

Excuses Excuses Summary Handout

Diana Mertz Hsieh (diana@dianahsieh.com)

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Definition

False Excuse: A lie disavowing self-perceived wrongdoing so as to avoid harm to the self.

The First Glance

Thesis: Upon superficial analysis, false excuses seem beneficial to oneself -- so long as the deception is successful.

- Obvious reasons to tell false excuses to others:
 - Consequences: False excuses enable us to evade the negative consequences of our misdeeds.
 - Trust: False excuses maintain trust in our relationships (and reputation within a community) by preserving the good opinion in which others hold us.
- Obvious reasons to avoid false excuses to others:
 - Compounding: False excuses may compound the moral wrong if ever discovered, particularly when the misdeed is minor.
 - Slippery Slope: A false excuse may require more and more lies to prop up the original lie, with each new lie increasing the risk of exposure.
- Apparent benefits of false excuses to oneself:
 - Self-image: Self-deceptive excuses seem to "maintain and protect" positive self-image.
 - Plausibility: Self-deceptive excuses may make other-deceptive excuses more plausible, consistent and sincere.

Undermining Defenses of Self-Deception

Thesis: Self-deception cannot be the cleanly beneficial process many presume it to be.

- Defenses of self-deception rest upon three dubious premises:
 - False Premise #1: Self-esteem grounded in truth is impossible.
 - That many use self-deception in an attempt to create positive self-esteem says nothing about its necessity.
 - Moral ambitiousness can be a significant source of honest self-esteem.
 - False Premise #2: Self-deception effectively erases knowledge of wrongdoing.
 - We must know or suspect the truth in order to self-deceive.

- Reminders of the facts concealed by our self-deceptions may come to our attention.
- "Successful" self-deception may only create diffused anxieties and fears in the long run.
- False Premise #3: Self-deception can be contained and controlled.
 - No mental process aimed at ignorance can be monitored and controlled by consciousness.
 - A self-deceptive excuse may require more and more lies to prop up the original lie.
- Self-deceptive excuses have unintended consequences.
 - Self-deceptive excuses contribute to injustice in our judgments of others.
 - Self-deceptive excuses may erode our moral principles and foster other vices.

The Second Hard Look

Thesis: False excuses (to ourselves or others) inhibit moral growth by blinding us to our moral flaws and diminishing motivation to change.

- False excuses blind us to our moral flaws
 - Concealment: Self-deceptive excuses conceal our moral failings from ourselves, thereby preventing us from addressing them.
 - Habit: Each self-deceptive excuse may contribute to a habit of self-deception about our bad acts.
 - Support: False excuses to others may support self-deceptive excuses by helping to reshaping memory or by constituting evidence for validity of the lie.
- False excuses diminish motivation to change our moral character flaws
 - Repression: Self-deceptive excuses repress the painful emotions of moral failures which motivate moral change.
 - Insulation: False excuses insulate us from the negative consequences of our misdeeds, thereby diminishing the incentive not to commit the bad act in the first place and the still stronger motivation not to repeat the bad act.
 - Ignorance: False excuses may keep us ignorant of the full extent of the harm done to others.
 - No Assistance: False excuses may prevent us from taking advantage of the insight and assistance of others in the process of moral change.

Summary

False excuses are not in our self-interest!