

# Honesty

by William Damon

Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society

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For numerous reasons—some justifiable—people do not always stick to the truth when they speak. Among the more justifiable reasons as to why people are less than honest are tact and other humane concerns. Reassuring an ungainly teenager that he or she looks great can be a sensitive and responsible embroidery of the truth; in a far more consequential instance, misinforming storm troopers about the whereabouts of a hidden Jewish family during the fascist occupation of Europe was an honorable and courageous deception. Honesty is not a wholly detached moral virtue demanding strict allegiance at all times. Compassion, diplomacy, and life-threatening circumstances sometimes require a departure from the unadulterated truth. What's more, people are far from perfect. Even those who strive for a life of personal integrity may be tempted to distort the truth on occasion to cover up or explain away an embarrassing mistake.

Politicians can be especially hard-pressed to toe the truth-telling line consistently. The very function of political speech, as George Orwell once observed, is to hide, soften, or misrepresent difficult truths. Orwell was uncompromising in his skepticism about any expectation to the contrary. He put it this way: “Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.”<sup>1</sup>

Although in this case Orwell himself may have been guilty of overstatement for purposes of rhetorical effect, his claim cannot be totally dismissed. It would be either foolishly naive or sardonically cynical for anyone in today's world to act “shocked, shocked” whenever a politician tries to hide the truth from the public. For the ordinary citizen, keeping up with the daily news means subjecting oneself to a constant process of trying to figure out what the politicians really meant by what they said and speculating about why they said it. It certainly does not mean taking what any of them say at face value.

But to recognize that honesty is not an absolute standard demanded for every life circumstance—or that we can expect a certain amount of deceit from even respected public figures—is not to say that the virtue of honesty can be disregarded with impunity. A basic intent to be truthful, along with an assumption that people can be generally taken at their word, is required for all sustained civilized dealings. No civilization can

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tolerate a fixed expectation of dishonest communications without a breakdown in mutual trust.

All human relations rely on trusting that those in the relations will, as a rule, tell the truth. Honesty seals a relationship with trust, and too many breaches in honesty can corrode any relationship beyond repair. Friendships, family, work, and civic relations all suffer whenever dishonesty comes to light. No one wants to be known as a liar because people shun liars as individuals who can't be trusted.

Honesty's vital role in human society has been observed and celebrated for all of recorded history. The ancient Greeks considered the goddess Veritas to be the "mother of virtue"; Confucius considered honesty to be the essential source of love, communication, and fairness between people; and of course the Bible's Old Testament prohibited bearing false witness. The two most universally heralded US presidents (George Washington, who "could not tell a lie," and Abraham Lincoln, who was known as "Honest Abe") were acclaimed for their trustworthiness.

In this same vein, religious leader Gordon Hinckley has written that "where there is honesty, other virtues will follow"—indicating, as did the ancient Greeks, the pivotal role of truthfulness in all moral behavior and development.<sup>2</sup> Hinckley's comment, which was made in his alarm-sounding book on "neglected virtues," points to the problematic status of honesty in our society today. Truthfulness may be essential for good human relationships and personal integrity, yet it is often abandoned in pursuit of other of life's priorities. Indeed, there may be a perception in many key areas of contemporary life—law, business, politics, among others—that expecting honesty on a regular basis is a naive and foolish attitude, a "loser's" way of operating. Such a perception is practically a mandate for personal dishonesty and a concession to interpersonal distrust. When we no longer assume that those who communicate with us are at least trying to tell the truth, we give up on them as trustworthy persons and deal with them only in an instrumental manner. The bounds of mutual moral obligation dissolve, and the laws of the jungle reemerge.

### **Honesty Besieged in Our Time**

Our problem today is not simply that many people routinely tell lies. As I have noted, people have often departed from the truth for one reason or another throughout human history. Our problem today is that we seem to be entering a dysfunctional period of social change in which an essential commitment to truthfulness no longer seems to be assumed. If this is the case, the danger is that the bonds of trust that are important in any society, and essential for a free and democratic one, will dissolve to the point that the kinds of discourse required to self-govern will become impossible.

What are the signs of this in contemporary society? In professional and business circles, the now-familiar complaint is that "it used to be your word was good, but those days

are gone.” In the educational world, cheating and misrepresenting credentials have become rife. In print, broadcast, and Internet news coverage, journalism has lost credibility with much of the public for its perceived biases in representing the facts. Most troubling for a democratic republic, our political and civic discourse is no longer considered a source for genuine information; rather, it is assumed that civic leaders make statements merely to posture for effect rather than to engage in a discussion and debate. In this environment, facts are manipulated (or made up) in the service of a predetermined interest, not presented accurately and then examined in good faith. This is especially troubling because civic leaders set the tone for communications throughout the public sphere.

Although it certainly is the case that similar breaches of honesty and trust have occurred in every historical epoch, there are reasons to believe that we are reaching an ethical tipping point today, when people’s assumed commitment to honesty and basic expectations of trust are in danger of being surrendered to a reflexive and dispiriting cynicism. If not corrected, this is a recipe for a truly Orwellian future.

### **Character Miseducation and Dishonesty**

The future of any society depends on the character development of its young. It is in the early years of life—the first two decades especially—when the basic virtues that shape character are acquired. Although people can learn, grow, and reform themselves at any age, it becomes increasingly difficult as their habits solidify over time. Honesty is a prime example of a virtue that becomes habitual over the years if practiced consistently—and the same can be said about dishonesty.

Parents in our society (and indeed worldwide) value honesty in their children: one poll found 98 percent of parents’ expressing a desire that their children be truthful (leading one to wonder what the other 2 percent were thinking).<sup>3</sup> Yet in practice, when parents try to get their child an advantage in today’s hypercompetitive educational marketplace, honesty often slips to the rear of other real-world considerations. Although there are no real data yet on this subject, anecdotal reports abound of parents encouraging their children to enhance school grades by submitting work that is not their own, and few are the college admissions staff these days who have not complained about students fudging their applications with the full knowledge, and in many cases assistance, of their parents. Beyond such aided exercises in dishonesty, many children today are subjected to their parents’ well-intentioned but misguided attempts to shield them from painful truths. In other writings, I have documented how the self-esteem movement has led to a constant stream of false praise, including “first place” prizes that everyone wins! Children rarely take such “white lie” practices seriously; and they get the message that what adults are telling them cannot be trusted for its truth value. Similarly, I have described incidents—not, sadly, unusual—in which parents deny the most evident problems in their lives to their children, who come away not only less reassured but vocally more doubtful about their parents’ trustworthiness.<sup>4</sup>

Habits learned at home are augmented in school; for ten months a year from ages five to eighteen—the most formative ages for a child’s character—schooling is the activity that consumes most of the child’s waking time and attention. As a consequence, for better or worse, schools are among the most important influences on the character development of most youth.

Honesty is the character virtue most closely linked to every school’s academic mission. In matters of academic integrity, which generally revolve around cheating, schools have a responsibility to convey to students the importance of honesty as a practical and ethical virtue. Unfortunately, many of our schools today are failing in this responsibility.

Of all the moral breaches that can tear deeply into the moral fabric of a school, cheating is among the most damaging, because it throws in doubt the school’s allegiance to truth and fairness. Cheating in school is unethical for at least four reasons: (1) it gives students who cheat an unfair advantage over those who do not; (2) it is an act of dishonesty in a setting dedicated to a quest for truthful knowledge; (3) it is a violation of trust between student and teacher; and (4) it disrespects the code of conduct and the social order of the school. As such, one would expect that cheating would provide educators with an ideal platform for imparting the key moral standards of honesty, integrity, trust, and fairness.

For educators looking for opportunities to help students learn from their mistakes, there is plenty of material to work with: research has shown that almost three-quarters of American college students (that is, students who have made it through high school) admit to having cheated at least once in their precollege academic work.<sup>5</sup> Yet school responses to cheating are haphazard at best. Many teachers, to avoid legal contention and other possible conflicts, look the other way if their students copy exam answers or hand in plagiarized papers. Some teachers sympathize with student cheaters, feeling that the tests students take are flawed or unfair. Some teachers excuse students because they believe that sharing schoolwork is motivated by loyalty to friends. Incredibly, some teachers encourage their students to cheat or actually cheat themselves in reporting student test scores. In a recent feature on New York State’s academic testing, CBS News reported the following: “New York education officials found 21 proven cases of teacher cheating. Teachers have read off answers during a test, sent students back to correct wrong answers, photocopied secure tests for use in class, inflated scores, and peeked at questions then drilled those topics in class before the test.”

For the most part, school rules regarding academic integrity and cheating consist of little more than a patchwork of vaguely stated prohibitions and halfhearted responses. Many schools vacillate wildly between neglect and hysterical overreaction if the problem boils over into a public media scandal. There is little consistency, coherence, or transparency in many school policies, and it is difficult to find a school that treats academic integrity as a moral issue, revealing incidents of cheating to communicate values such as honesty, respect for rules, and trust to its student body.

The result of this failure in moral instruction is an unmitigated decline in students' behavioral standards. Donald McCabe, a prominent contemporary researcher on this subject, has concluded that, in our time, "cheating is prevalent, and . . . some forms of cheating have increased dramatically in the last 30 years."<sup>6</sup>

This dreary consequence is hardly surprising. In my own experience, when I have been invited into schools to resolve cheating scandals, I have found a palpable resistance among teachers and staff to discussing the moral significance of the breach with students. Sometimes this resistance springs from an inappropriate sympathy with students who are struggling with a difficult assignment, as in the case of one teacher, observed by an educational writer, who held that "it was the teacher who was immoral for having given the students such a burdensome assignment" when a group of students was caught cheating.<sup>7</sup> In less extreme cases, teachers frequently excuse cheating as an instance of students' laudable desires to cooperate with one another.

The real problem here is the low priority of honesty in our agenda for schooling and child rearing in general. In bygone days, there was no hesitancy about using a moral language to teach children essential virtues such as honesty (just leaf through old editions of the *McGuffey Readers*, used everywhere in schools throughout the country until the mid-twentieth century, to see how readily educators once dispensed unambiguous moral lessons to students). Nowadays cheating seems to be considered a form of pro-social activity by some teachers; even antisocial acts such as stealing are discussed merely as "uncooperative behavior."<sup>8</sup> This kind of discourse can only lead to moral numbness and character miseducation for our young and a lethal decline of honesty (as well as other essential virtues) throughout our society.

### **American Political Speech Today; a Cheerless Homage to George Orwell**

It is always tempting (and probably in keeping with the American way) to denounce politicians as lying scoundrels and it is almost amusing to consider how often our high government officials are caught in bald-faced lies such as "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." Certainly such episodes erode public trust, especially when justified (as they often are) by cynical sentiments such as "everybody lies about things like that". But the specter of politicians telling outright lies, however dispiriting, is only the tip of the iceberg of distrust imperiling our public discourse. More prevalent, and just about as problematic, are less barefaced forms of deception that have become entrenched in the way that politicians and other leaders discuss policy issues in our public sphere. It is no exaggeration to say that habits of deceit have become systemic in the public communications of the civic and political leadership in the United States today.

How has this come to pass? Deception, of course, is often a matter of self-interest. As I noted above, a certain degree of dishonesty in human affairs requires no explanation beyond the common desire to seek advantage for oneself by bending the rules a bit. But when deception becomes systemic, the normal order of civilized life becomes inverted—and consequently threatened—and a more extended explanation is needed.

The malignant spread of dishonesty throughout our public discourse has its roots in a condescending attitude toward the public among our leadership. The assumption among many civic and political leaders is that the public cannot be counted on to deal with hard truths rationally and responsibly. From this belief it follows that whenever the public must be informed about a contentious matter of policy, the safest solution is to simplify, distort, or otherwise withhold accurate information. A strategy of deception has thus become a routine way of managing the reaction of a public considered too foolish to handle the truth responsibly. As in all condescending attitudes, there is a presumption of benign intent, similar to tricking children into taking unpleasant medicine for their own good. This is not, however, what the Founders had in mind when they dreamed up a constitutional republic that guaranteed citizens the freedom to make their own informed choices.

My first introduction to this type of attitude came from the professional rather than the political domain. Although it took place more than twenty-five years ago, it remains vivid in my memory. I had been invited to attend a meeting of distinguished health professionals as a junior, nonparticipating member. A respected cancer researcher made a presentation about environmental carcinogens; during the discussion that followed, someone asked him about the risks of second-hand smoke. He replied that, scientifically speaking, there was no solid evidence that second-hand smoke created a significant risk but that this was not something he believed should be reported to the public because any statement that could weaken the message that people should not smoke must be avoided. I should note here that I have no knowledge of the scientific accuracy of this researcher's statement, and I have heard some new evidence has come to light over the past twenty-five years that does indicate the medical risks of second-hand smoke. I also should note that I could not gauge the reactions of the other scientists at the meeting; in my role as a nonparticipant I was not permitted to challenge his statement. I do remember wondering whether this was some kind of anomaly in scientific medical reporting, because I had never encountered such an unashamed attitude toward deception on the part of a distinguished professional.

That was then. By the time of this writing, I have observed so many deceptions on the part of leading public officials that I can no longer keep track of them—and just about any sentient adult in our society could say the same. Many of these deceptions, no doubt, spring from the same kind of benign but condescending intentions that moved the cancer researcher to wish to cover up his findings. Staying within the domain of health, consider how the recent political debate regarding the Obama landmark health reform bill has been conducted. My focus in this discussion is *not* on the merits of the health care bill; indeed, for the sake of this discussion, I will remain wholly agnostic about whether the bill is a plus or a minus for our society at this time. Rather, I want to focus on the quality of the public debate that surrounded (and surrounds) this major policy initiative. In particular, I argue that a vigorous and informed democratic debate never had a chance to emerge during the entire lengthy public discussion of the bill

because the leaders of the discussion avoided an honest presentation of the bill's essential facts. The main victim of this neglect was the public's sense of trust in both the bill and its promoters.

Obfuscation through complexity has long been a proven strategy of deception in all matters financial, which is why fine print made its way into many legal contracts. For the recent health care debate, the administration prepared a document of two thousand pages that mystified even members of its own team. Compounding the complexity and length of the presentation was a demand to rush the bill through in a very short time. Astonishingly, even the technical experts in the administration who were responsible for defining the details of the bill's provisions were unable to present the full implications of the bill's costs and benefits. For example, shortly before the bill was brought to a vote before Congress, the Associated Press reported the following:

WASHINGTON, D.C.—The Obama administration's chief actuary at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) notified Republican leaders Saturday that the "very tight time frame" and "complexity" of the Democrats' health spending bill would prevent them from fully analyzing the costs and efficacy of the bill before the House voted on the legislation. . . . The Chief Actuary, Richard S. Foster, wrote: "In your letter, you requested that we provide the updated actuarial estimates in time for your review prior to the expected House debate and vote on this legislation on March 21, 2010. I regret that my staff and I will not be able to prepare our analysis within this very tight time frame, due to the complexity of the legislation."

One would expect that complete and accurate information would be deemed necessary before final consideration of major legislation. Yet the actuary's inability to provide the needed information was just one in a long line of dismissive responses from administration leaders when asked for clarifying details. Even some of the bill's most ardent supporters were heard to say that they couldn't tell exactly what was in it. If the experts and the political leadership lacked the honest facts needed to debate the merits of the bill, what was the public to think?

The answer to this question became apparent in a spate of irate public forums that spread across the nation before the congressional vote on the bill. It became apparent during those forums that vast segments of the public had become confused and distrustful of what they had heard from the political leadership. When this skepticism was revealed, the political leadership was appalled. The condescending reflex kicked in: the common response from political leaders and the news media was to dismiss the public's reaction as an irrational fear of change amplified by a hysterical tendency toward self-protection.

How irrational was the public distrust? Again, let us examine the veracity of the messages that the public was receiving from the political leadership. The president said

repeatedly that his health care bill would change nothing for people who were happy with their current health plans. People could keep their same doctors, get treatment at the same medical facilities, and generally count on a continuation of their medical services. All other members of the administration, and most of the mainstream media, repeated these assurances without any noticeable qualifications. Yet the public—which is not as ignorant or as unthinking as many politicians assume—was aware of one true fact about the bill that could not be hidden: somewhere between thirty and fifty million new patients would be brought into the health care system, amounting to an enormous increase in demand for a system that is already stretched to its limits in all but a few affluent sections of the country. The bill made no provisions for increasing the supply of health professionals or health care facilities to cope with this massive new demand.

Few if any leaders who promoted the bill admitted this problem or addressed the concern that seemed obvious to much of the public: with demand far outstripping supply into the foreseeable future, medical services would not be available to all who needed them. Inevitably, the imbalance between demand and supply must lead to some form of medical rationing to deal with shortages in service. This unavoidable outcome the political leadership refused to acknowledge. The closest allusion to this concern among national political figures was the claim from the opposition that the program would establish “death panels” to decide who would qualify for lifesaving treatments. But the “death panel” claim misstated the contents of the bill, adding to the aura of suspicion surrounding the debate. This inaccuracy was doubly unfortunate: first, because it was yet another misrepresentation causing more mistrust and, second, because it distorted an actual concern that, if stated correctly, should have been part of the public debate. As a recent series in the *New Yorker* has revealed, most countries that have adopted universal health care have put some form of jury system in place to rule on patients’ rights to obtain expensive care. In this way, the credibility of a potentially valid concern regarding medical rationing was just one more victim of the carelessness with which the facts were treated by political leaders during the entire debate.

Now, as I noted, I will remain neutral for the sake of this discussion regarding the question of whether medical rationing is a social good or a social evil. I consider both positions to be legitimate subjects for political debate on health care policy. The contest between those who favor centrally managed decisions for distributing health resources versus those who favor the freedom of individuals to provide the resources for themselves is exactly the kind of issue that should be decided through frank and well-informed democratic debate. *But such a debate never took place during the consideration of the health care bill* because all the honest facts of the matter were covered up through complexity, avoidance, and denial of the bill’s unintended consequences. The public’s dismay at this discreditable process was hardly irrational—nor was its loss of trust in the leadership that operated in this fashion. Unfortunately, the leadership of the opposition also did not rally to the cause of honest debate. As noted in the

*Wall Street Journal's* Washington Wire, the rallying phrase used by the bill's opponents in Congress was that it represented "a government takeover of health care." This phrase was lazy and misleading because, as pointed out in the *Journal* piece, "the law largely relies on the existing system of health coverage provided by employers." Indeed, this rallying phrase was given the dubious award of "lie of the year" by the nonpartisan monitoring group PoliFact.com.

Little wonder that public trust of both mainstream political parties has plummeted in recent times. To participate in an honest discussion of the issues surrounding a major policy change, members of the public were required to organize their own forums and take the established political leadership to task.

The health care debate (or nondebate) offered one recent vivid example of how a lack of honest communication is contributing to a waning of public trust and constructive political discourse. The problem, however, goes far beyond the contention around health care that I have used to illustrate how dishonesty works to undermine democratic debate. Honesty is now endangered all across the public sphere. In education, for example, the federal initiative raising bottom-level students' basic literacy skills has been sold to the public as a "race to the top." What is the "top" that this phrase refers to? The federal programs provide no support for education of the gifted and talented or for instruction on any of the higher forms of learning such as creativity, the arts, leadership, citizenship, or entrepreneurial skills—all of which are emphasized in school systems of other nations with which the administration claims it is trying to compete. The remedial aims and single-minded focus on basic skills that characterize our present administration's educational policy is precisely the opposite of a race to the top. In fact, it is hard to recall a more Orwellian use of doublespeak in contemporary civic discourse. I do not deny the legitimacy of a position that emphasizes the remedial needs of struggling students over the more elevated learning needs of advanced ones. But the citizens of a democratic republic deserve an honest statement of that position so that they can make informed choices about whether or not to support the position. They have not been given this. Instead, the public has received a deceptive euphemism that distorts the actual content of the policy beyond recognition.

When a disease becomes systemic, it can break out unexpectedly in numerous places. So it is with dishonesty today. In education, in response to federal policies that seem self-contradictory at best and disingenuous at worst, many teachers have resorted to their own forms of dishonesty: as I noted earlier, recent years have seen reports of teachers helping students cheat on the standardized tests meant to assess both student and teacher performances. What does such an example do for a student's own belief in the value of truth? In the financial world, the lack of straight dealing is so well known that I need only briefly note a few of the dreary facts: financial instruments crafted with such intentional complexity that even seasoned investment professionals did not "know what was in them" (sound familiar?); government programs that operate like

Ponzi schemes; actual Ponzi schemes that deceived investors for years without anyone stepping forward to alert them; and officials who have turned away from those responsible for the damage, claiming they are making efforts to punish rather than reward such behavior—a claim that has been proven false time and again in the three years since the financial markets were brought down by devious behavior. Is it any wonder that public trust in all civic and societal institutions is at a low point?

Entrenched dishonesty can destroy any democratic system. It takes away freedom of choice because free choices cannot be made in the absence of accurate information. It destroys the trust needed for civic devotion and participation on the part of the society's citizens. And distrust reproduces itself: when one member of society gives up on the possibility of dealing honestly with others, that person may join the ranks of the dishonest, thus influencing others to abandon their own commitments to the truth.

This raises a final question: Who is responsible for the desertion of honesty in the public sphere? In this essay, I have mentioned our educational and political leadership. But what about our news media that distort the politicians' messages, sensationalize trivial occurrences, take facts out of context, and fail to cover complex matters in any depth? or, for that matter, members of the public who uncritically consume what the politicians and media are selling even when the product does not meet the most minimal standards of integrity? Any of those parties could break the cycle of dishonesty by refusing to go along with anything less than an expression of verifiable truth. This is the hope for our future. Truth is robust, and anyone can bring it back to life. But someone must stand up and do it.

## Notes

1 G. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," *Horizon*, April 1946, 12–24.

2 G. Hinckley, *Standing for Something: Ten Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Home* (New York: Times Books, 2000).

3 Harris Poll, 1998.

4 W. Damon, *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in our Homes and Schools* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

5 D. McCabe, L. Trevino, and D. Butterfield, "Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research," *Ethics & Behavior* 3, no. 11 (2001); 219–32.

6 Ibid.

7 Christina Hoff Sommers, "How Moral Education Is Finding Its Way Back into America's Schools," in W. Damon (ed), *Bringing in a New Era in Character Education* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

8 See W. Damon, *Failing Liberty 101: How We Are Leaving Young Americans Unprepared for Citizenship in a Free Society* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2011).

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## About the Author



### **William Damon**

*William Damon is a professor of education at Stanford University, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For the past twenty years, Damon has written on character development at all ages of human life. His books include Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment, Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet; and The Path to Purpose. Damon is founding editor of New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development and is editor of The Handbook of Child Psychology (1998 and 2006 editions). He is a member of the National Academy of Education.*

## Boyd and Jill Smith Task Force on Virtues of a Free Society

The Virtues of a Free Society Task Force examines the evolution of America's core values, how they are threatened, and what can be done to preserve them. The task force's aims are to identify the enduring virtues and values on which liberty depends; chart the changes in how Americans have practiced virtues and values over the course of our nation's history; assess the ability of contemporary associations and institutions—particularly schools, family, and religion—to sustain the necessary virtues; and discuss how society might nurture the virtues and values on which its liberty depends.

The core membership of this task force includes Peter Berkowitz (cochair), David Brady (cochair), Gerard V. Bradley, James W. Ceaser, William Damon, Robert P. George, Tod Lindberg, Harvey C. Mansfield, Russell Muirhead, Clifford Orwin, and Diana Schaub.

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