

# Liar Liar Pants on Fire

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## Introduction

If we had an infallible lie detector, no one would ever lie. No attempt at deception would ever succeed. Dishonesty attractive because lies often mistaken for truth. So why not pad our resume to get that lucrative job we want? Why not make up some phony excuse to avoid the boss' boring Christmas party? Why not selectively use deception to further our own lives and interests?

This is what mainstream philosophy expects of egoism. However, interestingly enough, it is mainstream philosophy (and psychology) that often advocates dishonesty. Defending occasional dishonesty has become very fashionable in recent years. Lying is necessary to social life. Morality demands that we protect others and even ourselves from hard truths. Facing life honestly, in such arguments, isn't even possible, let alone morally praiseworthy.

It's ironic that Objectivism, the egoistic theory, has a solid case for the virtue of honesty. In fact, Objectivism has quite a number of good arguments for honesty, many of which are unique to philosophy. Each argument points out the long-range consequences of deliberate deviation from truth.

So tonight, I'll talk briefly for about 30 minutes about these general arguments for honesty. Since this is an early preview of the talk on honesty that I'll be giving at this year's summer seminar of The Objectivist Center, I'd really appreciate some critical feedback. In particular, I'd like to know what types of lies present the most challenge in your everyday lives. In other words, when are you most tempted to lie? I'd also particularly like to know what you think the weaknesses of the Objectivist arguments for honesty are.

## Definitions

Before we get started on the arguments for honesty, let's take a moment to look a bit more closely at what we're talking about. Honesty is, in the Objectivist view, the refusal to fake the facts of reality. This is a pretty expansive definition. We can be dishonest by deceiving others or by deceiving ourselves. We can be dishonest by commission (deliberately telling a falsehood) or by omission (deliberately omitting relevant information). So a man might explicitly lie to his wife about being fired, telling her that he quit, when she asks him about his day, or he might conceal it by simply failing to mention it. We can be dishonest explicitly in words or implicitly in action. So a person might explicitly say they're pleased about some new policy at work when they're really livid about it, or they might simply nod and smile, acting as if they support it. What is common to all such acts is the intent to deceive, the intent to present the facts as other than we know them to be. Merely omitting information is not sufficient for dishonesty. After all, there's no obligation to tell everyone everything. We know or suspect some truth, but deliberately divert attention away from it and towards falsehood.

The arguments that we'll be examining tonight all focus on truthfulness, on honesty with other people. The arguments against self-deception (otherwise known as evasion) as different enough to be considered separately.

## The Arguments

Okay, so let's get cracking on these 10 arguments for honesty. Most of these have appeared in the Objectivist literature. The most valuable discussion is in Tara Smith's *Viable Values*, pages 166-174. She makes many of these arguments simple and clear, particularly in comparison to the bombastic and muddled discussion in Peikoff's OPAR.

**Primacy of Existence Argument:** This argument, perhaps the most fundamental in the Objectivist case for honesty, simply points out that deception does not change the facts we seek to avoid. Boasting about skills you do not have in a job interview will not magically give you those skills if you are hired. Lying to friends that you have lost weight will not make you thinner or healthier. In essence, pretending that certain facts are other than they are does not change those facts. Sadly enough, many advocates of occasional dishonesty, pretend as if lying really does change the facts, as is evidenced by the whole "just feel good about yourself" side of the self-esteem movement.

In fact, such deceptions are likely to only make the problems we face more difficult to address. Dishonesty masks our problems, reducing our incentives to resolve them. Dishonesty invests time and effort into the lie, rather than into solutions. They are like, to use an overblown metaphor, a band aid that is coated not with antibiotics, but with flesh-eating bacteria. It might conceal the wound, but it's not going to heal under such conditions.

The other arguments we'll be discussing, except for the last, fall into three major categories: that deception breeds more deception, that dishonesty endangers relationships, and that dishonesty undermines moral character.

#### *Deception breed more deception*

**Slippery Slope Argument:** One lie may not be sufficient to conceal the truth. We may have to lie again and again to prop up the original lie. We may have to lie to more and more people, even those we would much rather be honest with. Each new lie, of course, increases the risk that our deceptions will be discovered. A scientist who falsifies data, for example, because he "just knows" that his theory is right, is very likely to head down such a slippery slope. We risk this slippery slope every time we lie because, as Objectivists are fond of pointing out, no fact is isolated from all others. No fact is an island.

**Self-Deception Argument:** The deception of others may promote the far more dangerous act of self-deception. For example, imagine a man who takes credit for the work of his co-workers. In an attempt to be convincing to others, he might immerse himself too deeply in his own lie, paying attention to only the facts which confirm his doing the work and ignoring those which contradict that interpretation. Over time, he "forgets" the truth of the matter. He might feel guilty about his actions and so choose to evade any awareness of his lies. Whatever method might take a person from deception of others to self-deception, most of us, I suspect, have often seen that most habitual liars are also habitual self-deceivers. People believe their own lies. This is no accident. At the very least, it makes their lies to others more plausible, consistent, and less troubling to their conscience.

**Habit Argument:** Any one lie may contribute to a habit of lying. Dishonesty thus becomes our default response in difficult situations, even when extremely and obviously disadvantageous. Additionally, by not consistently being honest, we may atrophy the skills needed to successfully and honestly cope with difficult situations. For example, it often takes quick thinking and finesse to be both tactful and honest. If a friend asks you how you like her new dress, you could be honest and tell her that the color makes her look like a giant banana. But you can also be tactful and honest by saying that you really love the cut, particularly the neckline. (Merely omitting your

evaluation of the color is not a lie of omission. If she asks you about the color, you have to be willing to give an honest answer, such as that a more subdued color would look better.) By routinely lying about such matters, you are unlikely to think of such a diplomatic reply. You might have no idea what to say, and thus think that lying is your only option. But it's not. What you need is the habit of honesty -- and all the skills that go with it -- to get you through these sticky situations.

### *Lies endanger our relationships*

These two arguments, unlike all other others discussed tonight, depend upon the lie being discovered. As such, they aren't nearly as compelling as arguments, because many (if not most) lies are never discovered.

**Trust Argument:** The discovery of deception can damage the trust so essential to our relationships. Whether a lie was intended to hurt or help, the word of a discovered liar can't reasonably be taken at face value. For example: Imagine a wife who discovers that her husband was really out drinking when he said that he was working late the previous week. The next time that husband says he's working late, will she believe him? The husband has damaged his relationship by lying because the lie erodes his wife's trust in him.

**Reputation Argument:** This argument examines not present relationships, but future ones. The discovery of deception can damage reputation, and thereby limit our capacity to form new relationships. Imagine a man well-known for lying and cheating his past business partners. Even if he claims to have reformed his ways, who would want to risk their time and money going into a venture with him? Bad acts, including dishonesty, can ruin reputations -- and many people are justifiably unwilling to give second, third, and twenty-second chances. After all, there are plenty of people with solid reputations for honesty to deal with in the world.

### *Lies undermine virtue*

**Dependence Argument:** Dishonesty makes us dependent upon the ignorance, laziness, and irrationality of other people. More, dishonesty puts us at odds with the knowledge, perceptiveness, and rationality of others. When we lie, when we hope that the lie will not be discovered, when we hope that our lies will simply be taken at face value, we become dependent, not even upon the best in people, but upon the worst. But of course, it is in our interest to align ourselves with good, smart, diligent, and rational people. This is perhaps the most interesting and unique Objectivist contribution to the philosophical literature on honesty. It is, in many ways, an extension of the Gail Wynand argument that those who seek to manipulate others become their pawns in the end.

**Vice Argument:** Dishonesty, in general, promotes vice and undermines virtue. By lying about religious beliefs, a person is acting cowardly and without integrity. By trying to get ahead in business through deceit and manipulation rather than honest effort, a person is undermining their productivity. By blaming failures upon another, a person acts unjustly and irresponsibly. An action that directly violates one virtue will, because the virtues are interconnected, violate other virtues as well.

**Distraction Argument:** Constructing and maintaining plausible lies requires time and effort that could be better spent on more pleasurable and productive pursuits. For example: If you oversleep one morning and miss an important meeting at work, you can spend that drive in thinking and worrying about a good excuse for your absence. But you'd be much better off thinking about how to correct your occasional problem of sleeping through important meetings. Perhaps you should make a habit of checking your schedule before going to sleep or set up a second alarm clock

on the other side of the room. By focusing our time and effort on the lie, rather than developing a solution to the underlying problem, we only perpetuate those problems. In general, there are a million more productive and more pleasant things we can be doing rather than trying to construct and fortify our lies.

*In sum...*

No Value Argument: The argument that sums up all of those we have discussed so far is the No Value Argument. The conventional philosophical analysis of honesty examines whether the gains of dishonesty outweigh the costs or vice versa. But Rand argues that the apparent gains of deception are of “no value.” This seems bizarre. Is money, even if gotten dishonestly, not a value? Will it not buy me bread and medicine? But the point here, as Tara Smith explains so nicely, is that we need to look closely at the method of acquiring those values, because those methods have consequences that bear upon the worth of the stuff gained. So, to take a non-honesty example, imagine that a person offers you \$50. If you accept it though, he gets to chop off your hand. Is that \$50 of value to you? After all, it will buy you bread and medicine? No, it’s not, because accepting it would be a sacrifice. The use of your hand is worth more than \$50. As Tara Smith says “the apparent gain is not genuine because it does not enhance the person’s long-term survival.” The same principle is true for dishonesty. Although it may seem that we can occasionally profit through dishonesty, the benefits are only illusory, because the method of dishonesty itself is so costly and so corrupting to a person’s life. We can see these corrupting effects of dishonesty particularly in the Habit Argument and the Self-Deception Argument. Such corruption may not take hold with every lie, just as some lies may never be discovered. And some lies are probably more benign than others: telling a friend that she looks fabulous in that banana yellow dress is probably better than lying in court that she doesn’t beat her children and lock them in closets for days on end. The point here is that in general, in most cases, in the long-run, dishonesty has such corrupting effects.

### **Particular Lies**

Additionally, particular types of lies may have particular bad consequences not evident from these general arguments about dishonesty. These consequences are often subtle, thus leading people to think that their deception in any given case might have few costs.

For example, false excuse lies, which I discuss in depth in my new paper, conceal our misdeeds through deception. Although such lies might seem compelling because they can preserve trust and reputation if successful, they often conceal the need to address our moral failings, they diminish our motivations to change, and they subvert the justice and objectivity of our judgments of others.

Lies to protect privacy, which Peikoff seems to think are acceptable for unknown reasons, may, in fact, be rationalizations for false excuses. We may claim that something is private, when it is really shameful. The much better alternative to dishonesty would be to cultivate a zone of privacy, refusing to answer invasive questions, whatever the answer may be.

Lies to protect ourselves against irrational people may muddy the waters for people trying to understand the dispute. They may think of you as “just as bad” as the other guy, because both are lying, neither can be trusted.

By looking at these particular categories, we may discover particular harms not always readily apparent. We may also discover, as with lies to protect privacy, a much better way to accomplish our goals without using deception.

## **Honesty And Force**

Before I open it up for questions, let me say a few words about honesty under conditions where rights are being violated, like when the SS is at our door, demanding that we turn over the Jews hiding in our attic or when the government tells you that you can't even walk on 33 of your 35 acres of land because it is the habitat of some endangered mouse.

The Objectivist position is that honesty is not required in such situations. Why not? Because scrupulously adhering to the principle of honesty is only of benefit to us in the context of normal *trading* relationships. When force enters the equation, our very virtues may be used against us and other good people in the service of evil. Being honest to the KGB in Soviet Russia by telling them that the neighbors are indeed engaged in subversive activity, only prolongs the slavery of everyone under the Soviet system (including the truth-teller). Virtue ought never be used in the service of evil.

Of course, we are not always required to lie when force is being used. In most cases, we may gain more in the long run by being honest. I haven't yet developed an overall strategy for judging when to be honest or dishonest in such situations, so I'd be interested in your comments on that.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I hope that I have given everyone here a slightly clearer sense for the Objectivist arguments for honesty. Of course, there is a great deal of important material on honesty left unearthed. I look forward to your comments and questions!