

Examination of the Case Study “Cheating: The Fallacy of Success at All Costs”

When we witness cheating in university, *what* do we do? This question is hard to answer without first analyzing the context, implications, and nuance involved. Examining the case study on page 136 by Andres et al., we see that an ethical quagmire arose due to unclear instructions around what constitutes ‘cheating’ (Andres et al. 136). The case study mentions that the students made a “looser interpretation [around exam policy] (136).” On the one hand, we observe how - as students began collaborating with one another - the students were *technically* abiding by instructions on the basis of ‘hazy’ expectations around what was allowed. Still, on the other hand, we should realize that their *conscience* - as students of Harvard University - around the distinction between reading from “online discussion boards and chat rooms [directly pertinent to the course]” and something like wikipedia, or some other generic website, shouldn’t be overlooked (136). Although it’s a valid point that usage of the internet *includes* usage of online chat rooms, and that therefore students should be entitled to use these online chat rooms, that clashes with the *explicit* rule of getting help from other people; although the students aren’t chatting face-to-face, they nonetheless are helping each other. Hence, on the end of the students, it appears that just because there is “one way” of reading instructions, that doesn’t imply it is the “valid,” or “correct” way of reading said instructions. Besides the quagmire of whether a particular interpretation constitutes ‘cheating,’ we also observe the *conflict* between ‘cooperation’ and academic integrity, or following course policies. Indeed, it was stated that “Harvard was criticized for punishing the students who collaborated using the internet,” on the basis of parallels to the benefits of cooperating in the real world; i.e., business ventures (136). In an *abstract* sense, this conflict highlights the *interplay* between Kant’s categorical imperative and a social action problem. In much the same way that it’s the “socially optimal outcome” to

respond to social action problems by cooperating, it was the socially optimal outcome for the students to cooperate collectively to get better grades individually; the situation is analogous to the prisoner's dilemma, with the exception that there wouldn't be any *greater* benefit for the 'non-cooperating,' or 'solo' students if they decided to report cheating. Thus, with the aid of the distinction with the analogy highlighted, then from the perspective of the students', it seems *rational* to cooperate. In addition, act utilitarianism would be in *favor* of this choice to cooperate on the end of the students, as it would provide the most social utility for the most amount of people. However, we must dig into *how* this cooperation clashes with the *rule, or duty thereof* of academic integrity (analog to Kant's categorical imperative). For starters, since this situation models a social action problem, it invites free-riders; as stated in the case study, "unless this collaboration is managed well, it allows persons [(free-riders)] to claim individual credit for the collective performance (136)." The issue with this is that - as more and more people cooperate - there will be more and more free-riders (assuming the proportion of free-riders isn't entirely volatile throughout) in groups; this goes against Kant's universalizability generalization in the sense that if everyone became a free-rider while 'cooperating,' then the outcome for everyone individually would actually be worse than if everyone decided to not 'cooperate' and do things by themselves. These free-riders also invite moral hazard as they essentially have nothing to lose; if the whole group of 'cooperators' get caught, then this includes both the free-riders as well as the 'productive cooperators.' Conversely, if the cooperators don't get caught, then - since the free-riders make up part of this group - the free-riders benefit. All of this adds to the temptation for more members of a 'cooperating' group to 'free-ride,' which therefore undermines the net benefit delivered to each individual in the group. Consequently, all of this shakes the foundation of the reasoning *for* cooperation as depicted in the case study. Another

major issue with this situation is that it interferes with the “instructors’ ability to provide a fair and honest assessment of individual students (136).” This fact not only plays into more reasoning for why one may decide to take a ‘free-ride’ from cooperation, but it also *degrades* the value of the grades given back to the students, and the merit that comes alongside work of a certain *quality*. Relating this to Kant’s categorical imperative, we can apply the universalizability formulation to this situation and observe that, indeed, if everyone ‘cooperated’ all the time, on every assignment, on every exam, then the maxims of fairness and honesty would be called into question with regards to every students’ final grades. Essentially, the metrics used to measure merit for every student become ‘null,’ or ‘void’ in the face of an undermining of qualities like fairness and honesty that the measurement of merit *depends* upon. Just like how the metric of money in society means something because of the shared qualities of trust and confidence, so does the metric of grades due to fairness and honesty. In the case study, it states that the students “admired good work and wanted to be good workers,” and “ardently [wanted] to be successful (136).” Also, it states that they “feared their peers were cutting corners, and that if they behaved ethically, they would be bested (136).” Afterwards, it stated that they will cut corners now, until they are ‘famous and well-off,’ and then they will be ‘good workers (136).’ The statements above give rise to the assumption that if other students are cutting corners and you are an ethical individual, that you will get ‘left in the dust.’ However, this type of belief not only ignites the flame that will burn down the values of fairness and honesty within academia and consequently degrade the metric of grades, but also serves to inhibit the student to fully *flourish*, or acquire the most amount of *personal value* possible from his/her education. These claims can be supported by a thought experiment: suppose student A graduates university with full honors, but this was achieved through ‘cooperation.’ On the other hand, student B graduates with a lower GPA, and

this was in part because they couldn't 'cooperate' with other students due to clearer and stricter policies/instructions, as well as a more rigid social norm around cheating. Although student A got a higher grade, in their world, people (especially employers) don't care as much (exaggerating to emphasize point) because they've accepted that the values (fairness and honesty) that held up the grade have been *undercut*. Moreover, student A didn't feel that he/she was able to flourish as much as he/she could've because he/she didn't value education as an end in itself. Now, when we come back to the quotes above from the case study, we realize that the undertone we should embrace is that of the *converse* of what was said; that is, *ethics* should be a necessary condition, rather than success. Coming back to how this is a social action problem and how this relates with Kant's categorical imperative, we can observe that it would be *advisable* to report cheating to your professor if you found out that your peers were cheating on the basis that although - on the surface - it seems rational to 'cooperate' due to a higher probability of *supposed* better outcome(s) for yourself and others, this 'cooperation' only undermines the values or maxims that the outcome(s) in question *rest upon*, and this was displayed through a violation of Kant's categorical imperative. Indeed, by reporting cheating to your professor, you are *reinforcing* social *norms* that serve to uphold the *values* of fairness and honesty that help deem the good marks that you do receive as *worthy*, and therefore containing merit.

References

Jordan, W. Jim, et al. *With a Clear Conscience: Business Ethics, Decision-Making, and Strategic Thinking*. Oxford University Press, 2021.