of such deception.⁷ That honest self-evaluation would diminish some people's positive self-image perhaps only shows that such people spend too much time and effort concealing their flaws rather than correcting them. After all, moral ambitiousness (in the sense of a strong commitment to identifying and eliminating character flaws) can be a significant source of honest self-esteem, even if it occasionally entails the stings of failure.

The second premise, that self-deception will (at least most of the time) effectively erase knowledge of wrongdoing is usually assumed implicitly in arguments for the moral acceptability of self-deception. After all, if uncomfortable doubts and painful feelings can and do linger despite self-deceptive excuses, then the suppression of awareness of wrongdoing now may come at a steep price in the future.

Self-deception seems unlikely to completely blind us to the truth, because we must already know or at least suspect the truth in order to self-deceive. Thus self-deceptive excusers are usually described as knowing “in their hearts” or “on some level” that their actions are wrong (Milo 1984, 107; Sullivan 2001, 164). So corrosive doubts (whether ever consciously admitted or not) may continue to plague self-deceivers (Serban 2001, 114). In particular, a “habitual disregard for truth” may “weaken confidence in our capacity for understanding and thereby lessen our sense of self-worth as rational beings” (Martin 1986, 41). Our moral and factual judgments may become suspect and untrustworthy as a result of our willingness to place desires above fact when it suits us (Baron 1988, 438).

Additionally, reminders of our misdeed may creep into our awareness on occasion because self-deception “leaves the facts denied as real as ever” (Smith 2000, 166). A former friend's anger, a spouse's depression, a child's withdrawal, and a co-worker's animosity can all trigger unwanted recollections of wrongdoing. Anyone who sees through our “brittle, poorly integrated” self-deceptions is likely to act in ways that contradict and confuse our false self-image (Serban 2001, 111). Finally, if self-deception eliminated awareness of a misdeed altogether, it would be difficult to explain how people come to see through their own past self-deceptions or why people living a lie often suffer from anxiety attacks and other neuroses (Blanton 1996, xxviii, Branden 1983, 76).

⁷ Psychologist Nathaniel Branden has argued that self-esteem grounded in self-deception is an illusion. Such “pseudo self-esteem” is “a pretense at self-confidence and self-respect” and “a nonrational self-protective device to diminish anxiety and to fulfill the need for positive self-regard” (Branden 1983, 79).

In the final analysis, self-deception about our moral failings may only drive our painful feelings underground, with the result being deep-rooted, diffused anxieties and fears in the future (Branden 1983, 69). Thus there is good reason to doubt that self-deception completely blinds us to the uncomfortable truths about ourselves we would rather not see.

The third hidden premise of philosophers and psychologists defending self-deception is that self-deception can be contained and controlled within certain desired areas. After all, if uncontrolled, a person would sometimes self-deceive even when extremely disadvantageous. 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 conscious awareness (Nyberg 1993, 81). As a result, as Daniel Putman observes, “it is very difficult to find an example of self-deception that does not radiate or does not put pressure on the agent to maintain self-deception in analogous situations” (Putman 1996, 20). Consequently, we render ourselves largely ignorant of and powerless to prevent any destructive, expanding effects of self-deception, such as slippery slopes.

One significant and common side effect of self-deceptive excuses is injustice in our judgments of others. In order to preserve our illusion of moral goodness, any suggestion of wrongdoing will have to be discounted or explained away (Taylor 1985, 122). For example, we may dismiss the negative judgments of others as “misperceptions or malicious views owing to the envy” (Serban 2001, 112). 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 (Snyder 1985, 38-9). In other words, we may unjustly judge others as bad in order to unjustly judge ourselves as good.⁸

Another common unintended consequence of self-deceptive excuses is the erosion of the substance and force of our moral principles. We often excuse our wrongdoings by creating unreasoned exceptions our moral principles, by shifting the line between right and wrong. For example, a student might convince himself that copying his friend's homework wasn't 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 pave the way for future cheating with permission, whether on homework, papers, or exams. According to the research compiled by psychologist Robert Cialdini, “our nearly obsessive desire to be (and to appear) consistent with what we have already done” can substantially affect behavior by altering self-image, including moral values (Cialdini 1993, 57). As with reframing, the hidden effects of this desire for consistency are a well-documented and substantial psychological influence (Cialdini 1993, 57-113). In addition to eroding moral principles, self-deceptive excuses may also foster particular vices, such as an attitude of superiority in judging what's best for others.

⁸ Self-deceptive excuses may also foster injustice towards others by “reliev[ing] us of the onerous burdens of making amends for wrongdoing or errors” (Martin 1985, 30). Perhaps more serious is that innocents may be unjustly suspected, blamed, and/or punished for our wrongdoings, even if we don't explicitly point the finger at them.

Thus we see that self-deception cannot simply be a neat and tidy process with no effects beyond the belief of a single, isolated falsehood protecting our positive self-image. Using self-deception to prop up self-esteem is a far more dangerous game than many philosophers and psychologists indicate.

The rejection of these three common premises—that self-esteem grounded in truth is not possible, that self-deception effectively erases knowledge of wrongdoing, and that self-deception can be contained and controlled—unravels the argument that self-deception is integral to positive self-image. As a result, the impediments to moral improvement created by false excuses become all the more evident. As Tara Smith has noted,

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 (Smith 2000, 166).

Diminishing motivations to change

In addition to concealing our character flaws, false excuses also inhibit moral growth by diminishing incentives for moral change after a wrongdoing. By insulating us from negative judgments, false excuses waste the significant motivational force that such judgments often carry in the form of internal painful feelings and external penalties.⁹

One of the most powerful incentives for moral improvement is the constellation of painful feelings naturally evoked by moral failure, such as guilt, shame, embarrassment, and remorse.¹⁰ By engaging in a process of moral redemption, including making amends and reforming moral habits, we can free ourselves from the burden of such painful emotions and prevent ourselves from repeating the experience in the future (Branden 1983, 68). So, for example, a hurtful remark to a friend may motivate us to be more thoughtful and sensitive in the future in large part because we ourselves are consciously pained by the harm we caused her. A willingness to temporarily tolerate the painful emotions of that moral failure helps us to both make amends to the friend and avoid repeating our wrongdoing with her—or anyone else (Norem 2001, 113).¹¹

⁹ Of course, such negative incentives are not the only forces that can motivate us to moral improvement. We may also be motivated by positives, such as “the attraction of the goal we have failed to reach” (Kekes 1988, 293-4).

¹⁰ Psychological pathology is certainly possible with these feelings of moral failure. Intense variants of such feelings can be debilitating, drawing a person into depression and hopelessness, rather than motivating corrective action. But such paralyzing self-evaluations in response to ordinary failures should probably be regarded as the result of deep-rooted psychological problems, rather than inherent to such emotions.

¹¹ Arguments against tolerating such painful emotions (particularly shame) are not uncommon; after all shame “painfully lowers our opinion of ourselves” (Kekes 1988, 282). However, such painful emotions do serve the necessary and useful function of steering us away from moral harms, in much the same way that the pain mechanisms of the human body steer us away from physical harms. As such, it seems worthwhile to make reasonable use of these emotions of moral failure in the process of moral improvement, rather than ignoring or repressing them.

Alternately, 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. By pacifying our painful emotions 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 emotional sting of moral failure and disappointment that might otherwise motivate him to exert greater control over his emotions in the future. Simply put, assuaging our guilty conscience and the disappointment of others using false excuses squanders incentives to do better in the future.

False excuses, whether self-deceptive or other-deceptive, also corrupt our incentives for moral improvement by protecting us from the harmful external consequences of our bad acts. 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, those negative consequences motivate us to choose wisely from the beginning. Additionally, we are doubly motivated not to repeat our misdeeds, for then we would likely be thought of as callous and indifferent to harms knowingly caused. So for example, 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 characters.

Conversely a willingness to use false excuses to evade the external penalties of our bad acts eliminates that motivational force. Why bother correcting our bad behavior, after all, when we can persist in it with few consequences?

False excuses may also indirectly 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 all of the negative consequences of the misdeed to the wrongdoer, so that the wrongdoer does not underestimate the potential harms in future decision-making. By making such dialogue seem irrelevant, false excuses may sometimes prevent us from learning the breadth and depth of the harm our actions caused. As a result, we might not be as diligent to avoid similar wrongdoing in the future as we would otherwise be.

In a similar vein, false excuses may prevent us from taking advantage of the insight and assistance that others (particularly friends and family) can offer in the process of moral improvement.¹² Other people may help us better understand the psychology motivating

12 In the chapter entitled "Friendship and Moral Growth" in *What Are Friends For?*, Marilyn Friedman argues that friendship offers people an opportunity for "a shift in moral paradigms, in the basic values, rules, or principles which shape moral thought and behavior" (Friedman 1993, 196). Without denying this important, transformative effect of friendship on moral values and character, the effects of friendship in consideration here are more moderate, occurring largely within a person's moral ideals.

our misdeeds. They may show us unthought-of harms of our actions. They may offer useful strategies for reforming bad habits. They may alert us to early signs of slipping back into our old ways. They may strengthen our resolve to change when we become discouraged. They can cheer us on by reminding us of the progress we have made. They may 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 seem hopelessly out of our reach when all we need is some help.

Clearly then, dishonestly concealing our bad acts separates us from important incentives to improve our moral character. We directly diminish motivation by avoiding the painful feelings and negative consequences of moral failure. We indirectly diminish motivation by keeping ourselves from full knowledge of harm caused and by denying ourselves the aid and assistance of others. In these ways, false excuses often help perpetuate our character flaws.

Concluding Thoughts

The virtue of honesty has perhaps held too high a position in Western philosophy for its own good. Honesty has often been assumed to be of unquestionable moral value, and so arguments for honesty 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 because they aim to protect loved ones from painful truths. 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. But moral perils lurk beneath this calm surface: false excuses risk our capacity for moral improvement by concealing character flaws and diminishing motivation for change. Unlike most traditional arguments for honesty, this argument from moral improvement takes account of the intimate connection between self-deception and the deception of others but does not require discovery of the deception for the consequences to take effect.

Of course, further harms of false excuses may hide in even deeper recesses. In one of his aphorisms, Eric Hoffer suggests a rather serious one:

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 (Hoffer 1955, 69).

Given the dangers of false excuses discussed here, the question naturally arises: Do other types of lies, such as those to protect privacy or spare feelings, risk similarly hidden harms? If so, bringing such harms to light may provide the virtue of honesty with just the defense it needs

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