

Cheating
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Cheating involves “breaking the rules.” It is usually, but not always, done secretly. We all know what it is to cheat in games. It is done to gain an advantage or avoid some consequence that one does not want. This is regarded as **unfair** to those who abide by the rules. Tom and Sally are playing checkers. It is Tom’s turn, but Sally leaves the room to answer the phone. While she is gone, Tom moves two checkers instead of one. When Sally returns, Tom simply tells her that it is her turn. Tom has acted secretly. He has done this to gain an advantage in the game. If Sally finds out what Tom has done, she will regard what he has done as **unfair**. He has broken the rules. Cheating in a game of checkers may not have serious consequences for anyone. “It’s just a game,” we might say. Of course, if it is a tournament, or if the winner gets a prize, cheating may be regarded as quite serious. In any case, cheating in checkers is frowned upon—as it is in all games.

We also are familiar with cheating in academic life. Here it won’t do to say, “it’s just a game.” There are rules in the academic arena, too—rules about taking tests, writing papers, doing research and writing up reports on the results, submitting research and other work for publication, and so on. Cheating on a test may enable someone to get a high grade, or at least pass. But this will raise the class average, and it may result in someone else—someone who did not cheat—getting a lower grade, or even failing. It may also help the cheater get a job or gain admission into a graduate or professional program for which he or she is not well qualified; and this might be done at the expense of some other student. This cheating would be both **dishonest** and **unfair**. As we will see, it might also pose other problems for people.

Cheating and the Golden Rule

A good question to ask about cheating is, “What if everyone did that?” This helps us see that successful cheating usually works if most people don’t. If everyone cheated, it wouldn’t take long for this to be discovered, and no one could be trusted not to cheat. Their teachers would not be fooled.

Suppose Tom thinks, “Of course the teacher will find out if too many cheat. So, I hope not many do. Actually, not many do—at least not on the same test. So, why shouldn’t I cheat if I can get away with it?” We could reply with some **Golden Rule** thinking. The **Golden Rule** says that we should treat others as we think they should treat us. Consistent thinking requires this—so does fairness. So, we could ask Tom how he would feel if he did honest work while Cheating Charlie got a better grade than he did by cheating; and how he would feel if, because of this, Cheating Charlie got into medical school and he didn’t. If Tom would object to Cheating Charlie’s behavior, he should also object to his own cheating.

Tom should also try looking at this through the eyes of his teacher. If Tom cheats on a test, he is trying to fool his teacher into thinking that she is doing a better job teaching him than she actually is. So, if he gets away with it, Tom is actually making it more difficult for her to do her job well. How would he feel about this if he were the teacher?

“So what?” Tom might ask. “What harm can really come from faking my lab work this one time?” Again the **Golden Rule** might help. If it’s all right for Tom to fake his lab work, it’s all right for others in the class to do the same. But there is more. If it’s all right for Tom to fake his lab work, why isn’t also all right for Sally to cheat on her math test, Charlie on his history test, and so on? And wouldn’t it also be all right for medical researchers to cheat in their work, salespeople to cheat their customers, and...? Where does this end?

Tom may reply that he is cheating only this one time. But he can easily fool himself about this. To cover one lie it is often necessary to tell several more (and to remember the lies one has told!). Furthermore, what reason is there to think that this is the only time that Tom will feel the need to cheat? Will there really be any less pressure on him on the job than in the classroom?

When we are tempted to cheat, it is very easy to overestimate the good that will come from it and to underestimate the harm that might result.¹ This is because when we cheat we tend to look at our situation from a very narrow perspective. A broader perspective will include both those who are directly deceived as well as others who might indirectly be caused **harm**. Suppose Tom cheats in his science lab and gets a really good grade in his class. Tom’s teacher is impressed and writes him a strong letter of recommendation that gets him into a top medical school. Tom finds that, to succeed there, he needs to cheat some more. In the end, he becomes an incompetent and dangerous physician. Meanwhile, Robert isn’t accepted into that medical school, even though he has done well in his classes without cheating. It’s just that Tom’s grades are a little better as a result of his cheating. How would Tom feel if he were Robert and found out about Tom’s cheating? How would Tom feel if he were the teacher who had written the strong letter of recommendation and found out about the cheating?

Cheating and integrity

Cheaters must live with themselves. Eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume asks us to consider a sensible knave who says:

That *honesty is the best policy*, may be a good general rule, but is liable to many exceptions; and he, it may perhaps be thought, conducts himself with most wisdom, who observes the general rule, and takes advantage of all the exceptions.²

Hume has two kinds of response to the challenge of the sensible knave. First, he appeals to our personal integrity and the satisfaction that comes with it:

Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, a satisfactory review of our own conduct; these are circumstances very requisite to happiness, and will be cherished and cultivated by every honest man, who feels the importance of them.³

Second, the honest person has:

the frequent satisfaction of seeing knaves, with all their pretended cunning and abilities betrayed by their own maxims; and while they purpose to cheat with moderation and

secrecy, a tempting incident occurs, nature is frail, and they give into the snare; when they can never extricate themselves, without a total loss of reputation, and the forfeiture of all future trust and confidence with mankind.⁴

Sadly, Hume concludes, those who act as the sensible knave recommends seem willing to trade their integrity for “gewgaws and toys.”⁵

Discussion questions

1. Why is cheating usually done in secret? What, if anything, does this tell us about whether there is something wrong with cheating?
2. What might one lose by cheating?
3. What would make cheating unfair? Unfair to whom?
4. Does cheating hurt the cheater? If so, how? If not, is it still wrong to cheat? Why or why not?
5. Who might be hurt by cheating?
6. “But everyone cheats. So, what’s wrong with my cheating?” Discuss.

Examples

1. Emily feels very fortunate to be studying with Professor Smythe, one of the country’s best-known scientists in her field. At the beginning of the year, she was thrilled to be assigned to his research team as an undergraduate, and now she is anxious that the experiment he assigned her should provide data in support of the analysis that the lab team as a whole is seeking to develop. Unfortunately, her results stubbornly point in a different direction, no matter how many times she repeats the experiment. Believing she owes her professor a set of data that will fit better with his thesis, Emily modifies the records in her lab notebook and adjusts her outcomes to support Professor Smythe’s idea.

2. Carlos has been racing to complete his lab assignment by the due date. He’s a member of the Debate Team, and he’ll be traveling with the team both of the next two weekends. Plus, his Mom has told him he had better be home for his grandmother’s 80th birthday next month “...or else!” It seems pretty obvious to him that the equipment he’s been using is messed up. He has been talking to the students around him at other benches and his results are off by the same amount every time he runs a new sample. Obviously, some silly idiot miscalibrated his equipment. Carlos corrects for the error and submits results much more closely aligned with those of his classmates.

The examples come from Creighton University’s handbook, Learning in the Academy: An Introduction to the Culture of Scholarship, available at: www2.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/docs?LearningInAcademy.pdf.

Notes

1. For a discussion of these tendencies regarding lying in general, see Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).
2. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd. ed, P.H. Nidditch, ed., pp. 282-3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 283.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For further reading on cheating, see Bernard Gert, "Cheating," *Teaching Ethics*, Vol. 6, Number 1, Fall 2005, pp. 15-27.