

Rational Self-Interest, Intellectual Curiosity, and the Capitalist University
SVHE 2009
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This essay addresses the significance of cheating in academia and its relationship to cheating in the marketplace. By considering insights put forth by Naomi Klein and contemporary responses to Kantian ethics, I explore how the culture of the business world considers private gain and its relationship to the public good. My presentation addresses the significance of intellectual curiosity within the marketplace and academia. There are different types of cheating which I will address here, but I am most concerned with addressing the significance cheating has for character development. I am interested in addressing the question of when it is ok to break rules and *how* individuals decide (or *if* they decide) whether rule breaking is ethically justified. How does rule-breaking in academia connect to rule-breaking in the marketplace?

Studies by Linda K. Treviño and others indicate that business students have a higher rate of cheating than any other majors, even at the MBA level. Many of these business students of today will be our business leaders in the future. It is not clear whether the recent global financial freefall can be linked directly to a business culture which accepts cheating as a given, but it is clear that some of the most egregious human rights violations in recent history have been due to a business philosophy which recognizes profits at all costs as the *raison d'être*.¹ When the corporate business world is left to police itself, there is often a high rate of failure, both ethically and legally. There are of course some businesses which do not cheat, even when they know they could get

¹ Naomi Klein and many others have pointed out that when businesses are left to police themselves, it is often the case that labor laws and human rights are circumvented to maximize profits. See Klein's *No Logo* (New York: Picador, 2002) for an analysis of the subtle (and not-so subtle) influence on public policy.

away with it, just as there are individuals who do not. The individuals and businesses which do not cheat, even when they know they can get away with it, tend to be the most ethical.

On the other hand, there are some businesses, marketers, managers, and students who are concerned about others' *perception* of them as ethical agents above everything else. Such agents are capable of doing the right things (aiming at ethical behavior), but are unlikely to do it for the right reasons.² Many resources and much capital are spent on the creation, marketing, and advertisement of the image of a caring ethical agent who has the good of the community in mind. Often this image is produced and sold out of the crassest types of self-interest.

When considering these issues from either a Kantian or utilitarian perspective, the significance of these issues is evaluated very differently. In my view, Kant's ethics has a fundamental weakness in dealing with some aspects of self-interest, specifically when applied to assumptions about fair market value and the respect of the moral law which connects all rational agents.³ However, in spite of such problems, Kant's ethics is still important because of his analysis about motives and *why* agents do what they do.⁴ Often

² Plato anticipates this situation in book VIII of the *Republic* where he surveys the best types of political leaders. According to Plato, honor-based rule is not truly virtuous because there is a lack of understanding of *why* honorable things are honorable. The weakness of the position is that such individuals aim at the *appearance* of virtue, rather than true virtue. Such a character typology might be applied to the Klingons in *Star Trek*: they are willing to do all sorts of things which aim at honor, but they may be blind to other nuances of the ethical dimension.

³ Kant's assumption of fair market values and *why* a merchant should not swindle an inexperienced buyer or child in the *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* presupposes a universality about market conditions which ignores the contextual basis of haggling at some level. Nonetheless, the idea of fair market value still retains some plausibility, since within the context of haggling, there are reasonable standards of plausible and implausible haggles which are not completely arbitrary or relative. Reasonable people can disagree about what constitutes a fair or unfair deal, but it does not therefore follow that fairness is a vacuous concept.

⁴ In my hometown, there is a rivalry between local banks: both pay for advertisements to announce how much they have raised for charities, which raises the question of whether one can do the right thing for the wrong reasons. Utilitarians and consequentialists of all stripes generally have no problem with this, but one

it is the case that *why* someone does something indicates more about the individual's character than what they actually do.

There are multiple ways of conceiving rational self-interest, but I would like to compare the reasoning process of individual university students to the players within the marketplace by engaging the following questions: why am I here and how can I get ahead? What limits are there on my behavior to advance my own interests? What risks do I sustain by testing these limits? Are the risks worth it?

Most students enter the university with some notion that it will help their long-term self interests, and indeed this is usually true, given that the average four-year college degree recipient still earns a million dollars more over the course of a lifetime than persons with no four year degree. The market itself shapes university curriculum both directly and indirectly. It should surprise no one that the values of capitalism influence what is esteemed in the space of the university.⁵

The marketplace fundamentally differs from the university when it comes to the value of intellectual curiosity. Whether one has intellectual curiosity is not something important for the marketplace in general. However, within the university, intellectual curiosity is very important, since this value creates the best students, learners who do not seek knowledge merely out of compulsion, but learn because they think on their own.

could argue that the motives of these businesses have more to do with outdoing their competition than a genuine concern about the causes which they support.

⁵ I was teaching in UNLV when the Consciousness Studies program still existed, a program which both the philosophy department and psychology department distanced themselves from. It certainly may be granted that UNLV may not be a typical university (where Sportsbook Management was one of the most popular courses), but the reason the Consciousness Studies program existed from 1997-2002 is the persistent interest of individuals to talk to their deceased relatives. This program aimed at establishing some kind of credibility which went beyond Jonathan Edwards' *Crossing Over*, as UNLV hired Raymond Moody to take over as chair when I was there, a medical doctor with a philosophy and a psychology Ph.D. The point of this is that the curriculum was a function of a multi-million dollar grant, given to the university by the Las Vegas real estate developer Robert Bigelow.

Intellectually curious students want to think on their own, not because someone tells them that is what they *should* do, but because they take pleasure in that type of activity. In general, I think people seek pleasure by nature and there is a pleasure in knowing, even if it is the case that not everyone experiences that activity as pleasurable.⁶

Unfortunately not all university students have intellectual curiosity, but those who do are the most likely to contribute positively to communities of learners. This issue of intellectual curiosity is significant, since it fundamentally conditions how the individual frames and evaluates the series of questions mentioned above, as well as the question, “what am I supposed to get out of a university education?”

After reading Katherine Mangan’s article that cites studies which show a rate of self-reported cheating among business majors of over fifty percent, I asked my intro philosophy students (I teach at a university which has a very strong business school and only recently has become a university) why this was the case.⁷ One marketing major found it difficult to contain herself and blurted out, “It is because we are under such tremendous pressure!” I wondered to myself, “[Self]--more pressure than doctors or nurses?” The smartest and the hardest working students cheat very little, so there is some obvious correlation between stupidity and cheating: the smartest students know they have a good shot at earning A’s or B’s, while the less bright students often do not think they

⁶ Aristotle claims that the philosopher is the most happy because of the joy of the sweetness of contemplation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE X). While much of his inquiry regarding virtue is useful to address why people do what they do and how they should feel about moral action, it is difficult to ignore the fact that his definition is inaccessible and unattainable for children, non-rational animals, and most human beings. His analysis of happiness and virtue is grounded in a perspective which devalues the experiences of those who are not philosophers. In this respect, it is important to examine the context of Aristotle’s work and consider whether ethical theories can be free from a perspectival bias.

⁷ Mangan, Katherine. “Survey Finds Widespread Cheating in M.B.A. Programs,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. September 9, 2006.

have much to lose by cheating, especially when cheating is unevenly policed by professors and universities.

Part of the reason cheating is unevenly policed is the sheer unpleasantness of confronting cheaters: most professors pursue their path as educators because they have intellectual curiosity and like to learn, not because they want to assume the role of policing. It is easier to ignore cheaters and many professors follow their inclinations to avoid conflict. Suspecting that someone is cheating vs. knowing someone is cheating is frequently difficult to prove and there are often compelling reasons to avoid souring the student-professor pedagogical/androgogical relationship.

The difficulty in specific cases of plagiarism to distinguish between the clueless student and the dishonest student creates challenges: in cases of plagiarized essays, should a student be given an F with an option to rewrite? Should the student be given an F for the assignment with no option to rewrite? Should there be a minor or major additional penalty? Should the student fail the course for one sentence or two sentences which are lifted from someone else's work? There is difficulty in establishing precise guidelines for many actual cases.

I teach a first year inter-disciplinary seminar which is writing intensive and we have the benefit of using turnitin.com to screen for plagiarism. However, every semester there still are students who plagiarize anyway, even when we use the database. One of the strategies which we employ to help minimize plagiarism is to try to convince students that they are denying themselves important citation skills and a type of knowledge if they do plagiarize.⁸ Framing arguments that appeal to the student's self-interest are not always

⁸ Some plagiarism tutorials do this. See the Center for 21st Century Teaching Excellence, "The Fraud of Plagiarism," <http://www.cte.usf.edu/plagiarism/plag.html>. This online tutorial states, "Plagiarism has far-

persuasive, but it is one strategy which makes sense for the purposes of reaching some students.

One of the contributing factors to widespread cheating among business students is the perception that the student who does not cheat is a sucker: what kind of chump wastes his time doing careful research when cheathouse.com can supply an essay for a nominal fee? Studies indicate that the culture of cheating is so prevalent that many students view it as an acceptable practice. When people visit pristine beaches, individuals are often very reluctant to litter; however, when beaches are already filled with trash, individuals are much more likely to drop their garbage: whether we like it or not, the conduct of the group influences how the majority of individual students think about themselves, plagiarism, and other forms of dishonesty within academia.

Similar practices exist in popular perception of whether it is ethically permissible to cheat on one's taxes. If there is a perceived injustice in taxation, the old argument has it that if one steals from the stealer, then the practice of bending the rules does not necessarily indicate a corrupt character. On highways in the United States, most motorists assume that they can exceed the speed limit by five miles an hour: it violates a civil law which exists by convention and virtually no one has any moral inhibitions about speeding if it is done under conditions which do not seem dangerous. These are two types of law-breaking which are often dismissed as not being very serious transgressions.⁹ Yet how do these widespread practices differ from the widespread bending of the rules in the context of higher education?

reaching consequences. The most destructive effect of the act of plagiarism is that it robs you of your ability to think for yourself.”

⁹ Although they come from different traditions, both Thomas Aquinas's account of natural law and Mohandas Gandhi's interpretation of ahimsa support the idea that bad civil laws should not be followed, since they lose their obligatory force.

There are different types of cheating and rule-breaking, both within and outside of academia. In English, the word “cheat” has different meanings in different contexts, but I would like to defend the claim that cheaters are invariably sneaky rule-breakers. There are differences of course between cheating on exams, cheating on a spouse, cheating on one’s taxes, and cheating in sports. There are also many cases in which rules are broken, but cheating is not involved. One can strategically break the rules as part of the game in basketball, American football, and many other games: usually it only becomes cheating when there is sneakiness involved. i.e., when someone breaks the rules and deliberately deceives someone else. Strategic rule-breaking is built into many games and sports.¹⁰

Intellectual curiosity, though not necessarily important for the marketplace, is very important within higher education and academia. However, within the university, some disciplines require more of a commitment to intellectual curiosity than others. Chris Bates’ article, “A Student’s View: Why Cheating Matters,” offers some rationale to account for why physics majors are statistically less likely to cheat than engineers.¹¹

He writes:

Innovation in Physics is driven by a curiosity to see how certain variables and conditions are related at a fundamental level. Experiments tend to be costly, with no guarantee of fame or glory—indeed, most physicists would acknowledge that they did not enter the profession for the money, but rather with the hope and expectation of discovering how our world operates. To physicists, questions of ‘Why?’ are sometimes not understood as well as questions of ‘How?’ (As Richard Feynman put it, ‘I think I can safely say that nobody understands quantum mechanics.’) Physicists must be motivated by the pursuit of knowledge itself.

¹⁰ When players in basketball and in football break into the open uncontested, a defensive player will deliberately foul them to prevent a score: this violates the rules of the game, but it prevents the uncontested score. It is worth recognizing that this general type of rule-breaking is not conceived of as a type of cheating.

¹¹Bates, Chris. “A Student’s View: Why Cheating Matters,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. February 20, 2009.

Although Bates is primarily concerned with comparing the differences between engineering and physics students' perception of cheating, his commentary is still useful to address business students insofar as it considers the motives for the pursuit of knowledge. Some students (and the disciplines which they select) value the pursuit of knowledge and truth itself more highly than others: whether the pursuit of truth is viewed as an end in itself or in terms of its instrumental use value fundamentally conditions cultural practices and sheds light on why someone may or may not consider cheating as an option.

When truth is viewed by an individual as an end in itself, it seems less likely that she will adopt the maxim, "if you ain't cheating, you ain't trying." I want to suggest that there is an inverse relationship between intellectual curiosity and likelihood of cheating. Some disciplines require a more demanding commitment to intellectual curiosity and this commitment is something which is difficult to fake. My claim here is that intellectually curious people have a tendency not to cheat as much as people lacking intellectual curiosity. Of course there are exceptions to this claim, but the generalization often is correct.

Intellectual curiosity fundamentally influences what it means to the individual to "get ahead" and evaluate the question: why am I here? I do not think there is anything wrong with cultivating skills to amass wealth. It makes sense for virtually everyone's own self-interests and often helps an individual's prospects of giving back to communities and contributing to the common good. However, I still think it is likely that business students will continue to cheat at higher rates than non-business students. The reason this will probably be the case has everything to do with evaluating the question,

“why am I here?” Students who value education as a means to nurture and take pleasure in their own intellectual curiosity usually conceive of education differently than those who look at education solely as an instrumental means to acquire wealth.

Thinking about the university according to a business model is obviously important in order to budget and maintain financial solvency. However, there are limitations in thinking about education exclusively according to a business analogy. The consumer mentality (I paid for my grade and the customer is always right) overlooks something important about the purpose of a university education: the best institutions within academia offer something great in the service to humanity, since there is a privileged space to pursue ideas with the aim of truth as the ultimate goal, rather than the instrumental goal of manipulating us into buying things or seeking opportunities to amass wealth.

In closing, let me indicate that there are many business students who are honest and succeed in making ethical choices. Just because business students as a whole have a higher rate of cheating than non-business majors certainly does not mean that all business students are corrupt: what is true of the whole is not necessarily true of the parts. Thus the point of this essay is not to indict the pursuit of business as a discipline within academia. Rather, one of the purposes of this essay is to initiate further dialogue about the significance of intellectual curiosity.

Plato and Aristotle both claim that taking pleasure in the right types of objects contributes a great deal toward character development. Individuals can be trained to some degree to take pleasure in different activities: whether one experiences drinking scotch or exercising as pleasurable activities is not hardwired into most individuals. However,

many persons can develop a taste for such activities. I think that we should try to develop tastes for things that are good for us, such as healthy foods and exercise. In general, such tastes are more valuable to develop than a taste for cigars. The point of this is that people have a tendency to pursue things that give them pleasure and it is possible to train oneself to take pleasure in activities which are good for one's health. We are able to train ourselves to some extent to take pleasure in various types of activities which we otherwise would not "naturally" experience, but is it possible to train oneself to take pleasure in intellectual curiosity? This is important question, given the intrinsic and extrinsic goods which usually follow for both the individual and the community from having intellectual curiosity. Are there techniques which can be used to cultivate intellectual curiosity?

Intellectual curiosity is something which is valued differently in the context of the marketplace and the space of the university. Even within academia, the importance of intellectual curiosity varies from discipline to discipline. Whether or not intellectual curiosity is something that can be taught is a worthwhile question to engage, since the disciplines which require students to have more of it would be much better served with a greater pool of prospective students. Business disciplines also would benefit by having more students who are self-starters in the process of learning by taking pleasure in learning on their own. Intellectual curiosity directly influences what an individual values, both inside and outside the walls of academia. Individuals as well as communities have an interest in cultivating it, since those who value it are probably less likely to cheat, both within academia and in the marketplace.