

Death of Honesty

“The Death of Honesty” by William Damon brings up an issue that will be with humanity forever; he delves deep into the implications of being truthful and offers valuable insight into the effects of lying. The publication “The Death of Honesty” was published in 2012, yet the underlying theme that honesty is diminishing over time seems to become more and more prevalent in society as time goes on. Damon takes the position that lying and a lack of virtue are detrimental to society, and without people taking more action against such behavior, they could even potentially lead to the death of democracy. Damon, with the help of interesting scenarios and examples, admirably persuades the reader to believe that dishonesty and a lack of priority placed on honesty will tear at the fabric of society to the point of no return.

Of course, Damon does not believe in a situation where lying should be outlawed or where lying is bad in all circumstances. He establishes himself with the reader by acknowledging that no one should necessarily be truthful in every scenario when he gives examples of situations where lying can be noble. His first example is “Reassuring an ungainly teenager that he or she looks great” (Damon par. 1), and the second example is when he suggests that lying to Nazis about the locations of hidden families during the Nazi occupation of Europe was also noble (par. 1).

After acknowledging some circumstances where the truth might not truly be the most virtuous option, Damon creates a paragraph with only one sentence that clearly shows his position about lying in an attempt to appeal to the reader’s ethics: “Teaching honesty is no longer a priority in our schools” (par. 5). This appeals to the reader by reminding them of their cultural standards, which include the idea that trust is important, especially at a young age.

Damon goes on to suggest that “No civilization can tolerate a fixed expectation of dishonest communications without falling apart from a breakdown in mutual trust” (par. 6). Damon attempts to justify this by saying that “people shun liars because they can’t be trusted” (par. 6). As much of a stretch as it is to suggest that whole civilizations can crumble as a result of too much lying, Damon appeals to the reader’s sense of logic when he backs up his statement by also suggesting that “people shun liars because they can’t be trusted” (par. 6). He goes on to back up his position about trust and honesty by examining the importance honesty has played in society throughout history; the Romans, Confucius, the Bible’s Old Testament, and even Abraham Lincoln and George Washington are all used as examples of people or traditions that placed importance on honesty or were commended for being honest.

After looking at the benefit of being honest and having integrity, Damon discusses the rationalizations of people within society who continue to be dishonest and even goes as far as to say that people in contemporary life, such as lawyers, politicians, businessmen, and others, can be foolish to deal with all people in an honest way. He states that, as a result of the continual lack of trust among people who lie, “The bounds of mutual moral obligation dissolve, and the laws of the jungle reemerge” (par. 9). “The laws of the jungle” in this case is a good example of Damon using pathos to create an emotional response. Most people would obviously find it hard to live in the jungle, and this example is an exaggeration used for dramatic effect.

Damon believes society is at a tipping point, where people will soon no longer assume that anyone is truthful. Again, Damon makes use of a one-sentence paragraph in an attempt to solidify his theory that civilization will crumble without honesty: “A basic intent to be truthful is required for all sustained civilized dealings” (par. 11).

Damon goes on to say that the news, political discourse, civic affairs, and, most concerning, especially for the young, the educational system have all lost credibility over the years. Damon appeals to the reader's pathos, yet forgets to include any logic in his examples. He simply states that things are bad but does not back them up with evidence. As a reader, you might think that the educational system is fraught with cheating, but there is no mention of how common this type of occurrence is or whether it happens less or more over time, especially considering the ratio of a growing world population. Damon does, however, state that, according to research, almost three-quarters of American college students have admitted to cheating at least once in their academics prior to college, without any reference to where the research was conducted.

After showing some more prominent and recent instances of cheating in the educational system, Damon proposes that American school systems and policies are failing to properly deal with cheating as an issue. He says that "There is little consistency, coherence, or transparency in many school policies" (par. 21). After listing recent instances of cheating, this statement might seem to logically resonate with the reader; however, it fails to properly acknowledge how prevalent such instances are.

"The problem here is the low priority of honesty in our agenda for schooling specifically and child-rearing in general" (par. 22), Damon says. Looking at this statement impartially, there might be a low priority placed on honesty in schooling, or there might be a lot of priority placed on honesty in schooling. However, the reader is likely to take his word for the former because, by the end of the text, the publication is written well enough to establish some trust and credibility for everything Damon has written.

In general, the author concentrates on specific examples of people not being truthful in a good attempt to connect with the reader's emotions, yet he makes the reader forget that he fails to discuss how prevalent lying is as a ratio within society and whether it is actually becoming more common. However, he is still most likely not wrong when he argues that dishonesty is an issue. All things considered, it seems that Damon focuses more on the detriment of dishonesty when he might also have benefited from focusing on the merit of being virtuous and honest to deliver his message. Overall, Damon succeeds in making the reader wonder about the extent and impact lies and honesty will have in the future. And we do now know that there is still a lot to learn about the benefits and consequences of honesty and truthfulness.