

Folks: You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out why I am assigning you this item (which comprises a radio program transcript and an excerpt from the book that is the subject of the program). Almost every semester I come across students who I know (or suspect) are lying to me about why they couldn't meet some deadline or meet a course requirement. While the student may go away feeling smug thinking that he/she has got one over me, in truth I end up having a very poor opinion of the individual. However, what this item shows is that habitual lying about even small everyday matters have long-lasting negative consequences for the individual in terms of their own self-esteem, identity, relationships, etc. In short, when you lie you hurt yourself even if your lie may not be exposed. I urge you to be always honest in matters concerning this course much in the same way that you expect me to be as honest as humanly possible when I grade your work, etc.

The High Price of Telling Lies

Friday, December 27, 2013

Neuroscientist and best-selling writer **Sam Harris** says lies of any color are damaging. It's the subject of his latest book, "[Lying](#)."

According to Harris, lies damage relationships with other people.

"When you're lying, you're constantly playing this game where you're having to keep track of what you said, and it's the antithesis of integrity and openness and authenticity," Harris told *Here & Now*'s Jeremy Hobson. "When you're pretending to be someone you're not, you're paying a price, even if it's not obvious to you."

But not only does lying damage relationships with others, it discourages self-improvement.

"When you give yourself the out of lying, you deny yourself the kinds of collisions with reality that are necessary to improve your life," Harris said. "A commitment to honesty is a kind of mirror that you hold up to yourself, where you can discover who you are in relationship to others, and in relationship to your moment-to-moment experience."

Book Excerpt: "Lying" *Excerpted from the book LYING by Sam Harris. Copyright © 2013 by Sam Harris. Reprinted with permission of Sam Harris.*

Among the many paradoxes of human life, this is perhaps the most peculiar and consequential: We often behave in ways that are guaranteed to make us unhappy. Many of us spend our lives marching with open eyes toward remorse, regret, guilt, and disappointment. And nowhere do our injuries seem more casually self-inflicted, or the suffering we create more disproportionate to the needs of the moment, than in the lies we tell to other human beings. Lying is the royal road to chaos.

As an undergraduate at Stanford, I took a seminar that profoundly changed my life. It was called "The Ethical Analyst," and it was conducted in the form of a Socratic dialogue by an extraordinarily gifted professor, Ronald A. Howard. Our discussion focused on a single

question of practical ethics: Is it wrong to lie? At first glance, this may seem a scant foundation for an entire college course. After all, most people already believe that lying is generally wrong—and they also know that some situations seem to warrant it. What was so fascinating about this seminar, however, was how difficult it was to find examples of virtuous lies that could withstand Professor Howard's scrutiny. Whatever the circumstances, even in cases where most good people would lie without a qualm, Howard nearly always found truths worth telling.

I do not remember what I thought about lying before I took "The Ethical Analyst," but the course accomplished as close to a firmware upgrade of my brain as I have ever experienced. I came away convinced that lying, even about the smallest matters, needlessly damages personal relationships and public trust.

It would be hard to exaggerate what a relief it was to realize this. It's not that I had been in the habit of lying before taking Howard's course—but I now knew that endless forms of suffering and embarrassment could be easily avoided by simply telling the truth. And, as though for the first time, I saw all around me the consequences of others' failure to live by this principle.

That experience remains one of the clearest examples in my life of the power of philosophical reflection. "The Ethical Analyst" affected me in ways that college courses seldom do: It made me a better person.

What Is a Lie?

Deception can take many forms, but not all acts of deception are lies. Even the most ethical among us regularly struggle to keep appearances and reality apart. By wearing cosmetics, a woman seeks to seem younger or more beautiful than she otherwise would. But honesty does not require that she issue continual disclaimers—"I see that you are looking at my face: Please be aware that I do not look this good first thing in the morning ..." A person in a hurry might pretend not to notice an acquaintance passing by on the street. A polite host might not acknowledge that one of her guests has said something so stupid as to slow the rotation of the earth. When asked "How are you?" most of us reflexively say that we are well, understanding the question to be merely a greeting, rather than an invitation to discuss our career disappointments, our marital troubles, or the condition of our bowels. Elisions of this kind can be forms of deception, but they are not quite lies. We may skirt the truth at such moments, but we do not deliberately manufacture falsehood or conceal important facts to the detriment of others.

The boundary between lying and deception is often vague. It is even possible to deceive with the truth. I could, for instance, stand on the sidewalk in front of the White House and call the headquarters of Facebook on my cell phone: "Hello, this is Sam Harris. I'm calling from the White House, and I'd like to speak to Mark Zuckerberg." My words would, in a narrow sense, be true—but the statement seems calculated to deceive. Would I be lying? Close enough.

To lie is to intentionally mislead others when they expect honest communication. This leaves stage magicians, poker players, and other harmless dissemblers off the hook, while illuminating a psychological and social landscape whose general shape is very easy to recognize. People lie so that others will form beliefs that are not true. The more consequential the beliefs—that is, the more a person's well-being demands a correct understanding of the world or of other people's opinions—the more consequential the lie.

As the philosopher Sissela Bok observed, however, we cannot get far on this topic without first distinguishing between truth and truthfulness—for a person may be impeccably truthful while being mistaken. To speak truthfully is to accurately represent one's beliefs. But candor offers no assurance that one's beliefs about the world are true. Nor does truthfulness require that one speak the whole truth, because communicating every fact on a given topic is almost never useful or even possible. Of course, if one is not sure whether or not something is true, representing one's degree of uncertainty is a form of honesty.

Leaving these ambiguities aside, communicating what one believes to be both true and useful is surely different from concealing or distorting that belief. The intent to communicate honestly is the measure of truthfulness. And most of us do not require a degree in philosophy to distinguish this attitude from its counterfeits.

People tell lies for many reasons. They lie to avoid embarrassment, to exaggerate their accomplishments, and to disguise wrongdoing. They make promises they do not intend to keep. They conceal defects in their products or services. They mislead competitors to gain advantage. Many of us lie to our friends and family members to spare their feelings.

Whatever our purpose in telling them, lies can be gross or subtle. Some entail elaborate ruses or forged documents. Others consist merely of euphemisms or tactical silences. But it is in believing one thing while intending to communicate another that every lie is born. We have all stood on both sides of the divide between what someone believes and what he intends others to understand—and the gap generally looks quite different depending on whether one is the liar or the dupe. The liar often imagines that he does no harm so long as his lies go undetected. But the one lied to rarely shares this view. The moment we consider our dishonesty from the perspective of those we lie to, we recognize that we would feel betrayed if the roles were reversed.

A friend of mine, Sita, was once going to visit the home of another friend and wanted to take her a small gift. Unfortunately, she was traveling with her young son and hadn't found time to go shopping. As they were getting ready to leave their hotel, however, Sita noticed that the bath products supplied in their room were unusually nice. So she put some soaps, shampoos, and body lotions into a bag, tied it with a ribbon she got at the front desk, and set off.

When Sita presented this gift, her friend was delighted.

"Where did you get them?" she asked.

Surprised by the question, and by a lurching sense of impropriety, Sita sought to regain her footing with a lie: "Oh, we just bought them in the hotel gift shop."

The next words came from her innocent son: "No, Mommy, you got them in the bathroom!"

Imagine the faces of these women, briefly frozen in embarrassment and then yielding to smiles of apology and forgiveness. This may seem the most trivial of lies—and it was—but it surely did nothing to increase the level of trust between two friends. Funny or not, the story reveals something distasteful about Sita: She will lie when it suits her needs.

The opportunity to deceive others is ever present and often tempting, and each instance of deception casts us onto some of the steepest ethical terrain we ever cross. Few of us are murderers or thieves, but we have all been liars. And many of us will be unable to get into our beds tonight without having told several lies over the course of the day.

What does this say about us and about the life we are making with one another?

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Program Transcript

JEREMY HOBSON, HOST:

OK now for a hard truth. You are a liar, maybe not a big one, but you've probably lied before. Everyone has.

PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON: I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinski.

PRESIDENT RICHARD NIXON: And in all of my years of public life, I have never obstructed justice, and I think, too, that I could say that in my years of public life that I welcome this kind of examination because people have got to know whether or not their president is a crook. Well, I'm not a crook.

HOBSON: And as we know, Presidents Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton both paid a large political price for those lies. But neuroscientist and writer Sam Harris says lies big or small are always a bad idea. It's the subject of his new book "Lying," and he's with us from NPR West in Culver City, California.

Sam Harris, in your book you write lying is the royal road to chaos. Is it really never OK to lie?

SAM HARRIS: I think the situations that merit lying are few and far between. I mean, they're really analogous to those that merit violence, you know, self-defense, situations when you would shoot someone or punch them in the face or otherwise use violence to protect yourself or someone else. Obviously that's a situation in which you could steal from them or lie to them in order to mitigate unnecessary suffering.

But it would just - we're almost never in those situations. What we're talking about, you know, the Nazis come to the door, and you've got Anne Frank in the attic. Then fine, lie because you know you're not going to reason with this particular group of Nazis. But the kinds of lies that people tend to tell, and we tell them just in torrents, research shows that virtually all of us all day long lie to other people, most of these lies are what we consider to be white lies, and I think those do immense harm to relationships and to society.

And so lies of really every color I think are worth looking at and are virtually always unnecessary.

HOBSON: Was there a lie that prompted you to write the book?

HARRIS: No, it was a course I took freshman year at Stanford on the ethics of lying, the ethics of deception, really there was just a single question that organized the entire course, which was is it ever ethical to lie. And most of us came into the class convinced that lying was in some sense inevitable, that good people lied in situations that seemed to merit it.

And virtually everyone came out of the class convinced that lying was almost always unacceptable. It just comes down to the kind of life you want to have with people. Do you want to have a life where you're having to keep track of the things you said and to whom? Or do you want to have a life where you can be transparent and where if something comes out of your mouth that doesn't seem quite right, you can change it in real time, and the truth is flexible in that way.

If I say something that isn't quite true, I can say no, no, that's not exactly what I mean, and I can keep refining my statements in order to track the reality of my beliefs and the reality of the world. When you're lying you're constantly playing this game where you're having to keep track of what you said. And it's the antithesis of integrity and openness and authenticity.

And when you're pretending to be someone you're not, you're paying a price even if you're not - even if it's not obvious to you.

HOBSON: But you write that the boundary between lying and deception is often vague, that sometimes you might even convince yourself that a lie is true.

HARRIS: Well yeah, there is a phenomenon we call self-perception. It's not entirely clear what that is. It's not - it's certainly not clear that we ever lie to ourselves in a way that's analogous to lying to other people. So it's not clear that there's a part of your mind that knows the truth and yet convinces your conscious mind of a falsity, and then you operate on the basis of that falsity.

But there is this way in which we tend, based on a variety of self-serving biases, cognitive and emotional biases, where we tend to selectively pay attention to certain things. We have confirmation bias. We have optimism bias. People tend to think they performed better than they did as measured by the opinions of other people.

So there is this kind of (unintelligible) area there where it's not clear where a lie grades into self-deception and where someone can honestly believe their false representations of the world.

HOBSON: We're speaking with neuroscientist and writer Sam Harris. His new book is called "Lying." And we'll continue our conversation in a moment. That's the truth. This is HERE AND NOW.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

HOBSON: It's HERE AND NOW, and let's get back to our conversation about lying.

MAYOR ROB FORD: There has been a serious accusation from the Toronto Star that I use crack cocaine. I do not use crack cocaine, nor am I an addict of crack cocaine.

HOBSON: That, of course, was Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, who later admitted that that was a lie.

FORD: Yes, I have smoked crack cocaine.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: When, sir?

FORD: But no - do I? Am I an addict? No.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: When have you smoked crack cocaine?

FORD: Have I tried it? Probably in one of my drunken stupors, probably approximately about a year ago.

HOBSON: Sam Harris' new book is "Lying." It argues that all lies, big or small, political or not, are bad. And Sam Harris, I want to ask you to remember a lie that you have told because we've all told some kind of lie.

HARRIS: When I took this course at 18, I was really transformed at the end of this, and so I - from then on I have consciously avoided lying. And I've done a pretty good job of it. I'm sure I've told lies, but they've been somewhat inadvertent, where I'll just stumble upon

saying something, which I then notice is not quite true, but it's just too much of a hassle or too awkward to correct it in the flow of the conversation.

But I remember there's one lie I talk about in the book where in high school I was selected to be the valedictorian for my senior class, and I didn't want to give the graduation speech. I was just - I was pathologically afraid of speaking in public at that point. And I didn't want to. Apparently I didn't want to admit this to myself, and I didn't want to admit it to the principal, and so I just lied.

I said, you know, I actually think it would be better if someone else who had been at the school longer could give the speech because I don't have that much of a connection to this school. And so I found some way of getting out of it that was face-saving. But look at the cost of that moment.

What I didn't have is a conversation with my principal about my fear of public speaking. And I'm sure that could've been something that he would've said at that moment that would've allowed me to get over this fear much earlier than I did. I spent years avoiding public speaking, effectively, because I simply was uncomfortable doing it.

And when give yourself the out of lying, you deny yourself the kinds of collisions with reality that are necessary to improve your life. I mean, basically a commitment to honesty is a kind of mirror that you hold up to yourself, where you can discover who you are in relationship to others, and just in relationship to your moment-to-moment experience.

HOBSON: And yet I think of the situation where somebody says does this outfit make me look fat, and you say no, of course not, even if maybe that's a lie.

HARRIS: Right, well, so what are you actually achieving when you do that? You skirt the momentary discomfort of telling them the truth, if in fact the truth is they look fat, but look what you haven't done. You haven't given them real information, which might have helped them. I mean, they might have been able to find a different outfit, which they look better in.

HOBSON: But maybe that's not your place to do that.

HARRIS: Well yeah, you have to understand what the relationship calls for. But if someone is actually asking your honest opinion, when you deny it to them, you are not giving them information that presumably you would want if you were in their situation.

Now if in fact you're the kind of person who really would not want the information that's being asked, well then you might, by recourse to the Golden Rule or some other heuristic, you might say, well, OK, I'm actually being good by not giving them information that I think would be harmful to me in that situation. But mostly people want to know how they're appearing in the world.

HOBSON: All right, well, on the lighter side, I want to go to a piece of tape here that we have. This is from Jimmy Kimmel, the comedian, who has engineered a stunt for three years where parents tell their kids that they ate all of their Halloween candy, and then tears erupt. And in this clip you're going to hear the studio audience laughing in the background. Let's listen.

(SOUNDBITE OF TELEVISION PROGRAM, 'JIMMY KIMMEL LIVE!')

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: Last night I ate every bit of your Halloween candy.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: No.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I'm so sorry.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: I hate you.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I was just kidding.

UNIDENTIFIED CHILD: Well that's not very kind.

HOBSON: Now after this segment hit the airwaves, Sam Harris, you went onto Twitter and really expressed your concern about it. Tell us why you had a problem with that.

HARRIS: Well, I think this is fascinating because - well, first let me say I think this is just an odious and sadistic stunt that Kimmel has engineered. And it is - but what's fascinating about it is it presents a kind of moral illusion because what happens is that we watch this tape of these kids being strategically made miserable by people who they ostensibly should trust more than anyone in the world.

I mean, the whole purpose of this is parents trying to get on television by making their kids just catastrophically unhappy for a moment. And of course we know, and the parents know, that the kids are going to finally get the candy, but it is a - it is such an obvious betrayal. And people laugh at it.

Now the illusion is we're laughing at this because some of these kids are incredibly cute, and they're incredibly plucky and resilient in the face of this obvious injustice, and some of that is very cute. And so even I laughed at some of these segments because, I mean, you know - but we're laughing.

What we're not doing is we're not connecting with what is happening on the kids' side. The kid, we're thinking, well, it's just candy, get over it, it's just - it's not important. But it really is important to the kid in that moment, and it really, the kids' tears and astonishment at their parents' behavior is an honest reflection of a breach of trust, which I think people should not play with.

To casually break trust in this way with your kid, just for the fun of it so that 22 million people can watch it on YouTube, is a bizarre thing to do, and yet because of how cute kids are, we manage to find this funny. And I just think it is a kind of moral illusion.

HOBSON: It's reminding me of something that my grandfather used to say to me when I was very little. He would say don't go out into the backyard. He didn't want any of us kids going out into the backyard on our own because he said there were lions and tigers living there. Now this was Princeton, New Jersey. I don't think that there were any lions and tiger in the backyard. But do you have a problem with that?

HARRIS: Well it's just - reality is so magical already, there's no reason to lie to kids to make it more fun. I mean, so you - there's basically no reason to lie to kids about anything, as far as I can tell. We can censor certain information from them that they can't appropriately deal with, but to mislead them, there's just no reason to do it, and it doesn't give them the tools to have the kind of cognitive and emotional relationship to reality that we want them to have as adults.

So I think honesty is the best policy at the very beginning. Again, the certain truths are not appropriate to tell the kids, but it doesn't require lies to hold those truths back. So I just think - I think we should rethink this relationship we have to the fun lie or the prank, which in Kimmel's case is just doing obvious harm.

I mean, these look like the worst parents I've ever seen, and yet people find this hilarious. It's just, it's absolutely bizarre to me.

HOBSON: Well, and I'm sure our listeners have thoughts on this, and you can go and let us know what those are at hereandnow.org or [Facebook.com/hereandnowradio](https://www.facebook.com/hereandnowradio). At hereandnow.org, by the way, we've also got an excerpt from Sam Harris' new book "Lying." Sam, thank you so much for coming in.

HARRIS: Thanks for having me.

HOBSON: This is HERE AND NOW.

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