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### **The Perils of Dishonesty**

With the publicity resulting from scandals involving falsification of information by companies such as Arthur Andersen and Enron, the issue of honesty in the workplace has gained attention in recent years. While many would quickly deem the actions of these corporations blatantly and obviously wrong, their own practices in regard to truthfulness betray their true nature and suggest that they, themselves, are not necessarily as guiltless as they would like to believe. This double standard often arises out of an extended practice with dishonest behavior motivated by fear or greed. Regardless, such actions are wrong, are harmful to all involved, and rarely get a person ahead in the long run.

The American Dream, the desire to obtain life and liberty and successfully pursue happiness, exemplifies man's desire to better himself. Sought out by hundreds of millions of people worldwide on a daily basis, it provides a foundation on which a wide variety of actions are based. Often, such actions are aimed at satisfying these yearnings simply, easily, and painlessly. Dishonesty is one such means of meeting man's desire to gain greater wealth, live a better life, or earn significant recognition at minimal cost.

Untruthfulness is not only perceived as a means of gain, but provides an escape from uneasy or fearful situations that threaten the pursuit of one's goals. Whether simply to avoid scrutiny from a friend or colleague, reprimand from a superior at work, or large

fees from the government, a lie or string of lies can often relieve one from uncomfortable circumstances, at least temporarily.

While untruthfulness is commonplace, a person does not usually become characterized by dishonesty overnight. Like many behaviors, both positive and negative, it is of the nature that “practice makes perfect.” Take, for example, the “little white lie” a boy tells his mother after spoiling his appetite by stealing a cookie from the jar. He might feel guilty the first time or two, but as he continues in carrying out similar actions, he begins to become unconcerned with and increasingly accustomed to such behavior.

It has been suggested that kids who practice violence against their pets are more likely to act in a similar rage toward their own children once they are adults. Similarly, the “little white lies” the boy tells will often develop into “big black lies” as he becomes acclimated to the practice. Many will argue that such miniscule grievances are of no concern. To say that progression of this behavior into bigger areas of life does not occur, though, denies the rampant dishonesty present today.

Seeing as little leads to more – that practice makes perfect – then it comes as no surprise that dishonesty so negatively permeates today’s workplace. As professor of General Studies at MSOE, Dr. Rollings shares with his students in his Organizational Psychology courses, some of the largest dishonesty that businesses must address comes in the form of theft by their own employees.

While few may challenge the claim that dishonesty is both pervasive and commonplace, the impact of such activities is often marginalized. People may tell themselves that they will steal a few dollars or cover up a critical mistake “just this once” and may even feel guilty about it, but soon they cover up another fault or take a few more

dollars from the cash register. As one's conscience becomes increasingly accustomed to this behavior, it objects less and less and becomes an ineffective determinant of right and wrong. Often, individuals in such a position have a difficult time trusting others, as they project their own behavior on others. Having told themselves that "everybody does it," they are not only deceiving themselves, but begin to believe their lie.

Even were it true that "everyone does it," the practice of dishonesty would not be validated. From a legal standpoint, such actions can get individuals into deep trouble. Names such as Enron, Arthur Andersen, Watergate and Martha Stewart come to mind. Those involved in each paid a great price for the dishonesty through which they had initially hoped to profit.

While the dishonest acts in these examples were declared illegal by the United States government, not all people perceive such actions as problematic or wrong. In fact, some cultures approach dishonesty as a necessary evil. Take, for example, border guards who must be bribed when entering a country. In countries where such actions are outlawed, though, any regulations set forth by the government simply provide punishment for actions classified externally to an individual as wrong, but are insufficient means of characterizing the person as bad. The root of this issue, though, lies in the common fundamental misunderstanding that the individual is of supreme importance – that the sum of human existence is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If every person is at the center of the universe, suddenly no one can be at the center, as there is no recognition of that position by anyone besides the individual who feels that way.

Regulations put in place by the government are not imposed haphazardly or without reason. Rather, they are meant to establish a sort of higher standard of behavior

outside each individual and set a moral standard for all those who are under it. While not all people agree, this external influence is essential and a lack of it would result in chaos.

In addition to the legal ramifications that can result from acts of dishonesty, companies can suffer other great losses by acting in such a manner just once. Just as a person who is cheated or lied to by another person has difficulty trusting that individual in future endeavors, so those wronged by a company often will take their business elsewhere, to an entity they feel they can trust. While dishonesty may appear to get the company ahead, those against whom the lies are perpetrated are harmed. If an auto mechanic claims that more repairs than are actually necessary should be done, he may profit, but at the cost of his customer. Additionally, he risks the loss of future business, assuming there is a chance the car owner finds about the true state of his car.

Such untruthfulness not only harms the client but stands in direct conflict to the concept of the professional. It is the duty of a professional to practice disinterestedness and provide the best service possible to his clients. Any element of dishonesty puts the client at a great disadvantage, as he does not possess the esoteric knowledge necessary to get the job done. Because of the monopoly granted to professionals, it is their duty to hold up their end of the bargain and deal truthfully with their clients.

Because of the desire of individuals to better themselves, it can be difficult for a professional to maintain his status as such and act as is expected. Often, people select the dishonest route because it maximizes their own utility immediately. While it looks at utility, this perspective is not congruent with the ideals of utilitarianism. Rather, when considering the issue from this perspective, one must look at the maximization of utility in the global sense. While it might benefit oneself to act in a dishonest manner, this

course of action will likely not maximize utility overall, for all those affected. The presence of dishonesty suggests that, in fact, someone else will be affected negatively as a result of the action.

Dishonesty poses an even greater problem to a rule utilitarian, who looks at the universalization of an action in terms of token, asking the question, “would it maximize utility if everyone did it?” If everyone were dishonest and lied, cheated and stole, the resulting situation would be anything but desirable. It is difficult to imagine how a business could function in such a situation. Banks, for example, are based on trust. An account holder expects the money to be there when he asks for it. Granted, as portrayed in the movie, *City of God*, “business” can occur in spite of dishonesty. It’s just that those who are dishonest either get killed or kill others to remain in power. Neither circumstance can hardly be considered a maximization of utility.

Kant takes a similar approach to dishonesty. His categorical imperative states that one should always act in such a way that he could also will the maxim of his action to be a universal law. Allowing untruthful behavior universally has a similar effect to that of the result of a rule utilitarian approach, as Kant exemplifies in his portrayal of the lying promise. He characterizes a situation in which an individual is faced with the opportunity to make a promise he does not intend to keep. Kant claims that making the promise with dishonest motives is self-defeating, in that it requires that he who makes the decision allow others to deal dishonestly with him, thus eliminating the ability to trust others.

While many instances in which dishonesty is practiced are cut-and-dry, clear, blatant decisions to abandon truthfulness, people can be put into situations in which an honest response is not as easily given. Take, for example, the engineer who is pressured

by his supervisor to either falsify data so that serious harmful findings are covered up or lose his job. Having a family of five kids makes the prospect of losing a job a grim situation, but succumbing to his superior's request could have more detrimental ramifications. Were his actions discovered by an outside company or someone else with clout, such as the government, he could find himself in jail, not to mention out of a job. Additionally, giving into the demand to lie could suggest to his superior that this is something he has no problem doing and could be asked to do likewise when faced with similar situations in the future. There is no absolute guarantee he will be fired if he does not meet his employer's demands, as he has the option to discuss the issue with someone higher up in the company. If more prominent members of the organization, too, recommend that he lie, he must ask himself whether this is a company of which he wants to be a part. All things considered, though the hardest choice, the decision to tell the truth is the best route.

While it may often seem to be the easy way out, dishonesty does not pay off in the end. Rather, seeking out the truth in all situations provides a much greater resolution to conflicts. As the Biblical writer John quotes Jesus, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."