

Why and how we cheat?*

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Dan Ariely:

The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty (How we lie to everyone – especially ourselves)

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Dan Ariely is a professor of psychology and behavioural economics at Duke University in the United States. In his book *“The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty”* published in 2013, he wants to find an answer to the question why and when we cheat, how we lie even to ourselves and how our motivations can influence our judgement. The author also lists practical tools that can help us to restrain dishonesty. In order to support his arguments, Ariely presents a number of experiments, and for the purpose of deeper understanding, he provides anecdotes from his own life as examples, of which I only highlight a few.

Immediately at the beginning of the book, the author refutes the model entitled ‘Simple Model of Rational Crime (SMORC)’ from the Nobel laureate economist, Gary Becker. According to Becker’s theory, only rational factors drive our actions, i.e. when making decisions, we only compare benefits and costs. It follows from the theory that the number of crimes can be reduced if the potential cost of perpetrators is increased (stricter punishment is anticipated). According to his experiments,¹ Ariely claims that, as against the model and the intuition, neither the expected benefit nor the probability of getting caught determines the quantity of fraud. In his opinion, a much more complex thing is the case here as compared to what is supposed by a standard economist.

According to Ariely’s theory, when considering their decision, the people are balancing between two contrasting motivations: on the one hand, they would like

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Allegedly, Becker’s theory was inspired by a personal event. One day, he was in delay from a meeting and he was only able to park illegally. When making his decision, he only took into consideration the fact whether the benefit (arrive at the meeting in time) exceeds his cost or not (he might be fined). He did not consider what “the right or wrong behaviour” would have been.

¹ To quantify the dishonesty, the persons participating in the experiment had to solve simple mathematical tasks under different conditions (participants were allowed to cheat in various ways).

to see themselves as sincere and honest persons and, on the other hand, they would like to benefit from the advantages provided by dishonesty. However, both of these contradictory desires may be fulfilled at the same time if we are able to exculpate our acts or to explain our wrong action to ourselves. The interpretation of the experiments performed by Ariely was that every participant cheated practically to the same extent, but always just a little and the number of persons who had cheated to a great extent was only minimal. According to the statement by the author, as long as people cheat only “a little bit”,² they can enjoy its advantages while they can retain a positive image for themselves.

A second important finding by Ariely is that people cheat or steal more easily if it is not money that is involved, but, let’s say, copy paper, a pen or a can of cola left in the common refrigerator of the residential college. The editor draws attention to the fact that the more we move to the cash-free world, the more we can expect the spread of dishonesty.

On the basis of his research, Ariely states that similarly to viruses dishonesty can also be contagious. A finding of his experiment carried out at the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) was that the participants cheated more when they saw that a student belonging to their group (a CMU student) cheated, as compared to the case in which the cheating was by a student outside of their group, i.e. by a student from a rival university. In the editor’s opinion, minor offences must not be overlooked because they may easily become contagious and can lead to more serious transgressions.

In his book, the editor also presents how favours influence our decisions. In the experiment he presents, the participants were divided into two groups: one part was told that the experiment was sponsored by the “Third Moon” Gallery and the other part that it was sponsored by the “Lone Wolf”. Afterwards, they had to evaluate 60 paintings and the logo of the gallery where the picture can be purchased was indicated in the corner of each picture. The participants evaluated the pictures of the gallery with a better mark in the case when they saw the gallery’s logo and thought that this gallery sponsored the experiment. Another interesting discovery by the researchers was that preference for the pictures of the “sponsor” increased proportionally with the payment due for participation in the experiment. The editor stated that, in case someone makes a favour or gives a gift to us, then it influences our decision without noticing it. Otherwise, the large pharmaceutical companies understood and successfully apply these techniques. Frequently, they attempt to encourage doctors to recommend or prescribe the products of the relevant company to their patients by giving smaller gifts or an invitation to dinner.

² On the other hand, it is important to note that the “aggregate” value of a lot of little cases of dishonesty exceeded that of a few large ones.

On the other hand, lies have not only shady side but have also positive role for the purpose of the operation of the society. Ariely brings forward his own history as an example. In his young age, he suffered third degree burns affecting 70% of his body and therefore, he had to undergo a number of operations. Nurses encouraged him saying that the operations would not cause pain (which proved to be a lie later) and in this way, he spent at least the period remaining to the operation calmly.

At the same time, based on the experiments, Ariely proposes solutions as well for the “prevention” of dishonesty as well as for hindering non-ethical behaviour. If we are, directly or indirectly, reminded of the rules of ethics, then we will cheat less. This reminder may even be the Ten Commandments (the recalling of which was sufficient for the participants in the experiment not to cheat) or the signing of a declaration (Honour Code), in which the participants agreed not to cheat in the future.

In his book, Ariely listed a number of factors about which we would think that they influence our decisions, which, however, do not affect us decisively in reality, while there are many circumstances and impacts, about which we would not think that they influence us but they still do.