

## **TO BE TOTALLY FRANK... TEACHING THE COMPLEX VIRTUE OF HONESTY**

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Is it a sin to tell a lie? Or is it sometimes prudent, even ethically required, to be economical with the truth? And if honesty is, overall, the best policy, what exactly is that policy? It is often assumed that teaching children that they should not lie, steal, cheat and make false promises is one of the easier jobs teachers and parents have to do. I want to suggest that that is not so and that, furthermore, when we consider candour as a character trait, whole thickets of considerations bristle which the school as a community, as well as individual teachers, need to think about.

### THE STRAIGHTFORWARD CASES: STEALING AND LYING

So, what problems do the straightforward cases of lying, stealing, cheating and making false promises raise? First, they are not all of piece. Stealing is a matter of wrongfully appropriating property to which one has no right. Lying, cheating and making false promises might be roughly characterised as a matter of intentionally giving a false picture of the way you believe things to be. Honesty then has at least two aspects: uprightness in matters of property, and veracity, which is a virtue of speakers. This distinction is a fairly rough and ready one, and one can think of cases falling under the veracity aspect which might be said to deprive someone of something which is rightfully theirs. Slander and libel might be said to deprive someone of (the property of) their good reputation. Perhaps a problematic case for the teacher is cheating, copying someone else's work and presenting it as one's own. How is one to present the wrongness of cheating to the child? Is it that the child who cheats is giving the teacher, her classmates, her parents a false picture of her knowledge, skills and so on or is she to be seen as, through deceit, getting something she does not deserve — marks, recognition, perhaps praise from the teacher? In school, as a matter of fact, it is usually the former aspect that is stressed. Attention is focused on the harm the child is doing to herself in giving those concerned with her education a false picture with the result that their efforts cannot be as effective as they would be if they knew exactly what her problems were. In other contexts, in the academic world for instance, the focus is likely to be on the wrongness of getting something one does not deserve, perhaps recognition for ideas which one has plagiarised, which may sometimes involve depriving a colleague of his rightful recognition. How far should teachers draw attention to the wrongness in cheating as lying, in the getting by stealth of what one does not deserve? To do this will involve entering into the complex area of issues of fairness to do with desert (see, eg., Sher 1989). Teaching children not to steal, then, even leaving aside the questions raised by the presentation of the wrongness of cheating, will be a complex task. For simply to get children to understand why stealing is wrong will involve giving them some understanding of the notion of property, the notion of rights on which that depends, the possibility of institutions of private property and common property. As well it will involve encouraging children to examine how far these institutions are necessary in any human community. Having simply gestured at some of the complexities in the case of the uprightness in matters of property aspect of honesty, let me turn to the veracity aspect.

Is encouraging the virtue of veracity a matter of encouraging children always to speak the truth, to give an accurate picture of the way they believe things to be, "the whole truth and nothing but the truth"? Curiously, perhaps, the answer is not an unqualified yes. Reflection on our talk will reveal that rather rarely are we expected to offer our hearers the complete unvarnished truth. Certainly

when we are trying not to bore people, not to impose our troubles on them, we do not offer the whole truth. Asked how we are doing, how our holiday was, we reply, “fine, great,” rather than offer a catalogue of minor ailments or an exotic collection of travellers’ tales. We have to learn in fact that only in special contexts (for instance, in a police investigation or perhaps in the hunt for some bit of lost property) does our interlocutor really want the whole truth, every detail. Many anecdotes would gain nothing if related with strict regard for the whole truth. Flirting, after dinner speeches, cheering people up would be lacklustre affairs if pursued with forensic attention to truth. Perhaps having a proper perspective on truth in these matters is being able to enjoy them even whilst thinking, “Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?” The honest person then does not have to tell the whole truth all the time; he has to know when it is appropriate. As Annette Baier (1990: 270) puts it: “For veracity is knowing *when* one is bound to speak one’s mind and then speaking it as best one can. Even then, fallible judgment will be involved, snap decisions concerning how most helpfully to speak it, what sentences to produce.”

Children too have to learn to recognise when other people are, without being mendacious, not speaking the whole truth. Much of the teasing fun adults have with young children exploits the fact that, not initiated into the complexities of social life, children tend to take everything seriously. Learning that someone can be only joking, just teasing, is learning that social intercourse is not always a matter of the exchange of the whole truth.

Children will learn then, when a strict account of what they believe to be the case, with no cutting of corners, is not to the point. In the interests of good manners and sociability, either judicious editing or fanciful embroidery is called for. They will also need to consider how they are to cope with the more difficult question of what to do in those cases where truth is very much to the point but where other considerations, perhaps of other people’s, or their own, well-being, pull in the opposite direction. The classic case is that discussed by Kant of the lie to the murderer looking for his victim which perhaps most people would hold to be justified by concern for the potential victim. If there is to be any case where honesty might be overridden by other considerations, this is surely it. Kant’s (1949, quoted in Bok 1978: 269) well-known claim, though, is that even in this case to be honest “is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency.” It is interesting, however, to look in detail at his reply to Benjamin Constant’s attack on his views.

For instance, if by telling a lie you have prevented murder, you have made yourself legally responsible for all the consequences; but if you have held rigorously to the truth, public justice can lay no hand on you, whatever the unforeseen consequences may be. After you have honestly answered the murderer’s question as to whether this intended victim is at home, it may be that he has slipped out so that he does not come in the way of the murderer, and thus that murder may not be committed. But if you had lied and said he was not at home when he had really gone out without your knowing it, and if the murderer had then met him as he went away and murdered him, you might justly be accused as the cause of his death. For if you had told the truth as far as you knew it, perhaps the murderer might have been apprehended by the neighbors while he searched the house and thus the deed might have been prevented. Therefore, whoever tells a lie, however well intentioned he might be, must answer for the consequences, however unforeseeable they were, and pay the penalty for them even in a civil tribunal. This is because truthfulness is a duty which must be regarded as the ground of all duties based on contract, and the laws of these duties would be rendered uncertain and useless if even the least exception to them were admitted. (Kant 1949. Quoted in Bok 1978: 269)

Despite the last sentence of the quoted passage which draws attention to the ultimate reason for telling the truth, Kant’s main preoccupation here seems to be how, if we are unhappily in this situation confronted by the murderer seeking his victim, we avoid *legal blame*. This comes out in several places. If you stick rigidly to the truth “public justice can lay no hand on you.” If you tell a lie you are responsible for the unforeseen consequences and may “justly be accused” and “pay the penalty for them even in a civil tribunal.” Bernard Williams (1985) has drawn attention to the significance of blame in the “peculiar institution” of morality and certainly here Kant seems to be suggesting that a very good reason for sticking to the rules (in this case those of truth-telling) is that at least that way, whatever goes wrong, we cannot be legally blamed. After all we “only told the truth.” Is it always likely to be the case, though, that that course of action which is least likely to result in attracting legal blame to one is necessarily the wisest in a conflict of principles situation? If

not, there seems to be something rather self-indulgent in making considerations about such blame universally central to one's deliberations in the matter of difficult ethical choices.

If then there is no compelling reason always to make truth trumps in any situation where we are faced with conflicting ethical considerations, the teacher's job is once again a difficult one. She doesn't have ready to hand the neat rule, "Always tell the truth." She has to make her own professional judgements (as do doctors, nurses, journalists, etc.) about when considerations other than truth should be overriding *and* she has to initiate her students into the complex world of conflicting considerations and fallible judgement between greater and lesser evils. Is the best thing, for instance, on some occasions to keep silent? Depending on the context, that may be dishonest, it may be weak or cowardly or it may be the kindest or most prudent course of action.

The "straightforward" cases of lying and stealing require a much fuller treatment (see Bok 1978 for a whole book on the first of these and also Michell's 1990 treatment of patriarchy's pressure on veracity) but the ethical complexities of honesty do not end there.

### CANDOUR

Wariness about attracting legal blame seems then to be prominent in Kant's discussion of one's obligation to tell the truth to the murderer seeking his victim. This same wariness leads Kant to a different conclusion in the matter of candour. In Kant's view, "No man in his true senses...is candid" (Kant 1963: 224). Reserve and reticence are our protection against mockery and censure by our fellows. If we were wholly good we would not need to be reserved, but as it is we are so full of defects that if we revealed these in a free and frank way, we should become "foolish and hateful" in other people's eyes. We have, as Kant says, "to keep the shutters closed." If we are prudent we do not open our hearts even to intimate friends.

We must so conduct ourselves towards a friend that there is no harm done if he should turn into an enemy. We must give him no handle against us. It is very unwise to place ourselves in a friend's hands completely, to tell him all the secrets which might detract from our welfare if he became our enemy and spread them abroad.... (Kant 1963: 208)

The passage continues with advice about the need for care because of what, even if our friends do not turn into enemies, they might inadvertently do, particularly if they are hot-headed.

What then is candour? It is being open about one's thoughts and feelings as a part of one's character. A person could be appropriately honest in the straightforward cases discussed in the previous section, but not be a candid person. Kant, if he followed his own precepts, was an honest man, but certainly not one to open his heart, not even to his friends. Chris, in Julian Barnes' *Metroland*, tells us that he was pushed into candour by his French girlfriend, Annick. After he has found it hard to tell her that he felt a mixture of "gratitude and smugness" after she first spent the night with him, he asks her how she felt. She replies:

"I felt amused, at sleeping with an Englishman, and relieved that you could speak French, and guilty about what my mother would say, and eager to tell my friends what had happened, and...interested."

I then made some stumbling, embarrassed remarks in praise of her sincerity, and asked her how she had taught herself to act as she did.

"What do you mean, taught? It's not something you learn. Either you say what you mean or you don't. That's all."

That sounded rather less than all at first; but gradually I understood. The key to Annick's candour was that there was no key." (Barnes 1981: 100-01)

The context of Chris's propulsion into candour is not surprising because, as Mark Fisher (1990: 31 n. 9) says, "love conduces to openness and guardedness diminishes love." Pace Kant, it is characteristically in relationships between lovers and intimate friends that one finds such openness.

One of the goods of such relationships is the possibilities they afford for people to be themselves and to enjoy discovering the unique combination of dispositions, thoughts and feelings which make the other person the person she is. (This is not to say that such relationships will be without dishonesty, not least because concern for people we love will sometimes lead us to shield them from what seem to us unpalatable truths.) Candour is not displayed only in such intimate relationships, though, for it is an attitude which can be apparent in all a person's dealings with other people. It is the attitude, I think, Aristotle has in mind when he describes "the truthful man" as not "the man who keeps faith in his agreements, i.e., in the things that pertain to justice or injustice (for this would belong to another excellence), but the man who in the matters in which nothing of this sort is at stake is true both in word and in life because his character is such" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1127b 1).

Can candour be taught? Perhaps Annick was right about this. It certainly does not seem to be something to be taught as one might try to teach children that they should keep their promises and respect others' property. It seems rather to be a quality about which the teacher needs to nurture understanding in young people so that they see what kind of life is and is not compatible with it. This will involve, in part, dispelling some false conceptions of candour. It is neither on the one hand to be equated with brutal frankness, telling people "home truths," nor is it to be equated with simple loquaciousness. It will also involve showing that, with candour as with other things, there is something like an Aristotelian mean. Letting it all hang out, even in the case of the most engaging people, may be less than enthralling for one's listeners if they are treated too regularly or at too great length to one's disclosures. One's candid revelations may lead too, in some cases, to unwelcome intrusions into others' privacy. Also there is something to be said for Kant's caution in that reasonable prudence will sometimes require that people are circumspect in revealing their thoughts and feelings. This is the very stuff of novels where we, as readers, are privy to the narrator's thoughts which, if revealed to other characters, would cause them distress or to feel some unwanted emotion (pity, contempt) towards the narrator. That having been said, more positively, the teacher can present candour as an attractive quality. Candid people are likely to be well-intentioned people, as Baier says: "It may...take a certain sweetness, trust and innocence of temper to be willing to open one's mind freely to others, so that the person with aggressive intentions will sensibly avoid candor" (Baier 1990: 274).

Candid people (understanding by that generally well-intentioned people with judgements about when, and to what degree, openness about thoughts and feelings is appropriate) are liked because we feel we know where we are with them, we feel at ease (as Chris in *Metroland* [1981: 100] says, "Annick was the first person with whom I truly relaxed."), and they offer us an intimate picture of another perspective on the world. As well as promoting an understanding of candour, the school, even if it cannot make people candid, can try to ensure it has the kind of organisation and atmosphere in which candour can flourish. To see what this might involve it is useful to see why people fail to be candid.

### OBSTACLES TO HONESTY AND CANDOUR

Sometimes habitually honest people will tell lies or be less than candid in the interests of their own, or others', well-being and unless one takes the view that honesty is a principle which should never be overridden, in many cases this will be the best thing to do. The case which bears a closer inspection, however, is that of the community that makes it very difficult for people to be, generally speaking, honest and candid. Some belief systems, for instance, may give people a powerful motive for hypocrisy, encouraging them either to hide beliefs and feelings they have been told are wrong or to pretend to noble and disinterested intentions they do not have (see Shklar 1984: ch. two). Characteristically, these are systems, like the Puritan version of Christianity or some totalitarian systems, which expect people to live up to impossibly high ideals. Setting oneself up as holier than thou or as the all-Soviet man is a common enough reaction to such systems to have been a frequent target for lampoons. For the possibility of hypocrisy creates the anti-hypocrite. The result is a rather horrible society in which people are driven by impossible demands (for instance, for purity in

thought, word and deed), fearful of not fulfilling them and at the same time suspicious of their neighbours, who surely cannot be all they seem. We are all too familiar with the resulting witch hunts, colleagues informing on colleagues, children informing on their parents. But it is worth pausing to ask how this vicious circle in the pursuit of purity gets started. The problem seems to be that the fierce exigency of the demands made on people fuels the hypocrisy/antihypocrisy circle. Such systems have no place for the thought that it is only human to make mistakes.

These examples of systems that might be said to encourage dishonesty and discourage candour are not simply of historical interest. For schools can set themselves up as systems which expect too much of their staff and students. In the past schools did this in, for instance, expecting all children to keep up with the fastest learners in the class (copying someone else's work was one way of doing this), and to produce neatly written work in ink, first time, without mistakes. (One of my crimes was illicitly to remove pages from my English exercise book because I could not do this.) It is tempting to think that we have come a long way since those days and that we have a more reasonable attitude to those things. And indeed to those things we certainly do, but we make our own impossible demands that fail to recognise human frailty. Schools will, for instance, rightly have anti-racist and anti-sexist policies. These will recognise that the societies in which we currently live have been shaped along racist and sexist lines and that we need to re-draw the groundplan, and to this end much constructive work is done in schools. For some anti-sexist and anti-racist Puritans, however, it is not enough that people recognise the problems, struggle to re-orient themselves, adapt to new manners and help to build new institutional structures; they must be pure in thought, word and deed, as of now. Much energy is then spent in attempting to identify the unregenerate racist or sexist behind the "hypocritical facade." But do we want to lock ourselves into the pursuit of purity in this way? For a start, why do we have to talk about a facade? We might just as easily welcome the fact that, for instance, some men recognise that in some public contexts certain kinds of behaviour which are patronising to women are no longer acceptable. We also do not have to have the picture of the true (racist and sexist) inner self waiting to be exposed behind the public facade, but rather the more hopeful image of people who have been willing to change their behaviour in one context perhaps, over time, being prepared to look at their attitudes and behaviour in others.

Schools can discourage candour not only by imposing high ideals from which any falling short must be punished but also by offering too limited a picture of the possibilities for human flourishing. Many schools have come to see that, often unwittingly, their teaching, the organisation of the school, letters to parents and so on assume that the world is composed of heterosexual people, most of them couples bonded together in nuclear families. If children, especially younger children, get the idea that there is a normal family situation that their own does not fit, they may be anxious to conceal it in case they are ridiculed by fellow students or in some way bring contempt on themselves or their families.

If a school wants to encourage candour, it needs not only to be sensitive to human frailty and to have a generous attitude to staff and students who fall short of the ideals it is fostering, but, in a pluralistic society, it needs also to be sensitive to the different possible values and related ways of life to which its students may be committed. This is not to say, of course, that in the interests of candour the school should welcome all lifestyles (those, for instance, involving drugs or violence) so that its students have nothing they need be secretive about. It is to suggest that the school needs to take care that it is not *inadvertently* causing its students to feel ashamed of some aspects of their lives and constrained to hide these. Finally, the school should not attempt to get its students to feel something like an obligation to candour. The object is rather to achieve an atmosphere in which people do not feel obliged to hide things but in which they can choose to keep things private.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to illuminate only a couple of aspects of what is involved in teaching children to be honest. It has left unexamined, for instance, how important it might be educationally for a person to have a clear view of her personal qualities and potentialities. R. K. Elliott (1989: 52) has

suggested that teachers do not always want their students to make realistic judgements about what they can do, since success in education and ordinary life often depends more on audacity and keeping one's nerve than on realistic judgement. So teachers need to exercise fine judgement in the encouragement of self-knowledge in their students. There is also the question of honesty in public life. It has been claimed (Williams 1978) that, on occasion, pursuing moral ends in political life may require some form of deceit. Any political education needs to consider this claim. We are faced here then with a complex virtue of many aspects. Teachers need to be aware of all of them if they are to do an honest job.

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