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Honesty (2011)

It would be an exaggeration to say that as a child I never lied. But I did so rarely, remembered every individual occasion (they could be numbered on the fingers of one hand), and reviewed each one, repeatedly, with regret and guilt.

Now, however, I seem to lie to everyone constantly. How did that come about?

Aristotle considers the fundamental virtue to be magnanimity; which, in its original (literal) meaning, is greatness of soul.

His idea is that not some presumption of equality but the reality of just proportion should determine the relations among individuals. — Aristotle would have assumed these were free men, because just proportion determined who *was* a person; women and slaves were automatically excluded from consideration. — The magnanimous man “thinks himself worthy of what he is actually worth”; his judgment is consonant with his position.

Thus the magnanimous man will be justly proud, despise honors from his inferiors, exhibit courage because he is superior to fortune and more puissant than his enemies, lend money but not borrow, or if he does then repay more than he received to show he is truly the richer, behave with dignity before members of the upper classes but be unassuming with members of the middle and lower classes, not conceal his feelings (i.e. not care less for truth than for what people think) because to do otherwise is cowardice, show taste in his choice of possessions; and, naturally, speak the truth to show he has nothing to fear from it.

This is a character easy to recognize since it describes the instinctive behavior of a member of the upper classes — what we disparage when we refer to “entitlement” — and since (says Russell) Aristotle considers ethics a branch of politics, and aristocracy the natural political structure, what he is actually providing here is what Emily Post did later for New Money looking up to the Old in her manuals of etiquette:¹ instruction in how to behave like an aristocrat.

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How is the American attitude supposed to differ from that of the Greek?

The story that we tell ourselves is that we are democrats, that all in principle are equal. — In fact all are not, but attitude is based on aspiration, and equality defined upward: implicitly the argument is that you should behave like an aristocrat in order to prepare yourself to become one.²

And what does that entail? That you are supposed to view yourself in a distorting mirror, one that unnaturally magnifies your stature and deceives you as to your importance.

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Honesty, or at least the appearance of honesty, is supposed to be important in business dealings; the argument being that, if you are known to cheat, no one will want to deal with you. — Naturally then people lie most vehemently when *accused* of cheating. — However the

¹ See Edmund Wilson, “Books of Etiquette and Emily Post”; in *Classics and Commercials, A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*; pp. 372-382. [New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950.]

² Dumbed down to the level of Schools of Education, this is the obsession with the “development” of “self-esteem”.

powerful *can* cheat and get away with it; to cheat therefore is a display of power; the natural tendency of the wannabe must therefore be to imitate this behavior. — None of this appears in Emily Post, though it should.³

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In any case there is, paradoxically, an element of bullshit in honesty; in the whole idea of square dealing. Because you are honest with another out of the sense that — in fact to *project* the sense that — he cannot harm you.

Aristotle would make this a matter of calm self-assessment, but the modern is honest, or tells himself he must be honest, out of a desire to show the other he has no fear of him and that the other can do him no harm *even when the other can* — the point being that you are not only trying to bullshit the other into thinking he is dealing with an equal, but indeed (this is the aspirational part) trying to bullshit yourself.

Which perhaps is realistic. The aim is still magnanimity (which in the modern connotation of generosity toward the less fortunate is⁴ the characteristic American virtue), but you recognize that you achieve and maintain that by a continuing act of will.

³ It does appear in Thorstein Veblen: “Under any known phase of culture, other or later than the presumptive initial phase here spoken of, the gifts of good-nature, equity, and indiscriminate sympathy do not appreciably further the life of the individual. Their possession may serve to protect the individual from hard usage at the hands of a majority that insists on a modicum of these ingredients in their ideal of a normal man; but apart from their indirect and negative effect in this way, the individual fares better under the régime of competition in proportion as he has less of these gifts. Freedom from scruple, from sympathy, honesty and regard for life, may, within fairly wide limits, he said to further the success of the individual in the pecuniary culture. The highly successful men of all times have commonly been of this type; except those whose success has not been scored in terms of either wealth or power. It is only within narrow limits, and then only in a Pickwickian sense, that honesty is the best policy.” (*The Theory of the Leisure Class.*)

⁴ Or was, anyway. Admittedly many of us are, in our minds, still living in the Truman administration.

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(Revealing yourself — nakedness — the connotation of being defenseless — something in the attitude that you require no defense is like the Greek city that knocked down its walls to receive a champion, because with citizens like this we don't need them.)

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But obviously this is irrational.

A more natural inclination is to lie to protect yourself from those who are more powerful; to save face, for instance, which is not a matter of — foolish pride? (is there anything foolish about it?) — but the protection of social standing, which is also necessary for self-preservation — when you are perceived to be weak and incapable of defending yourself, depend upon it, Sir, you *will* be preyed upon. This is simple biological necessity, a banal corollary of the logic of power and aggression.

The point is less that you should lie any more than necessary, i.e. more than you do already, but that you shouldn't feel guilty about it afterward; that this guilt is another of the mechanisms devised by the powerful to keep their minions in subjugation — to maintain and indeed increase their power over you — to try to trick or intimidate you into being honest with them even though (experience teaches us, contra Aristotle) they generally have no intention of being honest with you.

Thus the insistence on honesty is generally part of the system of control.

In fact this is one of those things that everyone understands but no one will admit — that, e.g., anyone who does not lie to an employer as a

matter of course is just trying to get fired. (That the employer lies to the employee of course goes without saying.)

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The same applies to theft, actually. And in fact the instinctive assessment of its morality is equivalent: you won't steal from someone worse off than yourself, or from someone with whose situation you can identify or empathize — someone on your own level, a peer, an actual equal — but (if you can't get caught) you may well shamelessly steal from the wealthy and powerful, and from institutions of power — from a bank, for instance, or a large corporation — as in turn banks and corporations steal from the government without compunction — on the assumption, not frequently incorrect, that they have gained such great power by doing just that to others, and will not hesitate to do it to you.

Mosquitoes suck blood and get swatted for it. Still, you can't blame them for trying.

(Application: the issue of copyright.)

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Russell remarks that moral behavior consists in the choice among *possible* actions.

When possibility is radically constrained, behavior is distorted to fit. (One must remember, always, the image of dandelions growing through the cracks in the sidewalk.)

It is impossible to deal honestly with someone of whom you are afraid.

And in a world of great disparity of power, it is natural, rational, justifiable to be afraid. Always.

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Feynman titled the second volume of his memoirs “What do you care what other people think?” This was a question his first wife had asked him on some occasion, I forget precisely which, but I always hear it now in the voice of Patricia Arquette.⁵ In any case this is the way you talk when you wish for something without knowing what the fuck you are talking about.

I say this with complete confidence because it has been my habitual misfortune not to care what other people think, and it has been the source of unending grief.

What other people think determines whether you can make enough money to live on and whether you’ll ever get laid — to name two considerations that have occasionally seemed important.

Worse, they *know* when you don’t care what they think, and they do not like it — not at all — and make you pay for it. — It is a distressing fact of (what one might call) social nature, that you are generally at the mercy of the opinions of persons whom you justifiably revile (and certainly cannot trust).

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John Waters: “I look up to bad taste because it’s a freedom I don’t have, I do care what people think. I don’t sit on my front steps in my

⁵ Who played the role in the movie: *Infinity* [Matthew Broderick, 1996], based upon Feynman’s memoir. (I have no idea what possessed Broderick to take on this project, incidentally, but his Ferris Bueller interpretation of Feynman isn’t a bad one.)

underpants and give people the finger when they go by. I'm jealous of people that do that, because they don't care. Bad taste is a great freedom if you have it”

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Of course we are also expected to show courage, to defy those who would punish us, no matter that they are more powerful. Our heroism is then the more glorious, our example the more shining. — Though of course if we are political opponents of Vladimir Putin, we end up taking polonium in our tea, falling off balconies, or committing suicide by shooting ourselves several times in the back of the head, stuffing ourselves into Hefty bags, and locking ourselves into the trunks of our cars.

You have to wonder about that. Defiance in the face of overwhelming force seems admirable, Victor Laszlo standing up to the Nazis, but does it really make sense? What good does it do if no one ever hears of it? We interpret this as drama, but drama supposes an audience. If a man facing a firing squad refuses the blindfold when there is no one there to see it, does his courage set an example?

So far as I know the bravest man who ever lived was the Chinese dude who faced down a line of advancing tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. By the grace of God a photographer was there⁶ to immortalize this grand existential gesture, and so I know of it, though I don't know his name or anything else about him save that he probably died a miserable death not long thereafter. He was trying to set an example for a billion-odd of his fellow Chinese, about whom we can guess —

⁶ Jeff Widener got the best picture (Peter Beaumont, “Thirty years on, the Tiananmen Square image that shook the world”; *The Guardian*, 11 May 2019), but Charlie Cole was there as well (see his obituary notice by Rebecca Tan in *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2019); both had already been beaten up, Cole by the Chinese secret police, and were forced to employ elaborate stratagems to smuggle their photographs out of the country.

we can only guess — that most don't know he ever existed, and those who do dare not mention him. — By comparison Socrates was a showboating self-promoter, a veritable Mohammed Ali, who could grandstand for posterity confident that his pupil Plato would take notes and polish his performance for optimum advantage. — So, I mean, what good was it? What good was his gesture? He set a good example for Americans, who know what he did, but it doesn't seem to be have had much influence.

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I say that, of course, without believing a word of it. The gesture was that much more grand because it all might have gone for nothing.

It is something like buried art. I used to call this existential countenance.

Nonetheless — planetary lithography is in its infancy, but when it is perfected that photograph should be etched on the face of the Moon, so that every time it hangs in the sky over Beijing, those motherfuckers have to look at it.

One is ten thousand to me, if he be the best, says Heraclitus.

Or a billion. Or more.

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So I don't care what other people think, and it has condemned me to poverty and misery. Of course I don't care about that either, but I have to think I must be some kind of fucking idiot. — Why couldn't I disguise it better? Why did I have to be so honest?