
Lying by Sam Harris

A notebook and summary

Michael Obernhumer

12.3.2025



1 Introduction

- We often behave in ways that are guaranteed to make us unhappy.
- Lying is the royal road to chaos.
- Lying, even about the smallest matters, needlessly damages personal relationships and public trust.

2 What Is a Lie?

- Deception can take many forms, but not all acts of deception are lies.
- When asked “How are you?” most of us reflexively say that we are well, understanding the question to be merely a greeting
- Elisions of this kind can be forms of deception, but they are not quite lies.
- The boundary between lying and deception is often vague. In fact, it is even possible to deceive with the truth.
- To lie is to intentionally mislead others when they expect honest communication.
- 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 depends upon a correct understanding of the world—the more consequential the lie.
- To speak truthfully is to accurately represent one’s beliefs. But candor offers no assurance that one’s beliefs about the world are true.
- Whatever our purpose in telling them, lies can be gross or subtle.
- But it is in believing one thing while intending to communicate another that every lie is born.
- The liar often imagines that he does no harm as long as his lies go undetected. But the one lied to almost never shares this view.

3 The Mirror of Honesty

- Research suggests that all forms of lying - including white lies meant to spare the feelings of others - are associated with poorer-quality relationships.
- In committing to be honest with everyone, we commit to avoiding a wide range of long-term problems, but at the cost of occasional, short-term discomfort. However, the discomfort should not be exaggerated: You can be honest and kind, because your purpose in telling the truth is not to offend people.
- Lying is the lifeblood of addiction.
- Telling the truth can also reveal ways in which we want to grow, but haven’t.

4 Tow Types of Lies

- Ethical transgressions are generally divided into two categories: the bad things we do (acts of commission) and the good things we fail to do (acts of omission).

5 White Lies

- One of the strengths of telling the truth is that it remains open for elaboration.
- And while we imagine that we tell certain lies out of compassion for others, it is rarely difficult to spot the damage we do in the process. By lying, we deny our friends access to reality—and their resulting ignorance often harms them in ways we did not anticipate.
- Unless one commits to telling the truth, exceptions to the principle of honesty begin to multiply.
- A white lie is simply a denial of reality. It is a refusal to offer honest guidance in a storm.
- False encouragement is a kind of theft: it steals time, energy, and motivation a person could put toward some other purpose.
- If the truth itself is painful to tell, there are often background truths that are not - and these can be communicated as well, deepening the friendship.
- When we presume to lie for the benefit of others, we have decided that we are the best judges of how much they should understand about their own lives.

6 Trust

- Tiny erosions of trust are especially insidious because they are almost never remedied.
 - A friend hears you lie to another person and now wonders if you have also lied to him before.
- Failures of personal integrity, once revealed, are rarely forgotten.
- We cannot erase the bad impression we have left in the minds of other people.

7 Faint Praise

- Yes, it can be unpleasant to be told that we have wasted time, or that we are not performing as well as we imagined, but if the criticism is valid, it is precisely what we most need to hear to find our way in the world.
- We are often tempted to encourage others with insincere praise. In this we treat them like children - while failing to help them prepare for encounters with those who will judge them like adults.
- If we have a history of being honest, our praise and encouragement will actually mean something.