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Spring 6-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Jang, Hyejin, "Philosophical Lessons in The Honest-to-Goodness Truth" (2021). *Student Research*. 24. <https://scholarship.depauw.edu/studentresearchother/24>

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Philosophical Lessons in *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth*

In *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth*, a little girl called Libby learns about when she should tell the truth and when she should keep it to herself. In the beginning, Libby is told that truth-telling is good and so does it without care, even when pointing out truths cause people around her to become upset—Ruthie Mae is humiliated when Libby points out a hole in her sock and Miz Tusselberry is angry when Libby says her yard looks like a mess. Libby only changes her practice of absolute honesty when her horse is being insulted in earnest by another character and she comes to realize how hurtful some truths can be. Therefore, the main philosophical lesson of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* is that honesty is good, but only when kind truths are told. The moral of the book is wrong, though. Being honest is important, *especially* when it is not nice, because without telling others the truth about their flaws, people cannot improve and are operating under a false reality, which can do more harm than good to themselves and people surrounding them.

But first, what is meant by being honest? Honesty seems to involve presentation of the truth—to answer with candor when asked. In the book, Libby lies to her mother when asked if Libby had watered and fed their horse, Ol' Boss. Libby is obviously being dishonest. However, honesty is also automatically telling the truth even when one has not been asked to specifically do so. Some would say that omission of certain facts and truths is not necessarily the same as being dishonest, such a concept is called a lie of omission or a half-truth. Nonetheless, it is still dishonest to tell lies of omission and half-truths because they involve elements of deception with the intention and outcome of misleading others. Even if Libby was not asked about whether she had fed and watered Ol' Boss, Libby continuing with her day as though she did do her chores would still lead to the same result as when she actively lied: deceiving her mother.

The concepts “honesty” and “truth” are closely intertwined, but they are not the same thing. For honesty to exist, it has to be based on truths. We cannot be honest about untrue

things or things, concepts, feelings, events, etc. that do not or did not exist. Even though honesty involves presenting the truth, being honest is not the only way through which truths come to light. For example, we would not call a scientist making groundbreaking discoveries “honest”, even when they are uncovering and presenting truths about the natural world in their research. Additionally, even though lying is a way obscuring the truth, it is not the only way through which truth is concealed. Some truths remain veiled because of other factors outside of deceit; for example, consider whether it would be possible for modern scientists to continue research and the uncovering of truths about molecular biology without the technology to help them do so. The truths which are relevant to *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* and our discussion here are truths that are specifically concealed by deceit: lying, lies of omission, half-truths, and their variations.

Then why should honesty be considered morally good? In chapter 12 of *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Rachels explains that honesty is necessary on a large scale because it forms the basis of communication. Communication allows us to exchange information about ourselves, such as our needs and wants, and to build trust with one another. This in turn, allows civilizations to flourish. On a smaller scale, honesty has an impact on our connection with reality and our day-to-day activities. We operate based on our trust for others. If they don't deceive us, we are behaving in a way that is based in reality and makes sense. If they are dishonest, we are betrayed and humiliated upon realization. Thus, honesty is good because it contributes to the possibility of civilization, but also because it is necessary for us to act sensibly and maintain dignity.

Because being dishonest to others causes them to operate on a false reality and in a wrong way, we should always tell the truth, even when it is hurtful. For example, if a close friend is romantically interested in you, but their interest is unrequited, it would be best to be honest and tell them that you do not feel the same way. Telling the truth in this situation would most

definitely hurt their feelings, but it would also make them confront reality and cause them to adjust their behavior accordingly. Being dishonest and leading them on will simply prolong their suffering, when they eventually realise that you do not return their feelings they may even feel betrayal more intensely than the hurt they would have experienced if you had been direct and truthful. Furthermore, your honesty may also lead them to learn how to respect boundaries and recognize social cues when someone is not interested in them. This can help them improve their social skills, become a better friend and love interest to others in their future. Therefore, honesty, despite the hurt it may bring, is necessary.

Another example of when hurtful honesty is necessary is when it comes to academic situations and professor-student relationships and obligations. Assuming that students have invested reasonable amounts of time and effort into their work, receiving unexpected negative feedback can be an adverse experience, especially when students believe their assignment is deserving of a better grade. The professor may adjust the student's grade to be higher, but then the entire class' grades would have to change in the name of fairness. Alternatively, the professor may also change the grading rubric after the assignments have been submitted so that students' marks can increase, but this would set precedence for the misleading of the class, who had completed the work under the assumption that it would be marked differently. Therefore, the professor has to be honest and give feedback that may be negative, but is the only way to help students improve on their work and direct them towards getting better grades. Without honesty from the professor, the students will continue to submit coursework they think is good, but does not correspond with the reality of what is considered to be quality assignments. The students may then feel demotivated that their efforts are not bringing in good results and have low self-esteem in relation to their academics.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that hurtful honesty does not necessarily guarantee improvement at all. Returning to the example of the friend with a crush on you, it is entirely

possible that upon rejection, they do not choose to reflect and think about how to become better at reading social cues and respecting boundaries. Instead, they may feel tempted to adopt incel (the portmanteau of “involuntary celibate”, used to denote people are bitter about their inability to find romantic or sexual partners and are often violently misogynistic, racist, entitled, and self-deprecating) behaviours instead. They may become defeatist in thinking about future relationships, believing that they are undeserving of love or affection because of your rejection. Incel ideology, when taken to its logical conclusion, usually involves the incel murdering people who are similar to the love interest they were rejected by. So in this case, your honesty may lead to disastrous consequences for the person you rejected and many others, instead of positive improvement. Likewise, students who receive honest negative feedback from professors may become demotivated, believe they have no potential, and consequently, cease to attend classes since they do not think they are able to gain anything from going to university.

However, the odds of the person you reject behaving in a way similar to the situation described above is fairly low. On the other hand, the chances of you becoming happier and relieved after telling your friend the truth about how you view them are almost guaranteed. The possibility of your honesty improving the well-being of at least one person in your friendship is almost certain. Compare this to if you had continued to be dishonest to your friend about the nature of your relationship and your platonic regard for them: both of you would have continued to be miserable. You would be miserable because you would constantly be burdened with the stress of acting in a way you do not feel reflects your reality and feelings. Your friend would be miserable because their efforts to pursue you are not paying off for some unknown reason, as you are unwilling to enter a relationship with them and equally reluctant to tell them the cause for your ambivalence, which is that you genuinely do not return their feelings. Similarly, the possibility of the student continuing to make dissatisfactory work is certain if the professor does not give negative feedback, whereas the critique of work may cause the student to progress

positively in their studies. When weighing the possibilities and benefits of being dishonest in comparison to being honest, it appears that hurtful honesty, difficult as it may be to follow through, guarantees a higher chance of improvement, and more importantly, success, for everyone involved.

The practice of honesty is difficult precisely because we want to preserve cordial relationships. However, if everybody adopts the perception of honesty in the form of critique as one that will bring about common good and happiness, there would be no problems, because everyone would realise that honesty serves the improvement of their character. In adopting this mindset, honesty is not a weapon of hurt, but is a kind of nutrient for growth. Therefore, when we are subjected to honest critique, we should not be offended. Instead, we should thank the person for their candidness and use that opportunity to reflect upon the points of improvement and adjust our behavior accordingly. Then, we will be able to act and conduct our lives in a way that is more suitable for and anchored to our shared reality. In this way, absolute honesty may not even be considered a necessity, but instead, a luxury afforded by friendship and affection. People usually do not wish for those they dislike, hate, or otherwise resent to improve and have happier lives.

To sum it up, the main moral lesson of *The Honest-to-Goodness Truth* is appealing when one wants to preserve cordial relationships, but this preservation by being dishonestly nice is not healthy. It is not healthy because it cannot foster growth in individuals and can cause them to continue unrealistic behaviours harmful to themselves and those surrounding them. To prevent this unrealistic conduct in people, we must always be honest when we notice something that can be improved upon, especially when we have something negative to say. We must be honest even when we are not being asked to be. If we do not express our truths we are consenting to carrying a burden that does not just negatively affect us, but also the people were concealing the truth from. We are living in a way that does not align with our own reality and

experiences and causing others to act in an unreasonable and unrealistic way as well. This will only result in humiliation and betrayal, completely avoidable experiences if everyone committed to being honest.

Works Cited

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