

Cheating, Integrity and Human Flourishing

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University of Montana students are more honest than the average US college student. Over the last 17 years, Donald McCabe, a prominent researcher from Rutgers University, has surveyed more than 165,000 college students on academic honesty. According to a recent survey conducted by McCabe in Missoula, UM students did better than the average.

Despite the local good news, we should still be concerned about academic honesty. A well-documented national trend shows increasing rates of cheating among both high school and college students. For example, a recent Duke University study found that 75 percent of high school students admit to cheating.¹ Furthermore, there has been a significant change in the kind of students who cheat. It's no longer the lazy bully making the A-student write his essay: it's the honors student buying ready-made A-papers off the Internet. According to Stanford University education professor, "Eighty percent of [high school] honors students cheat on a regular basis."²

Why is this change important? As author Madeline Levine comments, "It's worrisome that the highest-performing kids in high school have few qualms about cheating. [These are the people who] will be our doctors, our lawyers, our policy makers. And if the issue of integrity is on the back burner, that doesn't bode well for all of us."³ Compounding the problem, such students have almost no fear of being caught, because, according to one study, "less than 2 percent of all academic cheaters get caught, and only half of them get punished. There is almost a 99 percent chance of getting away with it."⁴

It is a cause for concern when many of our best students are willing to trade their integrity for success. What can we say to these high-achieving young people who feel that in order to be successful they must cheat, especially when they have no fear of getting caught or suffering any consequences? In many ways, this situation is an example of a classic philosophical problem: why be moral? If you can get what you want the easy way, then why not do it?

Plato attempted to answer this question over 2000 years ago in his famous dialogue *The Republic*. There, he approaches the problem through a story about a shepherd who finds a

¹ Regan McMahon, "Everybody Does It," San Francisco Chronicle, September 9, 2007

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

ring that makes him invisible. This shepherd uses the power of invisibility to illicitly gain wealth, power and position. Drawing from this tale, one of the characters in Plato's dialogue argues that given such power, every person would behave in exactly the same way. In other words, people only act morally because they fear the consequences of getting caught. Plato thinks otherwise, and argues that doing right is a good in and of itself. Justice is its own reward, and Plato argues that dishonest people corrupt their souls. Doing right creates a healthy soul, and doing wrong leads to a diseased one.

Plato's conception of a "healthy soul" may be dated, but I think his general approach to answering the question, "Why be moral?" is sound. Recent philosophers are using the notion of human flourishing to discuss these issues. While human flourishing is a complex notion, it's common sense to say that in order to *flourish*, humans need things like healthy friendships and loving relationships. We also need to like ourselves—to "feel good inside our own skins." In order to have healthy relationships with others and with ourselves, we need both the respect of others and respect for ourselves. In short, we must possess the character trait of integrity.

Integrity has two important aspects that can support human flourishing: moral consistency and autonomy. The person of integrity is consistent and can, therefore, be trusted. But when one decides to cheat, one becomes an opportunist.⁵ Opportunists do only what it takes to get what they want: they do not act out of personal conviction. The other attribute of people with integrity is autonomy. People of integrity think for themselves. Many of the students who self-report cheating say they do so to maintain the approval of their parents and peers. These students, again, are not motivated by personal convictions, but rather seek the approval of others.

So one answer to the question "why be moral?" is to maintain one's integrity. Unfortunately, we are creating a culture where many young people feel that they are under so much pressure to succeed that they must sacrifice their integrity to do so. As one high-school student says, "There's so much pressure to get a good job, and to get a good job you have to get into a good school, and to get into a good school, you have to get good grades, and to get good grades you have to cheat."⁶ Ironically, to flourish and truly succeed in life, students must develop the very thing that they feel they must set aside: their integrity.

⁵ Robert Solomon, *Ethics and Excellence* (1993, Oxford University Press).

⁶ McMahon.