

## Why Does Paul Manafort Lie?

By Clancy Martin

The New York Times, Dec. 8, 2018

**To boast, to flatter, to deceive others, to deceive himself, out of habit — or perhaps just because.**

**Dr. Martin is a philosopher and novelist.**

Paul Manafort heading to a hearing in Federal District Court in Washington in June. Brendan Smialowski/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images



Paul Manafort heading to a hearing in Federal District Court in Washington in June. Brendan Smialowski/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Maybe Paul Manafort simply has more chutzpah than the rest of us. Here's a man convicted of financial fraud, facing further criminal prosecution for the lies he's accused of telling, who makes a deal to protect himself and proceeds, according to a memo sent to a federal judge on Friday, to lie to the prosecutors. Accused of lying, he offers as evidence in his defense ... what appear to be more lies. There are no good reasons to believe him, and yet he seems to brashly lie nevertheless.

When we look at photos of Mr. Manafort, President Trump's former campaign chairman, coming and going from court, he tends to be smiling, the proud, bold deceiver. When we see pictures of Mr. Trump's disgraced former lawyer Michael Cohen, by contrast, we see the glum, shamefaced confessor of the truth.

But perhaps chutzpah does not entirely explain Mr. Manafort's dishonesty. When considering the virtue of truthfulness and its opposite, mendaciousness, Aristotle identified two common kinds of lying characters: the boaster and the flatterer. The boaster, he said, "claims more than he has" and is "a contemptible sort of fellow" but "seems futile rather than bad." The vanity of the boaster is easily spotted, and consequently he tends to harm no one other than himself. He is at best a kind of amusing buffoon; at worst, an annoyance.

It seems to me this is one helpful way to think about a case like Mr. Manafort's. The notorious \$15,000 ostrich jacket, the desperate living beyond his means, the ostentatiousness — these all very predictably go with the pretense of the boaster. Why would Mr. Manafort lie, even to Robert Mueller, the special prosecutor? At least one reason would be that he's showing off.

There is something of the flatterer, too, in Mr. Manafort. The flatterer does to another what the boaster does to himself. With his lies, he tries to convince the one he flatters that the flattered is better than he is in reality. The flatterer affects this simulation, of course, because he seeks to gain some advantage for himself by pleasing the flattered. For this reason I suspect that Mr. Mueller and his team have heard as much praise from Paul Manafort as Donald Trump must have, back when they were still palling around.

Aristotle's famous point about virtue and vice is that both are habits that one cultivates. A case like Mr. Manafort's, by these lights, is more a cause for pity than for anger, and is easy to make sense of: Why would Mr. Manafort continue to dissimulate, even when it clearly runs counter to his own interests? Well, because that's what he's always done and always does. He doesn't exactly *intend* to mislead; it's just what comes naturally.

Even if Mr. Manafort is consciously, deliberately lying, he's foolish to do it and he's doing a bad job of it. Of course, he may well have a Machiavellian rationale in his head. "Those best at playing the fox have done better than the others," Machiavelli wrote, speaking of the powerful. "But you have to know how to disguise your slyness, how to pretend one thing and cover up another."

There are many more such arguments in defense of the necessity of lying for people who want to control the rest of us, and indeed this view agrees with what most of us believe about politicians in particular and power player types in general. Even Machiavelli, however, insisted that one must avoid lying too much, because people will stop believing you, and your lies will no longer work.

Before we get carried away feeling superior to Mr. Manafort, we should admit we are all experts in deception. Politeness and other forms of social expediency prevent us from telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth every day. Evolutionary psychologists teach us that lies, self-deception and hypocrisy are essential to ordinary psychological well-being and the survival of the human species. We bluff our way through a lot of life.

So we might do well to think of Mr. Manafort as a kind of outlier or cautionary tale, an extreme example of a weakness we all share, rather than as a case of exceptional vice in the midst of our more ordinary virtue.

Although many of us would like to think of Mr. Manafort as a scheming, calculating, coldblooded Prince of Lies, it's probably the case that he has told so many different stories over the course of a long career as a liar that at this point he no longer quite knows what the truth is. As Nietzsche taught us, we tend to deceive ourselves about when, how and why we lie, and even about the act of lying itself.

Why? At least in part because lies are more effective when we don't know that we are lying. "There must be self-deception in order to produce a great effect," Nietzsche wrote. If this is true, unfortunately for Mr. Manafort — and, one worries, for our president — one can become so confused about the distinction between truth and falsity that one can no longer really tell the difference.

We might actually prefer that Mr. Manafort be a straightforward liar, because the unmindful liar is more dangerous, both to himself and to others. As Mr. Dryden admonishes T.E. Lawrence in "Lawrence of Arabia": "If we've been telling lies, you've been telling half-lies. A man who tells lies, like me, merely hides the truth. But a man who tells half-lies has forgotten where he put it."

I think, in short, that we can learn from the pitiable case of Paul Manafort. The truth requires courage rather than cowardice. For us ordinary human beings, the right thing to do is most often the difficult thing to do, and this is especially so when it comes to knowing and speaking the truth. It's almost always easier, lazier, more convenient to boast, to flatter, to lie, to fail to interrogate yourself about why you believe what you do. But we've seen where these habits led Mr. Manafort, over the course of his life, and none of us want to join him there.

And what about Mr. Manafort? Like most liars, he's probably feeling lonely, with only his secrets to comfort him. But if I'm right, and he no longer really knows the difference between truth and lie, he's lost even his secrets.

**Clancy Martin is a professor of philosophy at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the author of "Love and Lies: An Essay on Truthfulness, Deceit, and the Growth and Care of Erotic Love."**

***Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).***

What do we use cookies for? We use cookies and similar technologies to **recognize your repeat visits and preferences**, as well as to **measure the effectiveness of campaigns and analyze traffic**. To learn more about cookies, including how to disable them, view our [Cookie Policy](#). By clicking "I Accept" or "X" on this banner, or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies unless you have disabled them.