
Lying by Sam Harris

A notebook and summary

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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.

8 Secrets

- A commitment to honesty does not necessarily require that we disclose facts about ourselves that we would prefer to keep private.
- However, it is worth noting that many secrets - especially those we are asked to keep for others - can put us in a position where we will be forced to choose between lying and revealing privileged information.

9 Lies in Extremis

- A total prohibition against lying is ethically incoherent in anyone but a true pacifist.
- If you think that it can ever be appropriate to injure or kill a person in self-defense, or in defense of another, it makes no sense to rule out lying in the same circumstances.
- For most of us, such circumstances arise very rarely in life, if ever. And even when they seem to, it is often possible to worry that lying was the easy (and less than truly ethical) way out.
- The murderer is standing at your door and wants to know whether you have seen his intended victim. Instead of lying, the truth in this case could well be, "I wouldn't tell you even if I knew. And if you take another step, I'll put a bullet in your brain."
- It is far more common to find ourselves in situations in which, though we are tempted to lie, honesty will lead us to form connections with people who might otherwise have been adversaries.

10 Mental Accounting

- Lying comes at a psychological cost for the rest of us.
- Lies beget other lies.
- Unlike statements of fact, which require no further work on our part, lies must be continually protected from collisions with reality.

11 Integrity

- What does it mean to have integrity?
 - One criterion is to avoid behavior that readily leads to shame or remorse.
 - To truly have integrity, we must not feel the need to lie about our personal lives.
 - Vulnerability comes in pretending to be someone you are not.

12 Big Lies

- Big lies have led many people to reflexively distrust those in positions of authority. As a consequence, it is now impossible to say anything of substance on climate change, human nutrition,... without a significant percentage of one's audience expressing paralyzing doubts about even the most reputable sources of information.
- We seem to be predisposed to remember statements as true even after they have been disconfirmed.
- The need for state secrets is obvious. However, the need for governments to deceive their own people seems to me to be exiguous to the point of nonexistence - an ethical mirage.

13 Conclusion

- Lying is, almost by definition, a refusal to cooperate with others.
- The lies of the powerful lead us to distrust governments and corporations.
- The lies of the weak make us callous toward the suffering of others.
- The lies of conspiracy theorists raise doubts about the honesty of whistleblowers, even when they are telling the truth.
- Lies are the social equivalent of toxic waste — everyone is potentially harmed by their spread.