

On honesty

It all started with a wonderful relationship with a girl here. One day she meets some guy at a party who is “so sweet” , and decides that night that she wants to date him exclusively, because “it just feels right with him” . (So much for intuition: The relationship lasted three months.)

When she told me this, I said: “Well, I have to tell you I’m not pleased at the situation. We have a wonderful relationship as of two days ago, so you still have feelings for me, yet you are putting yourself in a situation where you won’t act on them, even though you want to. That’s emotional dishonesty, and I just don’t like spending time with dishonest people.” .

Her response was: “But I’m not being dishonest. When I met him, I lost the desire to be with you or with anyone else. I only want to be with him.” .

In a former life I’d probably have doubted her, saying that people just don’t change overnight. But when this happened a different thought occurred to me.

What is “good” about honesty? Is it just some universal good? I don’t buy that, and I don’t buy universal goods. For me, honesty is good because it enables people to build trust in you. When you have strong values; when you know why you follow those values; when you tell your values openly to people, without mincing words, and when you show people through your actions that you adhere to those values, people see “who you are” . They know why you do things, and the more they know about you, the more they can trust you. Sure, there’s always the possibility that you’ll make a rash decision, but the deeper the value is, the less likely it will be for that value to change.

For example, I tell all my friends exactly why I have the worldview I do, and each time that worldview buys me something, I usually make it a point to tell my friends. Thus they build more and more trust that I will act according to that worldview, because they see how enjoyable it makes my life. I’m not surprised that when it comes to things I like, my friends who know me have a very high level of trust in me; and that for the things I don’t like—for instance, keeping secrets— , they have absolutely no trust in me. That’s precisely the way it should be!

But we can see that the essence here isn’t “honesty” , it’s “constancy” . It’s hard to build trust in someone who isn’t honest because you don’t know what their values are. But for the same reason, it’s hard to build trust in someone who is fickle, even if they are honest about that fickleness. So this girl’s response didn’t change the way I felt about her, because the reason I was displeased was not about honesty per se, but about unpredictability when it comes to things which are important to me.

And that was a nice observation. Discipline in thought really is empowering.

Eindhoven, 14 May 2006

Jeremy Weissmann
jeremy@mathmeth.com