

Intellectual Honesty*

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Abstract. Until recently, almost nothing had been written about the moral virtue of honesty in the past 50 years of Western analytic philosophy. Slowly, this is beginning to change. But moral honesty is not the only kind of honesty there is. In this paper, I focus specifically on the intellectual cousin to moral honesty, and offer a preliminary account of its behavioral and motivational dimensions. The account will be centered on not intentionally distorting the facts as the person takes them to be, for one of a variety of intellectually virtuous motivating reasons.

Keyword: dishonesty, honesty, virtue, motivation, self-deception.

Until recently, almost nothing had been written about the moral virtue of honesty in the past 50 years of Western analytic philosophy. Slowly, this is beginning to change. Several papers and a recent book will hopefully serve to spark interest among philosophers to pay more attention

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to this stunningly neglected virtue (see Wilson 2018, Roberts and West 2020, and Miller 2017, 2021).

But moral honesty is not the only kind of honesty there is. Intellectual, aesthetic, and perhaps still other kinds are also important. In this paper, I focus specifically on the intellectual cousin to moral honesty, and offer a preliminary account of its behavioral and motivational dimensions (for recent discussions of intellectual honesty, see Wilson 2018, King 2021, and Byerly forthcoming. Guenin 2005 is more about moral as opposed to intellectual honesty.)

Thinking more about intellectual honesty specifically is very important to the theme of this special issue and the role of intellectual virtue in pursuing interdisciplinary work. Without a commitment to not misrepresent or distort the evidence that emerges from research conducted in fields like philosophy, theology, and science, it is hard to see how interdisciplinary work can ever lead to significant new discoveries.

The paper proceeds in five sections. In the first I offer a brief overview of how I understand the honest behavior that arises from the moral virtue of honesty. Section two turns to moral honesty and motivation. With this groundwork in place, in sections three and four we will be well-positioned to begin unpacking what the intellectual virtue of honesty looks like behaviorally and motivationally. The final section applies the proposed account to self-deception.

1. Moral Honesty and Behavior

Let us begin with how I am thinking about honesty as a *virtue*. Suppose we learn that Claudia has the moral virtue of honesty as part of her character. That information allows us to make certain assumptions about her, including the following (which are not intended to be exhaustive):

She will tend to accurately recognize information about her environment that is relevant to honesty.

She will tend to have honest thoughts, say about the importance of telling the truth in this instance, or keeping a promise to her friend, or not cheating on her husband.

She will tend to have virtuously honest emotions and motives.

She will tend to behave honestly, as a result of those honest thoughts and feelings.

Her honest behavior will tend to be consistent across relevant situations (the courtroom, office, home, etc.) and stable over time.

This broadly Aristotelian approach to thinking about a virtue takes it to be an excellent disposition of character with a cognitive, affective, and behavioral component.¹ In this section, we will begin to unpack the behavioral component in more detail.

Suppose I tell one of my children to go brush his teeth before bed. A few minutes later he comes back and I ask if he brushed them. He says, “Sure I did.” Turns out he didn’t; he got distracted instead by Legos, and then lied to me. Alas, I can’t report that this is a completely fictional case.

In a situation like this, my son is failing to behave honestly in this one instance. That does not mean he isn’t an honest person in general, as one failure to act in accordance with a virtue does not disqualify a person from possessing it. But nevertheless his lie isn’t compatible with honest behavior. In what way?

On my approach, it fails to be honest because it involves intentionally distorting the facts as he takes them to be (Miller 2017, 2021). He knew he didn’t brush his teeth, but in his verbal communication to me he intentionally misrepresented his own behavior.

This way of understanding dishonest behavior generalizes. Suppose he had responded instead with “Yes, I brushed my teeth today.” That’s

¹ It is important to clarify that the statements above are not intended to provide a reductive account of what honesty or the virtue of honesty are, since they freely mention ‘honesty’ in every statement. They are just intended to clarify some assumptions we tend to make about an honest person. A reductive account of honest behavior will come later in this section. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer here.

true, since he did after breakfast, but he intends it to be a misleading response that he hopes will lead me to think that he is talking about right now. Or suppose he was so distracted that he genuinely can't remember whether he brushed them or not. So he just makes up an answer, "Sure I brushed them." That's a bullshit answer, following Harry Frankfurt's famous account (Frankfurt 1986). In both cases, he is failing to be honest in the moment, and in both cases he is also misrepresenting how things are from his perspective.

The heart of honest behavior, then, can be captured by something like the following:

(HB) To act honestly in a given situation is to not intentionally distort the facts as you see them.

In my earlier work, I have tried to show how this basic approach would apply in a lot of cases relevant to honesty and dishonesty, including lying, misleading, cheating, stealing, promise-keeping, bullshitting, and hypocrisy (Miller 2017, 2021).

To be sure, (HB) isn't the final word about what honest behavior looks like. A host of complexities arise, such as with whether honesty also requires correcting misinformation in others, or whether the 'facts' can include moral and other normative facts as well as descriptive facts (see Miller 2021). But (HB) is sufficient for our purposes in this paper.

2. Moral Honesty and Motivation

Honest behavior is one thing. But acting from the virtue of honesty is another. Suppose my son really did brush his teeth, and does not misrepresent the facts when he replies that "Sure I did." But if he says this only for purely self-interested reasons – say to avoid punishment like going to 'time-out' – then the behavior would not be virtuously motivated.

When it comes to the moral virtue of honesty, I want to suggest that all forms of egoistic motivation are off-limits. Punishment avoidance is perhaps the most straightforward kind of egoistic motivation here, but

other kinds would include motives for getting rewards like a promotion or motives for avoiding negative feelings of guilt or embarrassment.

What is left after these egoistic motives are excluded? A number of different options. Returning to the example of my son brushing his teeth, I might continue the conversation after he said, “Sure I did,” by saying, “Thanks so much for telling me the truth. What led you to do that?”. And pretending that this is more like the philosophy classroom than real life with my eight-year-old, I can imagine a variety of different responses:

Reasons of Love: “Because I love you.” “Because I care about you.”

Reasons of Friendship: “Because we’re pals.” “Because that’s what friends do.”

Reasons of Duty: “Because it is the right thing to do.” “Because telling the truth is important.”

Reasons of Virtue: “Because it’s honest.” “Because its what good people do.”

Additional Reasons: “Because I respect you.” “Because it wouldn’t have been fair since you always tell me the truth.”

These are different kinds of reasons. Yet they all strike me as compatible with the virtue of honesty. I would not fault my son’s honesty if he gave any one of these responses as opposed to some other.

It matters that these are *ultimate* reasons, and are not derivative from another reason which in turn might be self-interested. For instance, if the initial reason is “because it is the right thing to do,” but the person only cares about doing the right thing so as to avoid getting in trouble, then that’s not going to count as virtuous motivation for honesty.

Otherwise, though, I suggest we should be pluralists about motivation for the moral virtue of honesty. I do not see a way to reduce these various motives down to one more fundamental motive. Nor do I see a need to do so in the first place. There is nothing about the nature of virtue itself which requires only one kind of motivation for each virtue.

Hence we can unpack the moral virtue of honesty a bit more by combining what has been said about both its behavioral and motivational components:

(HB2) The virtue of moral honesty is, at least in part, the virtue of being reliably disposed for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds K_1 through K_N , to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them.

K_1 could, for instance, be loving reasons, K_2 reasons of virtue, K_3 friendship reasons, and so forth.

One final note before we turn to intellectual honesty. The approach sketched above requires there be virtuously honest motivating reasons. It does not require that there *only* be such reasons. Mixed motives for action are commonplace behind human behavior, and requiring only purely virtuous motivation would set the bar for honesty very high. Instead, an account of honesty should allow egoistic motives to be present and even lend their support to honest behavior, provided that the stronger motives are the virtuously honest ones. And not only that, but the virtuous ones need to be strong enough by themselves such that even if the egoistic ones were to disappear, there would still be sufficient motivation for honest behavior. Hence here is one more modification:

(HB3) The virtue of moral honesty is, at least in part, the virtue of being reliably disposed *primarily* for good or virtuous motivating reasons of one or more kinds K_1 through K_N of *sufficient motivating strength*, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them.

Further questions arise, such as whether there also has to be the absence of non-virtuous motivation *to* distort the facts (see Miller 2021 for much further discussion). But this much will suffice for now.

3. Intellectual Honesty

At last we can turn to intellectual as opposed to moral honesty. I wish at this point that understanding intellectual honesty were as easy as taking (HB3) and adding a few well placed “intellectual” labels. Alas, philosophy is rarely that simple.

For one thing, there is the preliminary question of whether intellectual virtues are even distinct from the moral virtues. After all, one could hold any of these positions:

- (i) The moral virtues are a subset of the intellectual virtues.
- (ii) The intellectual virtues are a subset of the moral virtues.
- (iii) The moral virtues and the intellectual virtues are distinct sets of virtues.

For the sake of this paper, I will assume that (iii) is the correct approach and explore where that takes us (for relevant discussion, see Wilson 2017).

Saying that moral and intellectual virtues are distinct does not automatically guarantee that there is a distinct moral and intellectual virtue of *honesty*. Here are three more options, even assuming (iii):

- (a) There is a moral virtue of honesty but not an intellectual virtue of honesty.
- (b) There is an intellectual virtue of honesty but not a moral virtue of honesty.
- (c) There is an intellectual virtue of honesty and a distinct moral virtue of honesty.

Up to this point, I have been concerned with unpacking the moral virtue of honesty, so I have been assuming that (b) is false. If (a) were false, then there is nothing left for me to do in the remainder of this paper. So another assumption I will make, without argument, is that (c) is the correct framework to adopt.

For the remainder of this paper, then, let us assume that there is an intellectual virtue of honesty that is distinct from its moral cousin. Presumably, though, it can't be *completely* distinct, since otherwise it would not be clear how they both pertained to *honesty*. When thinking about

ways in which they might overlap, we can note that they are both virtues, and wonder to what extent there are similarities with respect to their cognitive + affective + behavioral components. Some straightforward options which present themselves include these:

- (1) Moral and intellectual honesty share the same cognitive components, but differ with respect to their affective and behavioral components.
- (2) Moral and intellectual honesty share the same affective components, but differ with respect to their cognitive and behavioral components.
- (3) Moral and intellectual honesty share the same behavioral components, but differ with respect to their cognitive and affective components.
- (4) Various combined possibilities, whereby moral and intellectual honesty share two of the three components.

The approach I want to explore focuses first and foremost on differences with respect to the affective side of the virtue of honesty, although it might also involve differences elsewhere too. In particular, the key difference between moral and intellectual honesty has to do with the motives that make them up.

Using motivation to differentiate between moral and intellectual virtues in general, and the two types of honesty in particular, is a strategy that has already been proposed by both Alan Wilson and Nathan King (Wilson 2017, 2018; King 2021: chapter seven). As Wilson writes,

Honesty is a moral virtue when the motivation...is grounded in a morally valuable underlying motivation [...]. Honesty might be possessed as an intellectual virtue, such as when the motivation [...] is grounded in a love of truth. Or honesty might be possessed as an aesthetic virtue, such as when the motivation [...] is grounded in a desire for artistic authenticity or in a belief that the truth is somehow beautiful (Wilson 2018: 278).

For now I will remain agnostic about what the specific motive associated with intellectual honesty is supposed to be. But Wilson's more general

point about differentiating between types of honesty traits based upon their motivational profile is promising.

On such an approach, one crucial thing that intellectual and moral honesty share is the nature of honest behavior. For both of them, honest behavior is a matter of not intentionally distorting the facts as the person takes them to be. One crucial thing that they do *not* share, however, is *why* a person is motivated to not engage in this fact distorting, with moral motives operative in the one case and epistemic motives in the other.

Given this, we can now take an initial pass at characterizing intellectual honesty:

- (IH1) The virtue of intellectual honesty is, at least in part, the virtue of being reliably disposed for good or virtuous *intellectual motivating reasons* to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them.

At this point it would be nice to have more to say about what the “intellectual motivating reasons” are supposed to be. That is the project of the next section.

4. Intellectual Motives for Intellectual Honesty

I said that pluralism is the way to go when it comes to motivation and moral honesty. What about intellectual honesty?

Nathan King goes with a single motive – caring about the truth, or what he also calls ‘reverence for the truth’ (King 2021: 135, 144–145). Alan Wilson seems to agree. As the quote from earlier revealed, he appears to think that intellectual honesty is motivationally grounded in love of truth (Wilson 2017, 2018).

I certainly agree that love of truth is *one* motive for intellectual honesty. But need it be the only one? I am not so sure. Here are some other candidates:

- Caring about knowledge
- Caring about being justified

Caring about true belief
Caring about understanding
Caring about wisdom
Caring about avoiding falsehood
Caring about avoiding ignorance

where ‘caring’ can be understood broadly to encompass desiring, loving, wanting, and the like.

These strike me as rather different motives. They can be subsumed under a very broad and vague heading like what Linda Zagzebski calls ‘cognitive contact with reality’ (1996: 131–132). But my preference is to emphasize how pluralist motivation can be for intellectual honesty, just as pluralism was recommended for understanding virtuous motivation for moral honesty.

One important clarification is worth making here (in what follows I have been helped by Byerly forthcoming). There is a difference between these two motives:

First Group:

Wanting to avoid false statements.
Wanting to know truth things.
Wanting representations to be veridical.

Second Group:

Wanting others to avoid believing falsehood statements.
Wanting others to come to know true things.
Wanting others to form representations which are veridical.

In the first group, what a person cares about is general and impersonal – avoiding falsehood, knowing the truth, and forming veridical representations, among other possibilities. In the second group, what a person cares about is what is epistemically good for other people – that they avoid believing the false, that they know the true, and that they form veridical representations.

It is motives of the first kind that I am thinking of when it comes to intellectual honesty. They are concerned with knowledge, truth, wisdom, and the like, period. They are also ultimate motives.

Motives of the second kind will often be instrumental. *Why* do I want others to know true things? Perhaps for some self-interested reason, say because they are my employees and they will do better at their jobs and make more money for the company if they are not clouded by misunderstanding. In that case, the motive bottoms out in self-interest, and so would not be virtuous at all. Or perhaps I want others to know true things because knowing true things is important. But then that bottoms out in an intellectually virtuous motive that belongs in the first group.

Finally, as we did in the moral case, we should also note the importance of mixed motives. Having an egoistic motivating reason to, say, carry out an investigation in the hope of becoming famous is compatible with intellectual honesty provide it is a secondary motive that is not necessary to support the primary, virtuous motive in leading to action. Hence we can offer a more worked out understanding of the virtue of intellectual honesty as follows:

- (IH2) The virtue of intellectual honesty is, at least in part, the virtue of being reliably disposed *primarily* for good or virtuous intellectual motivating reasons of one or more kinds IK_1 through IK_n of *sufficient motivating strength*, to not intentionally distort the facts as the agent sees them.

where “IK” is an intellectual kind of motivating reason, and “ IK_n ” stands for some vague and unspecified number of different kinds.

Let me end this section by illustrating the proposal using some examples of actions stemming from either intellectual honesty or dishonesty. Here is a case of the former, focused on interdisciplinary research:

The Interdisciplinary Researcher: A philosopher is well known for her groundbreaking theory about a certain natural phenomenon, a theory for which she has received many grants and prizes. But one day some empirical researchers share data with her that directly contradicts what her theory predicts. There is no way to suitably modify the theory to account for the data. It is clear that the theory is not going to work. But rather than ignore these researchers or try to discourage them from publishing their findings, she supports their work and acknowledges in print that her theory is now in serious doubt. She does this because she cares about the truth and the search for knowledge.

In this case the philosopher is acting in accordance with intellectual honesty. She is not intentionally distorting the facts by trying to hide these disconfirming results from the awareness of the research community. And she is acting from intellectually honest motives concerning the truth and knowledge. Contrast this with well-documented cases of researchers who have intentionally fabricated their results to advance their preferred theories, or ignored problematic findings in order to save their theories. These would clearly count as failures of intellectual honesty given (IH2).

Here is another interdisciplinary example, this time focused on teaching and based on a real conversation I had:

The Professor: A former student was telling me about how much he disliked the pedagogical approach of a philosophy professor at another university. According to my student, whenever topics in religion arose, the professor would be very heavy handed in trying to influence the students in his introductory class to adopt his views. He would make a very developed case for his side of the debate, and present only the most simplistic caricatures of the arguments and objections raised by the other side. Students were meant to get the impression that no sensible person could ever hold such opposing views. My student summed things up by remarking how ‘intellectually dishonest’ this professor was being.

Calling what this professor was doing ‘intellectually dishonest’ sounds right to me. It is in line with my account as well. This professor knew that there were stronger versions of what the opposing views had to say, versions that could still be presented to introductory philosophy students. And yet he was intentionally distorting the facts in failing to present these versions and thereby making it seem as if these views were much weaker and unreasonable than they really were. Note that all this could be true, even if he was also motivated by wanting his students to know true things or stop believing false things.

Finally, consider a case I have used elsewhere of so-called ‘double-bluffing’:

The Skeptical Friend. Joan’s friend Franklin is very skeptical of what Joan has to say about important matters. Joan knows about this skepticism. So one day

she tells Franklin that “Pluto is still considered one of the nine planets by astronomers.” Joan knows this is false, but hopes to get Franklin to believe the opposite, which is true. As predicted, Franklin does form the belief that Pluto is no longer considered to be one of the nine planets by astronomers (Miller 2021: 35. The expression ‘double-bluffing’ is from Fallis 2018: 32–36.).

Here too, I want to say that this is a failure of intellectual honesty, even though Joan is motivated to get Franklin to believe true things, and even though in this case she *succeeds* in getting him to believe something true. But the means she takes to do so is dishonest – she intentionally distorts the facts in what she communicates to Franklin, and implicitly in what she is representing to him as her beliefs about the matter.

No doubt (IH2) will need much further refinement and development, but it strikes me as promising for now.

5. Application to Self-Deception²

Let me end by looking in a bit more detail at another failure of intellectual honesty, namely self-deception. Here is a case:

The Affair. Suppose Andrew had always assumed that his wife was being faithful. But one day a friend reports that he observed Andrew’s wife meeting a man at a seedy motel room. Andrew also notices that his wife starts being absent from the house for hours at a time. Her clothes start smelling like men’s cologne, and there are texts on her phone to schedule future visits to the motel. Nevertheless, Andrew comes to form the belief that his wife is still being faithful to him.

With just these details before us, it is fairly clear that Andrew is suffering from self-deception about his wife’s faithfulness. It is also fairly clear that he is not being honest with himself.

My approach would agree. By not forming his beliefs in a way that is properly responsive to the evidence that is available to him, he is inten-

² Material from this section is adapted from Miller 2021, with permission from Oxford University Press.

tionally distorting the facts as he sees them. He wants to believe his wife is faithful, and so that leads him to misrepresent the evidence.

Al Mele has helpfully outlined at least four different ways in which a desire like Andrew's to believe his wife is faithful, can be responsible for forming self-deceptive beliefs:

Negative misinterpretation. Our desiring that p may lead us to misinterpret as not counting (or not counting strongly) against p data that we would easily recognize to count (or count strongly) against p in the desire's absence.

Positive misinterpretation. Our desiring that p may lead us to interpret as *supporting* p data that we would easily recognize to count against p in the desire's absence.

Selective focusing/attending. Our desiring that p may lead us both to fail to focus attention on evidence that counts against p and to focus instead on evidence suggestive of p .

Selective evidence-gathering. Our desiring that p may lead us both to overlook easily obtainable evidence for $\sim p$ and to find evidence for p that is much less accessible (Mele 2001: 26–27, emphasis his).

If Andrew's desire was working in any of these four ways, it would lead to him intentionally distorting the facts as he sees them. The resulting belief about his wife would not be formed in an honest way.

Would Andrew's self-deception count as not only a failure of honesty, but of *intellectual* honesty on my approach? It would. Andrew does not care sufficiently for the truth, one of the motives that is on the pluralist list for the virtue of intellectual honesty. If he did care more about the truth than about wanting to believe his wife is faithful, then he would have followed the evidence where it led and arrived at a different conclusion.

Let me conclude this section with a challenge to my approach. Suppose Andrew was successful in forming his self-deceptive belief by using one or more of the methods Mele distinguished above. Perhaps, for instance, by engaging in *selective focusing/attending*, he was able to fail to

attend to the evidence against his wife's faithfulness, and focus only on evidence suggestive of her faithfulness.

The problem is that if he really does engage in this method thoroughly, then he might get himself to the point where he does not see any opposing evidence any more to his wife's faithfulness. But failing to be honest is to distort facts *as you see them*. So Andrew might not fail to be honest in believing his wife is faithful, since he does not see any facts which are being distorted.

This isn't quite right, though. It might be accurate to say that the belief itself is not dishonest, even though it was the result of a self-deceptive process. Yet the *process itself* of forming the belief counts as less than honest on my account. Andrew repeatedly misrepresented the evidence that was clearly before him by not attending to it in the right way. The way he went about dealing with events in his life, was to distort the facts as he saw them on the way to forming the belief that his wife was being faithful.³

So generalizing from the case of Andrew and his wife, it seems as if our approach to understanding intellectual honesty (and dishonesty) can give a plausible treatment of standard cases of self-deception (the account would also apply to 'twisted' cases, where self-deception can occur for unwanted belief (see Mele 2001: chapter five)). But I do not want to be too confident at this point, as the literature on self-deception is large and would need to be discussed more carefully than there is space to do so here (for a good start, see Mele 2001; I say more in Miller 2021).

Conclusion

Moral honesty and intellectual honesty are distinct virtues, and philosophers need to pay a lot more attention to both of them. In this paper I have begun to unpack both the motivational and the behavioral sides of each of these virtues. But clearly there is more work needed to be done to

³ These points don't change even if the process of forming the belief was carried out in Andrew's mind unconsciously. As I suggest elsewhere, 'intentional distortion of the facts,' can occur unconsciously, and 'facts as the agent sees them' do not have to be part of conscious awareness in the moment (Miller 2021: 30–31). For more on self-deception, reasoning processes, and lack of conscious awareness, see Mele 2001: 53.

refine the proposals, as well as consider additional dimensions of these virtues like their value and their cognitive dimensions. In addition, it is worth exploring the potential existence of still other kinds of honesty, such as aesthetic honesty.

The topic of honesty has been neglected for far too long.

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