



## **Honesty: Respect for the Right Not to be Deceived**

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## 1. Introduction

Hardly anyone would doubt that honesty is an important virtue. However, there have been insufficient philosophical studies on what constitutes the nature and value of honesty as a distinctive virtue.<sup>1</sup> There are many important philosophical challenges here to be addressed: What is the scope of honesty? What do honest behaviors involve? What is the relationship between honesty and lying? Is there a vice of excess for honesty? Among the philosophical issues related to honesty, I find one issue particularly interesting and important: What is the characteristic motivation for a virtuously honest person to act honestly? As Alan Wilson (2018) and Christian Miller (2020) have recently pointed out, developing a coherent account of the virtuously honest person's motivation is critical for understanding the virtue of honesty. But few, if any, philosophical studies have been conducted on this topic.

This paper explores the core attitude underlying a virtuously honest person's motives to act honestly. After justifying the need for a new account of the motivation of honesty, I argue that the respect for the right not to be deceived is the attitude that serves as the underlying motivation for a virtuously honest person's honest action. Next, I define the right not to be deceived and examine its sources. I show how it is distinguished from other rights such as the right to know or the right to autonomy. Then I conclude by discussing the implications my analysis of the honest motivation on other philosophical issues concerning honesty.

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<sup>1</sup> Few exceptions include Baier (1990); Smith (2003); Carr (2014); Wilson (2018); and Miller (2020).

## 2. Previous Theories and the Gap

Many people say, 'honesty is the best policy.' Indeed, there are many reasons to act honestly. It makes you (or at least makes you appear) more trustworthy, strengthens your relationships, and provides consistency to your life. Honest actions can also manifest virtuous traits. It manifests benevolence when you tell the truth to protect someone's well-being and justice when you avoid deception because you think it would be unjust. But if honesty is a virtue, what would be the main reason that would motivate a person who possesses this virtue to perform honest actions? To pursue self-interests? To promote others' well-being? Or simply to be honest? To understand honesty as a virtue meaningfully distinct from other virtues, it would be important to study its characteristic motivation. Despite its importance, there have been only a few attempts to explore this important topic.

An adequate account of a virtuously honest person's characteristic motivation should be able to explain why a virtuously honest person's honest actions merit moral praise. As Robert C. Roberts and Ryan West point out, "motivation is crucial to the virtue of honesty, and that not just any motivation to tell the truth will do" (Roberts and West 2020, 108). If an account of honesty says that there is no motivation that is characteristic of a virtuously honest person, then it would be hard for such an account to explain the moral praiseworthiness of acting from honesty. One may perform seemingly honest actions based on an egoistic desire or other non-praiseworthy motives. For example, a merchant may refrain from deceiving her customers just because she believes that being honest is the best way to maximize her profits. A boy may keep telling the truth from mere obsession with not lying, which has been inculcated through his mother's strict education. In case of honest actions motivated by such considerations as self-interest or obsession, it is hard to find any moral praiseworthiness. Thus, without specifying what kind of motivation is supposed to underlie acting from the virtue of honesty, it is hard to tell when and why it is morally praiseworthy to perform such actions.

Miller's pluralistic account addresses the problem of being too egoistic or self-regarding by arguing that a virtuously honest person's motivation includes dutiful and altruistic kinds of

motivation but not egoistic motivation (Miller 2020). He describes the following about the virtuously honest person's motivation:

The virtue of honesty is, centrally, a character trait concerned with reliably not intentionally distorting the facts as the agent sees them, and *primarily* for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds  $K_1$  through  $K_N$  of *sufficient motivating strength*, along with the *absence* of significant conflicting motivation to distort the facts as the agent sees them. (Miller 2020, 366)

Miller's pluralistic account allows for different kinds of virtuous motives (e.g., caring attitude or a sense of justice) to provide the impetus for being honest, thereby showing why someone who performs honest actions from such motives are virtuous and thus morally praiseworthy. Consider the following replies to the question, "Why did you tell the truth about your past business failures, when it would have been so much easier to lie?":

"He deserved to hear the truth."

"I don't lie to my friends."

"It is important for us to be able to trust each other."

"It would not have been honest." (Miller 2020, 360)

According to the pluralistic account, each of these virtuous motives may qualify as a virtuously honest person's motivation. However, I believe it has its own limitations. If many different motivations do the work of making actions from the virtue of honesty morally praiseworthy each time, then it may undermine the status of honesty as a self-standing virtue since acting honestly may be understood merely as one specific way in which other virtues (e.g., benevolence or justice) are manifested.

Moreover, Miller's pluralistic account of honesty's characteristic motivation does not offer good guidance about how to *cultivate* the virtue of honesty. While his account does not support reinforcing the inclination to perform honest acts through extrinsic reward, it faces difficulties in

offering guidance on *how* to cultivate the virtue of honesty because it does not offer an honesty-specific motivation. To cultivate a certain virtue, we need to be informed about the considerations that would characteristically motivate a person who possesses the virtue in question. If various kinds of virtuous motives such as care for others or a sense of justice can serve as a motive for acting honestly, then it would be hard to know how to cultivate honesty as a virtue as opposed to other virtues. Saying “Be virtuous!” would be too broad and abstract to help younger people to focus their mental habituation to grow into honest people. Saying something like “Don’t hurt others’ feeling!” or “Avoid unfair treatment!” may make them confused about the point of being honest and how it is different from that of being benevolent or just.

### 3. Honesty’s Characteristic Motivation

For these reasons, an adequate account of honesty needs to specify some characteristic motivation a virtuously honest person has when she acts honestly. One may still argue against any need for any characteristic motivation for honesty. That is, one may argue that the status of honesty as an individual or self-standing virtue may not be undermined even if it lacks any single characteristic motivation. First, it may be argued that some self-standing virtues like courage lacks a single characteristic motivation and thus there is no reason to assume that honesty needs one. The argument can go as follows. Actions expressing the virtue of courage can be motivated by many different considerations (e.g., a desire to save someone you love, a desire to gain understanding, a desire to start a business, etc.). This could be because courage lacks *any* characteristic motivation, or because courage’s characteristic motivation is *generic* enough to cover a wide range of cases (as in Aristotle’s suggestion that the courageous—like the liberal—act “for the sake of the noble”). Either way, there is no characteristic motive unique to courage. But that doesn’t seem to threaten courage’s status as a self-standing virtue. Why think honesty is different?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

I would like to reply to this concern by saying that virtues like courage are *executive virtues*, while honesty is not. According to Bernard Williams, executive virtues are virtues “which do not themselves yield a characteristic motive, but are necessary for that relation to oneself and the world which enables one to act from desirable motives in desirable ways—the type that includes courage and self-control” (Williams 1981, 49). I believe that honesty is a self-standing non-executive virtue which has its characteristic motivation, just as concern for other’s well-being is the characteristic motive for the virtue of benevolence. If so, there needs to be some characteristic motivation that can make sense of why and how a virtuously honest person acts honestly (e.g., in a reliable and morally praiseworthy manner.)

Thus, to establish honesty’s status as a self-standing virtue, we need to identify some attitude that characteristically underlies a virtuously honest person’s honest action. Wilson suggests the motivation to *avoid deception* as the characteristic motivation of honesty (Wilson 2018). However, as he acknowledges, this is not a sufficient account of the motivation of honesty as a virtue since one may still be disposed to avoid deception based on non-praiseworthy motives such as egoistic desires or fear of bad reputation. It is still a negative account in that it does not tell us what makes honesty’s characteristic motivation morally praiseworthy.

Nor does the motivation of *being honest for honesty’s sake* adequately explain the honest person’s virtuous motivation. It assumes the value or goal of honesty, which is to be explained first here. An answer like, “I did it because it is honest thing to do” would not explain, let alone justify, much about why she performs the honest action where she could easily tell a lie. The motivation of being honest *for truth’s sake* faces a similar problem because it relies on the value of truth, which needs to an independent supporting ground. If honesty is motivated by solely by the value of the truth, it may be no more than truth-fetish. Such account does not adequately explain the intrinsic value of being honest stripped off all extrinsic values. To avoid being honesty-fetish or truth-fetish, the motivation of honesty should somehow involve considering some morally significant aspect of the other person to whom we are trying to be honest.

The care for *being an honest person* would also not be in the motivational profile of a fully honest person. While the motivation to be honest is not a vicious or an egoistic one, but it is too self-regarding to be the primary motivation for a virtuously honest person’s acting honestly. For

the person's focus is on one's own character, though not one's own self-interest. A person who is not yet but want to be virtuous may act virtuously to become or to be a virtuous person, but a fully virtuous person would be motivated by what the given virtue tells to care about, not (at least not primarily) by such a self-regarding consideration. For example, a fully benevolent person would help a person in need motivated by a concern for that person's well-being rather than by the desire to be or become a benevolent person. One of the reasons why deceiving is bad would plausibly be that it renders the deceiver viciously dishonest. But to preserve or promote one's own honesty seems to be too self-regarding to be the fully honest person's characteristic motivation.

Honesty is more of protecting the potential victim of deception rather than 'keeping one's own hand clean'. If one acts honestly based solely on self-regarding concerns—e.g., "I'm an honest person." "I should keep my moral integrity"—it would be objectionably self-centered to be a motive of a virtuous person. Honesty, as I understand it, is a matter of respecting something valuable in the person in question in the context of communication. In the sphere of communication, the concern should be focused on the one being communicated rather than on one who is trying to communicate.

#### 4. Respect for the Right Not to be Deceived

##### 4.1. Respect for the Right Not to be Deceived as an Honest Person's Underlying Motivation

I propose what I call *respect for the right not to be deceived* as the characteristic motivation of a virtuously honest person's honest action.<sup>3</sup> By saying that the right not to be deceived (RND) is the characteristic motivation of a virtuously honest person, I'm not claiming that the respect for RND should be the dominating and most salient motive at each time an honest person acts virtuously. I believe that this kind of respect serves as an honest person's *underlying* motivation

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<sup>3</sup> I understand 'deceiving' broadly to include various dishonest acts such as lying, cheating, and misleading. For the purpose of this paper, 'deceiving' can be roughly understood as "intentionally distorting the facts as the agent sees them" (Miller 2020, 366).

for her proximal motives to act honestly—e.g., to save others' feelings or to be fair to one's friend. Respect for RND may not be the most salient motive in every case of virtuously honest actions. But different surface-level or proximal motives can be grounded in a more fundamental, underlying motivation (Zagzebski 1996, part II). Sometimes a virtuously honest person may tell the truth to promote her own benefits or avoid deception to promote others well-being. Such surface-level motives would not disqualify her as a virtuously honest person insofar as they are compatible with the respect for RND underlying them. Insofar as someone has a right not to be deceived and respecting it amounts to being virtuously truthful to the right-holder, it would explain why acting from honesty is morally praiseworthy.

Whether one has the respect for RND as an underlying motivation become clearer in a situation where an honest action does not serve any purpose other than being honest or where it seems even conflicts with other considerations such as those of prudence or benevolence. Consider the context in which Mola asks his friend Anya about which city is the capital of Chile. She tells him the correct answer as she knows it—Santiago. Suppose that telling this truth would neither promote her or his well-being nor serve any other purposes. So she could have easily chosen to deceive Mola about Chile's capital were she not been a virtuously honest person. Since she is an honest person, of course, she chooses to avoid deceiving Mola. But what would be her motivation to avoid deception in such a situation? The motivation should not be the desire to show off her knowledgeability, since such a self-centered consideration does not seem to be a virtuous motivation. Also, it would not be the concern for Mola's well-being, since it is assumed in this case that knowing the capital of Chile would not promote his well-being in any sense. If Anya is a virtuously honest person, I suggest, she would have avoided deceiving Mola from the respect for his right not to be deceived.

Note that avoiding deception from some other virtuous motive does not render the agent a virtuously honest person unless the respect for RND is in her mind at least as an underlying motivation. Of course, a case of an honest action still may be virtuous and morally praiseworthy even if it is motivated by characteristic consideration of a virtue other than honesty. For example, suppose that when Julie asked, Jim told her, out of concern for her well-being, the truth about what he heard about Wayne's plan to assault her. This action would be virtuous, however, as a



*benevolent* action. In this case, avoiding deception is just used as a means to protect Julie's well-being. Jim has a deep care and concern for her, and, if he lacks the virtue of honesty, he would have easily *deceived* her if he thought that would be better for her well-being. In this sense, telling the truth in this case is not more than a means for protecting her well-being that is contingently chosen because of the given circumstances. A virtuously honest person, in contrast, would take being honest at least as a competitor with being benevolent in the case where these two considerations appear to be in conflict. In our case, Jim's care for Julie's well-being should be able to compete with the respect for her (or someone else's) RND if, for example, telling a lie seems to be the best way to promote her well-being.

I believe my account of honesty's characteristic motivation can also offer good guidance about how to *cultivate* the virtue of honesty. First, a virtuously honest person performs honest acts in a reliable way, that is, both stably over time and consistently across situations. A self-interested motive cannot explain an honest person's reliability because it will allow her to act dishonestly when it brings her more benefit than performing honest acts in the given context. The efforts to strengthen the reliability in performing honest acts by offering extrinsic rewards is not helpful for cultivating the virtue of honesty since this virtue is more than a mere disposition to perform honest acts reliably. Acting honestly, as opposed to merely performing honest acts, also involves having appropriate 'inner states' such as emotions and motives in performing honest acts and there is a great deal of empirical evidence that offering extrinsic rewards such as money tends to have a negative impact on the development of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 2001). My account can offer better guidance about how to cultivate the virtue of honesty and why it is important by suggesting that the respect for RND is the characteristic underlying motivation of an honest person.

#### 4.2. What is the Right Not to be Deceived?

Now let me examine in more details what respect for RND is. The first question to ask is *who* holds RND and *why*. Generally speaking, RND is grounded in the idea that each person has a claim that *others not intrude into their epistemic lives*. We all have the basic desire to 'be in touch

with reality', sometimes because that is the precondition for living an autonomous life and sometimes simply because of curiosity. While we may not have right to be taught or informed about whatever we want to know, it would be reasonable to say that we have a minimal claim that others do not positively intrude into our pursuit of truth by deceiving us, at least if there is no good reason to do so. In this sense, the general RND is grounded in our basic claim that others do not inappropriately interrupt in our pursuit of epistemic life. RND, in a sense, is a right to *epistemic freedom*.

However, there also is a *special* sense of RND, which depends on the relationship between the right-holder and the possible deceiver. In this special sense, RND is relative to the matter in question in the context of deception. RND in this sense is to be understood as a local concept, whose content is fixed in the given context. It usually takes the following form:

X has a right not to be deceived by Y on the matter M.

For example, Alicia has a right not to be deceived by her husband Bruno on whether he cheated on her, but a stranger may not have a comparable right to Bruno on his love affairs. Thus, through appropriate specifications about the possible deceiver and the topic in question, we would become better able to analyze the normative basis of honesty in particular situations.

We can better understand RND by comparing it with some similar but different rights that are more familiar to us, namely, the right to *know* (or the right to the truth) and the right to *autonomy*. Unlike the right to know, RND is defined passively and negatively. RND is a *passive* right, as opposed to an active right, in that that regulates the actions of others. While an active right like the right to know is expressed in the form "A has a right to x (i.e., A has a right to know M)", RND can be expressed in the form, "A has a right that B x" ("A has a right that B does not deceive A (about the matter M)"). For example, a research participant in a medical experiment has a positive right to know about the relevant conditions such as risks and benefits involved in the participation. This right implies that the researcher should inform the participant if any meaningful change occurs in the risks and benefits without omission. In contrast, RND does not

imply a comparable obligation from the researcher's side. The researcher may, for instance, omit to inform some relevant information to the participant without violating anyone's RND.

Also, RND is a *negative* right, as opposed to a positive right. While a negative right such as a right against assault involves a claim that others do not interfere, a positive right such as a right to health care involves a claim that others provide some good or service. RND as a negative right can be expressed as a right against deception, and the right to know as a positive right as a right to provision of knowledge about the matter in question. RND is usually easier to satisfy than the latter. For example, while one can satisfy RND simply by saying nothing misleading or deceptive, the right to know can be satisfied only when the knowledge in question is provided by the one who has the correlative duty to let the right-holder know.

Leif Wenar (2005) suggests four Hohfeldian incidents that constitute different kinds of rights: the privilege, the claim, the power, and the immunity. Among them, RND can be understood as involving immunity. According to Wenar, one has an immunity "whenever another person lacks the ability within a set of rules to change her normative situation in a particular respect" and rights that are immunities "entitle their holders to *protection* against harm or paternalism" (Wenar 2005, 232). Thus, RND entitles its holders to protection against harm or paternalism through deception.

Note that RND is distinct from the right to *autonomy*. The right to live autonomously amounts to the claim to be allowed to govern oneself or to determine the course of their own life. One's right to autonomy is infringed when someone inappropriately influences one's life so that one's life is partly governed by that person's choice without consent. For example, if a father coerces his daughter to choose a particular job over the other disregarding her own values or preferences, it would be a typical case in which a right to autonomy is infringed. Deception is another common way in which a right to autonomy is infringed. Suppose that Sally lies her son Ed saying that the application deadline for the actor audition has passed because she wanted him to be a lawyer rather than an actor. Then her deception is infringing his right to autonomy through depriving him of the opportunity to choose a possible life course by distorting some relevant facts.

However, while both RND and the right to autonomy can be infringed by deception, it does not mean that they are the same. While not being deceived is important for living an autonomous life, one may still have right not to be deceived about a certain matter even if that is not particularly relevant to living one's life as one decides. For example, one may have a right not to be deceived about how much money she has in her bank account even if she does not intend to do anything with that money.

#### 4.3. What is the Respect for the Right Not to be Deceived?

Now let me examine what kind of motivation the *respect* for RND is supposed to be. It would be helpful to start by saying what the respect for RND is *not*. First, it is not the care for the right-holder's well-being. As I have argued, such a care is characteristic of benevolence, not honesty. For example, one may refrain from deceiving someone out of the respect for her RND, even if one believes that deceiving her would better promote her well-being. Second, it is not the respect for the value of truth itself. The basis of RND is not the value of truth itself, considered independently, but of whether the potential right-holder is in a position to handle the truth in question appropriately.

To use Darwall's distinction, the respect due to RND is *recognition respect*, which consists in "the disposition to weigh appropriately in one's deliberation some features of the thing in question and to act accordingly" (Darwall 1977). It motivates the honest person who appropriately recognizes RND of the person in question to avoid deceiving her about the relevant matter. As a kind of recognition respect, the respect for RND does not necessarily involve particular phenomenological feelings such fear or awe. But respect for RND may often felt as an experience that one must recognize the given person's RND appropriately and, as a response to this right, avoid deceiving her about the relevant matter.

One might wonder if a *duty* not to violate the RND would suffice to capture the importance of acting honestly without appealing to the idea of honesty *as a virtue*. However, a duty not to violate the RND does not capture the complexity of the attitude of *respecting* that a virtuously honest person has. A virtuously honest person would act honestly, other things being

equal, willingly, without reluctance. However, a person who is dutifully honest may do the same thing unwillingly, reluctantly, or even painfully. For example, one may be strongly tempted to make a false promise to pay money back to borrow money, but manage not to do so out of a sense of duty, a duty not to deceive others. This person can be said to fully possess of the virtue of honesty. In this sense, the virtue of honesty is more than a disposition not to deceive other people. Given that we can perform act an apparent act of honesty either virtuously or non-virtuously (or even viciously), it would be important to think about what would characteristically motivate the virtuously honest person to act honestly. Virtue should inform us not only about how to use one's rights in an appropriate way but also how to treat given *rights* in an appropriate way. Honesty, according to my account, is a virtue that informs how a virtuous person would treat someone's RND. A fully honest person is likely to perform honest actions willingly, spontaneously, and unwaveringly, provided that there is no strong competing demand of other virtues such as benevolence.

One remarkable feature of respect is that it is not experienced as some motivational force that leads the agent to do what the object of respect is due independently of one's own desires or inclination (Dillon 2021). This feature ensures that the respect for RND is not an egoistic motive. Being motivated "to respect RND" may seem similar to being motivated "to avoid deception" (Wilson 2018). However, while one may be motivated to avoid deception just to maximize his sales profits, one is not motivated to respect someone's right for an egoistic reason. Unlike a person who avoids deception just for an egoistic reason, a person who avoids deception from the respect for the other's RND would still avoid deception even if it does not promote one's own benefits. On my account, being honest is a matter of respecting something important in the potential victim of the deception. This important thing is what I call the right not to be deceived.

## 5. Implications

I believe my analysis of honesty's characteristic motivation can shed light on some important philosophical issues concerning honesty. First, this analysis helps us to better demarcate the scope of honesty. For example, the virtue of honesty itself does not demand us to

pursue the truth or actively correct false beliefs, since failing to do so does not infringe anyone's RND. Moreover, it enables us to examine whether honesty requires such acts as whistleblowing or tattling by analyzing whose RND about which matter is involved and whether not performing such acts would amount to disrespecting any such right. For example, while your cheating on an exam would infringe your teacher's or classmates' RND, it is not clear whether your classmate would violate any such right by declining to report you. Thus, even if your classmate's action may reveal a lack of other virtues such as justice by not reporting your cheating, she may not necessarily be failing to meet the demand of honesty in doing so.

Moreover, my account informs us about what honest or dishonest behaviors involve. For example, it explains why making a false promise counts as a dishonest act while breaking a promise after making a promise with a genuine intention to keep it does not. It is because, according to my view, the former, unlike the latter, involves disrespect for RND by the promisor. In case of making a false promise, the promisee has RND by the promisor about whether she intends to keep the promise. If unintentional promise-breaking manifests any vice, it would be irresponsibility rather than dishonesty.

Most importantly, my account of honest motivation implies that the difficult conceptual issues regarding the definition of lying will no longer be at the center of honesty study. This account can set up a ground for a concept of honesty that does not put excessive moral significance to making true statements taken by itself. There are many cases in which deception is made without lying (e.g., by misleading with true statements) or those in which lying is not just permissible but even required (e.g., lying to save an innocent person from a murderer). On my account, whether a given act counts as lying or not would be less important in honesty studies than whether it violates anyone's RND. While behavioral aspect of honesty is focused on telling the truth and not telling a lie, being virtuously honest also involves knowing when not to tell the truth. My analysis helps us to see more clearly the difference between the value of truth-telling and that of being honest.

Relatedly, my account also makes sense of the vice of being *too honest*. At least in the Aristotelian tradition, a virtue is understood as a mean between two extremes: deficiency and excess. There has been difficulty in making sense of honesty as an Aristotelian virtue because it

is hard to explain what the vice of excessive honesty would look like. My account, however, can understand it as a disposition to avoid deception even when it is strongly required by the circumstances and no one's RND about the given matter is being disrespected in that context.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the respect for RND is the motivation that characteristically underlies a virtuously honest person's honest actions. My goal has been to set up a platform for the lively discussion of the characteristic motivation of honesty and contribute to the development of new research projects on honesty that explore its scope, behavioral aspects, and relation to other virtues and vices. Above all, this paper offers a new perspective that can help us to make sense of apparent cases of honesty in a more unified way. This will inform and inspire not only conceptual works in philosophy but also empirical works in social sciences including psychology. The research will also have a significant practical impact on the fields such as character education, child-rearing, and medical practice and research. A virtuous person acts virtuously from a virtuous motivation. If honesty is a virtue, as it is widely endorsed, a virtuously honest person's characteristic motivation should be explicated. I hope this paper can serve as a step toward filling this gap in the literature on the virtue of honesty.

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