



Sample Content

Location: Exploring Traditions

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Explaining Dishonesty: The psychology of the cause justifying the means.

One thing that has continued to trouble me is the continued participation in the lies by people who I have long respected and viewed as honest.

This really came to a head for me recently. I was speaking with someone who came to meetings only in the last 2 years who had attended many different churches in her lifetime, finding help in many of them but all eventually running their course with her. She was introduced to the workers by a mutual friend, and initially met with a sister worker for whom I have a lot of respect. This lady tried to do her research on this new church for her, and somehow stumbled across information on the “2x2 church”. As is most public information available on the church at the time, it was not flattering (although far less so than what is now available). So she asked this sister worker about what she learned. The response from this sister was a very blatantly dishonest “Oh, we aren’t the 2 by 2s”. That was the end of the conversation, and she went on to profess. Then just last month I had a conversation with this woman after she learned of the FBI investigation and became concerned about the nature of the church she had recently joined. She told me about her research before joining, and expressed her disappointment of being lied to about what she had found online. I had no explanation

for her as to why this sister worker chose to lie to her. But I realized this was a common theme, as I had encountered dishonesty after dishonesty as I approached various workers trying to get answers from them about things that deeply troubled me post Dean Bruer revelations. What I found most bewildering is how easily the lies flowed from workers that I knew had a conscience about lying, yet seemed to have a seared confidence when it came to telling lies about the religious organization that they subjected their lives to. It was clear something was in play and that their brains clearly did not interpret these lies as actually lies.

Then last week I watched the [The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley](#), a documentary about Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes, and it yielded the answer I had somewhat suspected. Living in Silicon Valley, I knew her story well, both her rise and her fall. I recall during her rise thinking she seemed to be more of an actor than a leader, but I too bought into the idea that she must be for real given the many smart people that had bought into her cause. Only later did it become clear to all that her mind existed in an alternate reality, enabling her to lie with convincing ease. Yet it seems perhaps even to this day Holmes is unable to view her rampant deceptions as dishonest.

A [Duke University Behavioral Economist Alex Gibney](#) is featured heavily in the documentary, and provides answers to how people can buy into an ideal and have no conscience about being dishonest. He described a psychology experiment that shed some light on how people justify dishonest behavior to themselves. The experiment is described in the above linked article, but it basically concludes that when people believe the lies are justified by the cause they can further, they no longer see their dishonest words as lies (and won't even be picked up by a lie detector). This seems to be exactly what we see play out repeatedly by workers; they believe the end justifies the means when it comes to dishonesty about the organization they are part of. That is, keeping people inside the system (giving them salvation, as they believe) justifies any means necessary, including being blatantly dishonest with both themselves and with those who press them to be accountable for blatantly dishonest and harmful words and actions.

Elizabeth Holmes wanted desperately to believe that what she sought out to accomplish was possible, as the benefits to humanity of her work would be substantial. Believing in the theoretical good she could bring to the world justified any means of keeping that endeavor going, ultimately defrauding investors of many millions. Even today it seems she feels no remorse for her actions. This is in a situation where her dishonesty and harm has been indisputably proven. Now imagine the difficulty for workers to confront the reality of the corruption of the system they are operating in, when the means they are justified by is an unprovable promise of salvation they believe they are delivering. Given the magnitude of what they believe they are uniquely able to offer through their personal sacrifice, they can justify all

possible means to keeping it going. This includes spewing a steady stream of dishonesty when confronted with the harsh realities of the history of the church. This is so disconcerting, because these actions are often coming from otherwise good and honest people.

Ultimately I hope this helps provide some insights into the psychology on why we see such incongruent behavior from the people who seem to have a moral compass otherwise intact.