

Phonies, Fakes, and Frauds—and the Social Harms They Cause

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You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one.

—James A. Froude, 19th century English historian

Son, always tell the truth. Then you'll never have to remember what you said the last time.

—Sam Rayburn, US Congressman 1913-1961

Introduction

Although my aim is to discuss the social consequences of a type of rampant lying, I begin with a personal story, and a personal failing.

Unexpectedly, a friend telephoned to say that she planned to marry and hoped I would be able to meet her fiancé that next weekend over lunch. Delighted at the happy turn of events, I made plans to meet, and at the appointed time, we sat in a neighborhood restaurant waiting for her beau, who planned to arrive separately. While we waited, she told me that, after a long career in military covert activity, he now worked as a

actors were forged in the fires of great trials tended to speak little, if at all, of terrible events—and never on a first meeting. And here is the personal failing: I smiled and chatted with this couple; our lunch ended and I left the restaurant with my friend as her fiancé went back to his supposedly secret assignment—and I never mentioned my certainty—or even suspicion—about the dishonesty of the man she was choosing to marry.

That story has a conclusion of sorts, to which I shall return at the end of this article. But meeting my friend's fiancé raised for me a series of questions, and while some of them concerned the responsibilities of friendship, what was most intriguing to me was consideration of the harmful effects a certain kind of liar has not just on those he lied to, but on the wider social order. Specifically, my interest resides in what I want to call the *virtue imposter*—the person who lies about his experience, knowledge, achievements, or identity in order to gain advantage over those who ascribe to the imposter aspects of character not possessed by him.

The Western philosophical tradition has extensively considered truth telling, prizing it as a virtue worthwhile for its own sake. Its presumed opposite, lying, is often treated insofar as it serves the prudential purpose of conferring on the liar some sort of personal advantage. Put another way, in the Western tradition truth telling is regarded as needing no justification, but lying does; consequently, a philosophical examination of lying typically looks to the advantages sought by the liar. The medieval thinker Augustine, for instance, categorized types of lies according to their helps and harms, as did his philosophical successor, Aquinas, who divided lies into three kinds, depending on intention. Mischievous lies aim to injure someone; jocose lies intend to ridicule another for fun, and officious lies are told for a “useful purpose.”

Although the virtue imposter's lies confer advantage, it would be a mistake to say that she is nothing more than a con artist or swindler. The goal of swindlers and con artists is the willing transfer of financial benefits from the mark, or victim. Virtue

imposters may also realize financial gain, but it usually follows as a by-product of increased status. Although philosophers have considered carefully such important ethical considerations as whether lying is under some circumstances justifiable, how lying differs from other forms of deception, the moral gravity of types of lies, and the possibility of so-called noble lies, the Western tradition has not paid enough attention to self-misrepresentation, perhaps because it confers no immediate economic advantage. The cases I examine below concern several kinds of virtue imposters. In addition to examining some of the benefits undeservedly accruing to the virtue imposter, the many and varied instances of this kind of behavior shows that, although the exploits of virtue imposters are reported almost daily, we rarely consider the ubiquity of those exploits, nor—so I argue—their wider consequences, which in combination further fray our worn social fabric.

Virtue Imposters

One can arrange virtue imposters along a spectrum ranging from virtues, character, or expertise that one can pretend to possess fairly easily, to those that require great effort or radical transformation to simulate. My intention is not to present an exhaustive list of kinds of virtue imposters; instead I explore a family of behaviors in which misrepresentation of the self is effected by the adoption of virtues or unearned aspects of character that harm the wider social order.

The Plagiarist. Perhaps the most common kind of virtue imposter is the plagiarist—one typically thinks of students buying term papers from Internet sources, or recycling A papers from fraternity brothers. Plagiarism has long been the fodder of news stories, classroom discussions, and uncomfortable conversations between teacher and accused student. Although media scrutiny tends to focus on the ease of buying papers electronically and crafting cut-and-paste assignments, the issue extends beyond the misuse of the Internet as a research tools.

The plagiarist appropriates the virtue of knowledge that, in its honest attainment, requires effort, discipline, and discernment. But passing off another's work as one's own, appearing more accomplished than one actually is, leads not just to better grades (and long-term benefits) but establishes and boosts professional reputations as well. Eminent historian and former University of New Orleans professor Stephen Ambrose responded to charges of plagiarism in his *Wild Blue*, a salute to World War II aviators, remarking, "if I sometimes fail to put in the quotation marks, I certainly never fail to put in the footnote." Ambrose echoed an excuse for which any teacher would love to have a nickel for each recitation. Equally eminent historian Doris Kearns Goodwin also appealed to "cita-

tion mistakes" in addressing charges of plagiarism in her 1987 best selling work, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*. Goodwin did not mention that a financial settlement quietly had been made to historian Lynne McTaggart, from whom items were appropriated.

What neither Goodwin nor Ambrose discussed is that the inadequacies of their research procedures stem from their increasing reliance on the work of assistants (in Ambrose's case, members of his family). The craft of rendering vivid, accurate portraits of the past disappears when history becomes a celebrity industry. Ambrose and Goodwin found themselves among a small number of eagerly sought-after commentators, and they succumbed to the pressures of celebrity—publishing voluminously as part of an overall strategy to remain in the public eye and receive high-profile media assignments.

Résumé Padding. Several times a year, someone is drummed out of a prominent position when it is revealed that he or she had

for the job. For instance, Notre Dame football coach George O'Leary resigned after it was learned that nearly thirty years ago he had added to his résumé two items that would be repeated over his many years of coaching. He claimed that he had earned a Master's degree in education and had played three years of college football. While these lies made him attractive enough to be offered his first coaching job, the years of coaching experience that followed prepared him for the pinnacle of his career as Notre Dame's head coach. Yet few observers felt pity for George O'Leary, not only because résumé padding can deprive more worthy candidates of the job offer, but also because O'Leary lamely tried to excuse his fabrication, stating in part, "Many years ago, as a young married father, I sought to pursue my dream as a football coach."

The Military Phony. Unlike the plagiarist, who pretends to know more than she can rightly claim, or the résumé padder, who pretends to be more than he is, the military phony pretends to be someone he is not. Sometimes a military record is fabricated, as in the case of Joseph A. Cafasso, who passed himself off as a lieutenant colonel in the Special Forces in order to insinuate himself into a consultant position at the Fox News Channel and WABC radio in New York City, and a position as organizer for the presidential campaign of Patrick J. Buchanan. His fabrications extended beyond himself; Cafasso's concocted information led to erroneous news reports at Fox, in the *New York Times*, and elsewhere. And while Joseph Ellis, a historian serving

on the faculty at Mount Holyoke, did serve in the Army (in Fort Gordon, Georgia), over time he told his students, and according to some accounts, a wider circle of colleagues and other historians, that he was a platoon leader in Vietnam, a paratrooper with the 101st Airborne, and a member of General Westmoreland's staff. Following an article in the *Boston Globe* raising questions about Ellis's tales, Mount Holyoke suspended Ellis from its faculty for one year.

Consider, finally, the phony war hero, a person who either never served in the military, or did serve, but without special distinction—and then obtained, and proudly wears, unearned medals and decorations. Other veterans are often the first to spot the person who decorates himself with unearned medals. In one instance, a Navy veteran noticed a man wearing two Navy crosses (in this case, a Navy cross ribbon accompanied by a gold star pin, denoting a second award, worn above the Vietnam Service Medal and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal). The Navy veteran happened to have just recently learned that no one had twice received such an honor in the Vietnam conflict. Several veteran's groups post on their Web sites some of the most extravagant displays of unearned medals. (These groups also typically offer advice for verifying claims of military service, past prisoner of war status, and claims of recognition for heroism. [See inset])

Among the most brazen phony war heroes is Ralph Ervin Crowder, who had himself photographed wearing the summer white uniform of a US Navy admiral

Web Sites Useful in Verifying Claims of Military Service or Status as Former POW

- All individual service records of veterans discharged, and who have no current service obligations, are maintained at:

National Personnel Records Center, Military Records
9700 Page Avenue
St. Louis, MO 63132-5100



"Special Agent Vickers and I have a few questions for you, Ericson."

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adorned with seven rows of ribbons—and a Medal of Honor—pinned to his chest. He later confessed that these items were bought from a surplus shop. There are only 157 living Medal of Honor recipients, and they all know of each other through the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. Through the efforts of one genuine recipient, Mitchell Paige, anyone wearing a Medal of Honor now faces a one-year prison term and possibly a \$100,000 fine. Mr. Crowder, when questioned by FBI officials about his naval uniform and medal, also boldly produced fraudulent material indicating he was affiliated with the National Security Agency (NSA). Posing as an officer of the NSA is an even more serious offense than falsely wearing a Medal of Honor; Mr. Crowder now faces a maximum penalty of four-and-a-half years in prison and a \$355,000 fine if convicted.

Fraudulent Science. To this point, I have presented several kinds of virtue imposters. The plagiarist *adopts* the knowledge, understanding, or analysis of others and claims them for herself. The résumé padder adds a little (or a lot) more to his experience, *augmenting* who he really is. The military phony adopts a past not her own, acts of courage she did not perform—she *impersonates* the heroic character and virtues that she does not possess.

One final type—some would argue the worst type—of virtue imposter merits discussion here. The scientific

fraud *invents* knowledge of the ways the world works. Not only might she lack such virtues as intellectual dexterity, an inventive spirit, and tenacity, all necessary for true scientific discovery, but she also dooms others in their efforts to apply, replicate, or build on a false foundation.

Consider the recent, extraordinary case of Dr. J. Hendrik Schön, the 32-year-old Bell Labs scientist who a year ago was thought to be on the fast track to a Nobel Prize as “one of nanotechnology’s brightest stars.” Results published between 1998 and 2001 (in seventeen papers appearing in scientific journals with twenty collaborators, Dr. Schön one among them) heralded breakthroughs in physics with applications in molecular electronics—building circuits out of individual molecules. Schön’s contributions were all fabrications. Although the investigative committee appointed by Bell Labs concluded that Dr. Schön alone was guilty of fabricating the data on which others relied, the scandal raised troubling questions about others touched by the fraud—the co-authors who noticed nothing unusual (and did not scrutinize one another’s data), Dr. Schön’s post-doctoral advisor and the senior author of several of the papers, the scientific journals that reviewed the papers, Bell Labs and its parent company, Lucent Technologies (which allowed Schön to claim that he saved no lab notes, a notable lapse in scientific practice).

Doubts arose only when scientists, frustrated in their attempts to reproduce Schön's work, were first told that the technique of constructing a novel transistor—where the main switching component was a layer one molecule thick—was difficult to master, but were later told that only a few of the devices actually worked. An investigation began after two physics professors noticed identical graphs that supposedly showed data from different experiments. Schön was fired by Bell Labs following the panel's finding of scientific misconduct, but he insists his work is valid, "I made various mistakes in my scientific work, which I deeply regret. I truly believe that the reported scientific efforts are real, exciting, and worth working for."

The Virtue Imposter's Harms

The most artful of swindlers and con artists can extract money from their marks without a gun; at best, the mark happily hands over all he has, gleefully believing he is getting the better deal. The virtue imposter derives benefit, too—recognition, fame, power or authority, honor, professional prestige, and often the financial benefits that follow. The advantages of deceit are clear, but the wrong committed by the virtue imposter is arguably greater than that of the swindler. "You can't cheat an honest man," so the saying goes—and con artists will thrive so long as they can find a greedy person willing to cut some corners for a "special deal." The swindler plays on people's ethical weaknesses; the virtue imposter, by contrast, plays on people's better natures—their generosity,

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humility, their need for heroes, their aspirations for the goods of knowledge and discovery. Although the virtue imposter's wrongs are extensive and merit further examination, I want to focus on the wider social harms that result.

Most of the time, discovery of the virtue imposter is followed by examination of those whom the imposter has harmed—her students, colleagues, organization, or profession. But little consideration is given to the social effects of virtue imposters. Just as these imposters arguably can be given a rank order according to the effort required to pretend to possess certain virtues, the harms of virtue imposters—again, arguably—can be assigned a rank order according to the extent and severity of harms.

Assumption of authority. One certain harm is that those who believe that the virtue imposter is the genuine article will be misinformed about facts. More importantly, they will be misinformed about what an extraordinary person—the expert, hero, visionary—is like. And they will give the imposter an undeserved authority, seeking advice, looking to—perhaps emulating—how she approaches life's challenges, or social and political questions. Even worse, those who are taken in by the virtue imposter might apply all the wrong lessons they thought they learned about the imposter's "character."

Cynicism. It is now a commonplace to remark that contemporary society is cynical, and to attribute that cynicism to revelations about the acts of leaders and prominent professionals that have eroded the public trust—the Watergate scandal and official misrepresentations about military involvement are most often cited as the greatest breaches of trust in recent US history. But other revelations have contributed to this view. For instance, many were appalled to learn from James Jones's best-selling 1981 work, *Bad Blood*, of the existence of the Tuskegee study of syphilis (begun during the Great Depression and lasting for forty-two years), which followed, but did not treat, 399 syphilitic African-American men. This, and other medical exposés—such as the 1994 revelation that some government-sponsored physician-researchers had subjected over 16,000 American patients to radiation experiments from World War II to the mid-1970s—undermine confidence that medical science truly serves public health. Populations in nuclear test sites areas in Washington state and Nevada were exposed to fallout from nuclear testing without their knowledge or consent. Add to these scandals of the garden-variety-financial greed sort, such as the savings and loan debacle of the 1980s, and the recent Enron-type accounting scandals. These incidents can lead one to conclude that, if no one is motivated by good or the common good and all motives must be base ones, then cynicism is the only reasonable stance when regarding public enterprises.

Integrity and its seeming incompatibility with success. Integrity, commonly defined as the quality of adhering to sound moral principles—of being upright, honest, sincere—can seem quaint, irrelevant, even downright antithetical to success in life. Students who plagiarize believe that doing well—regardless how the quality is produced—is essential to success, which increasingly is defined as a white-collar, prestigious occupation with a high income. Cheating is but one step in the long ladder of competition. Adults, and the young people who learn by observing them, no longer find it unseemly to compete for anything, regardless of whether that goal—or good—is what they want. No longer is it shameful to talk about wanting a lot of money—not to do anything uplifting with it, but simply to have it. The pressure some adults feel might differ little from that felt by the high school student who, despite high grades, test scores, and class ranking, believes that if she does not cut a few corners, introduce so-called efficiencies, others will surpass her. In a winner-take-all society, the pressure to "win"—whether gaining admission to one's dream college, or achieving recognition as a sought-after history

The other consequence of accepting lies as ordinary is that the public can easily ridicule those fooled. Just consider the recent popularity of "reality" television shows. Part of the entertainment value of "Joe (the phony) Millionaire," to name just one, was that viewers relished the prospect of seeing the reactions of the women "Joe" woos when these women learn he is a construction worker—with a modest income. When lying becomes acceptable, it is easy to blame for their victimization those whose stance is not cynicism or suspicion, seeing them as naïve or silly for *not* assuming that deception and self-serving motives are always at work.

Conclusion

Perhaps the worst effect of the ubiquity of pretense is that the public becomes complacent about being lied to. As citizens we give up our duty of civic involvement and deliberation—accepting that entertainment is not aesthetically uplifting but merely emotionally manipulative, treating all others as involved in personal machinations designed to advance only their interests, believing that political and policy decisions invariably obscure base motives. In the end, we adopt a fatalistic or defensive stance toward public endeavors and withdraw from civic participation. The seventeenth century jurist and humanist Hugo Grotius, among others, realized that deceit—regardless whether in private or public affairs—conflicts with the liberty of judgment. If one *is* duped, if one accepts that one *will be* duped, then one's judgment is thwarted. Either one is hindered from making decisions, or good decisions are entirely accidental.

In not speaking up to my friend about her fiancé, I helped him impede my friend's judgment about, among other matters, her life prospects and her best interests. As it happened, the *New York Times* did the kindness of exposing Joe Cafasso, who immediately disappeared, for the time being.

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Sources: Sissela Bok's work on lying remains a helpful contemporary philosophical examination of types of deceptive speech and action: *Lying: Moral Choices in Public and Private Life* (Vintage Books, second edition 1999), but much more could be examined, for instance, plagiarism is mentioned merely in a note on p. 207; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Thomas More Publishing, 1981) 2.2. ques. 110, art. 2; Stephen Ambrose's excuse is found in "Whose Own Words?" by Jay Tolson in *U.S. New & World Report* (January 21, 2002); Doris Kearns Goodwin's explanation of her research methods are described in "How I Caused that Story: A

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