

imagine a friend explaining to you the cost-benefit analysis that went into buying his new laptop? Of course. But can you imagine your friend sharing with you a cost-benefit analysis of her decision to steal a laptop? Of course not—not unless your friend is a professional thief. Rather, I agree with others (from Plato down) who say that honesty is something bigger—something that is considered a moral virtue in nearly every society.

Sigmund Freud explained it this way. He said that as we grow up in society, we internalize the social virtues. This internalization leads to the development of the superego. In general, the superego is pleased when we comply with society's ethics, and unhappy when we don't. This is why we stop our car at four AM when we see a red light, even if we know that no one is around; and it is why we get a warm feeling when we return a lost wallet to its owner, even if our identity is never revealed. Such acts stimulate the reward centers of our brain—the nucleus accumbens and the caudate nucleus—and make us content.

But if honesty is important to us (in a recent survey of nearly 36,000 high school students in the United States, 98 percent of them said it was important to be honest), and if honesty makes us feel good, why are we so frequently dishonest?

This is my take. We care about honesty and we want to be honest. The problem is that our internal honesty monitor is active only when we contemplate big transgressions, like grabbing an entire box of pens from the conference hall. For the little transgressions, like taking a single pen or two pens, we don't even consider how these actions would reflect on our honesty and so our superego stays asleep.

Without the superego's help, monitoring, and managing