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# The Truth About Honesty: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the Trait of Honesty

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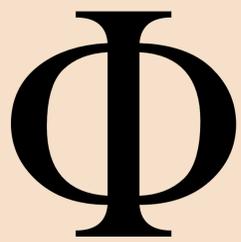
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# The Truth about Honesty: An Analysis of the Trait of Honesty



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### Abstract

In both the psychological and philosophical literature, there is little time devoted to a robust understanding of the character trait of honesty. The trait of honesty is often used as an example of a beneficial or *good* character trait, yet the gap in the literature raises a vexing question: **what is honesty?** This poster reports ongoing work aimed at identifying folk theories of honesty. We argue that an understanding of these theories can illuminate a principled understanding of this character trait in both psychology and philosophy.

### Research Overview

- Utilize qualitative surveys and analyses to develop an operational definition of honesty.
- Develop quantitative measures in order to assess the strength of the trait in individuals.
- Classify and categorize honesty within the Five Factor Model of personality in psychology.
- Generalize the construct of virtuous traits within virtue ethics in philosophy.

### Methods and Measures

**Participants:** 65 Boise State undergraduate students (25 females, 14 males, and 26 failing to report) with ages ranging from 18 – 50 ( $M = 21.97$ ). Participants enrolled in the experiment through the SONA program and were awarded credit in their general psychology course for participation in this study.

#### Materials

This study utilizes four free-response questions regarding honesty and dishonesty. Participants could choose to either opt out of responding to or respond with a minimum of 500 characters [see Table 1 for prompts]. These responses provide a general conception of the thematic backbone of the trait of honesty in order for us to build a considered construct of the trait.

#### Procedure

The four items were presented through the web-based program SONA and no proctors were present. Participants who selected the survey from the available options were presented with an online consent form which they signed electronically. After the participants responded, they were presented with a debriefing form.

#### Process

##### Survey

- Approved through IRB
- Built through Qualtrics
- Administered through SONA

##### Organize

- Responses consolidated in Excel
- Researchers extracted major themes
- Codebook is developed

##### Code



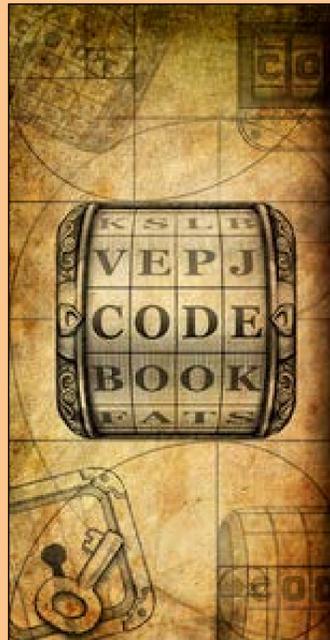
##### Analyze

- Coding is consolidated
- Interrater reliability calculated
- Frequency counts calculated

### Table 1

#### Survey Questions

1. Describe a situation where someone acts HONESTLY.
2. Explain what makes the situation you just described an act of HONESTY.
3. Describe a situation where someone acts DISHONESTLY.
4. Explain what makes the situation you just described an act of DISHONESTY.



### Major Themes

[REC] **Recognizing** when honesty is applicable

[ALT] **Altruism** – benefiting others at a cost to self

[RAR] Honesty is **rare** and dishonesty is common

[TRU] **Truthfulness** – or lack of – is a key indicator of honesty

[PROP] Stealing or returning **property**

[RESP] Taking **responsibility** for one's actions

[MOT] Honesty is **motivated** by either what a person gets or how they feel

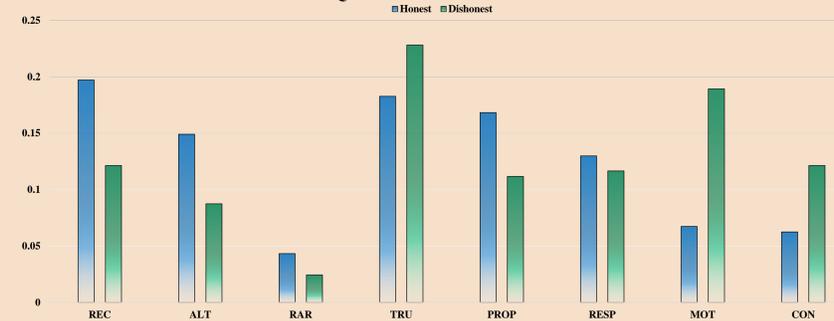
[CON] Breach of **contract**, including promise breaking and cheating

Note: each category is further divided into multiple sub-categories in order to record the relevant aspects of the category. These are not reported on this poster for simplicity.

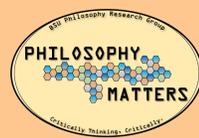
### Results

Question # & Code	REC	ALT	RAR	TRU	PROP	RESP	MOT	CON
Q1 (H)	60%	57.5%	12.5%	52.5%	57.5%	25%	20%	27.5%
Q2 (H)	42.5%	20%	10%	45%	30%	42.5%	15%	5%
Q3 (D)	57.5%	45%	12.5%	62.5%	32.5%	50%	62.5%	32.5%
Q4 (D)	5%	0%	0%	55%	25%	10%	35%	30%

#### RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF THEMATIC ELEMENTS



Our interrater reliability on the major thematic elements, per question, are as follows:  $\kappa = 0.39$  for Question 1,  $\kappa = 0.31$  for Question 2,  $\kappa = 0.52$  for Question 3, and  $\kappa = 0.41$  for Question 4. The standardly accepted  $\kappa$  score is a score greater than .4. We exceeded this standard in our analysis of questions 3 and 4, yet fell shy of this goal for questions 1 and 2.



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### Discussion

#### Interpreting the Data

- Initially, we expected to see the same themes emerging from both honesty and dishonesty responses, yet it seems as though we think about honesty and dishonesty as *two different traits*.
- These preliminary results show us that there are commonalities in the folk conception of honesty and dishonesty. This further suggests that these are more *trait-driven* than *situationally driven*, contrary to the situationalist's position.
- The theme of 'motivation' is highly present in the dishonesty responses, yet conspicuously absent in the honesty responses. This may be due to the need to justify the attribution of dishonesty (for blameworthiness) by understanding the motivation of the dishonest act. On the other hand, we are not as apt to demand justification for acts of honesty.

#### Examining our Methodology

- Qualitative research is more difficult than we initially expected due to the fact that the methodology is developed as the research progresses. This difficulty has led to a lower interrater reliability than we hoped for.
- Due to our lower-than-hoped-for interrater reliability, we are not yet in a position to operationalize definitions of honesty and dishonesty.

#### Furthering the Research

- Our main focus is on increasing our interrater reliability.
- After operationalizing definitions of honesty and dishonesty, we need to develop quantitative surveys in order to fully develop a folk theory of honesty (and dishonesty).
- After our methodology is fully-developed, we are interested in surveying different demographics in order to see if our conclusions are generalizable over other segments of the population.

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