

"Cheating: do we have a fair perspective?"

Discussion at The Park

Wednesday 18 January 2017 7:30pm at *The Park Tavern, Macclesfield*

The Longman Modern English Dictionary, c.1979, gives this definition of cheating: Cheat 1. to trick or deceive 2. to play a game not according to the rules || to use unfair methods || to practice fraud.

The abstract of an academic article on the topic (S.P Green, 2004) begins thus:

"The concept of cheating is ubiquitous in our moral lives: It occurs in contexts as varied as business, sports, taxpaying, education, marriage, politics, and the practice of law. Yet despite its seeming importance, it is a concept that has been almost completely ignored by moral theorists, usually regarded either as a morally neutral synonym for non-cooperative behaviour, or as a generalized, unreflective term of moral disapprobation...."

The DiP wades in where moral theorists fear to tread! Below are some remarks on, and questions about, cheating in particular contexts which can be discussed as a prelude to tackling the question in the title.

1. SPORT

This article: http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/front_page/8273483.stm introduces the term "gamesmanship". Everyone is familiar with sportsmen exaggerating injury, which is one form of it. Gamesmanship is often an accepted and even celebrated element of sport. It could reasonably be regarded as "using unfair methods", even when within the rules. What's the difference between gamesmanship and cheating?

Access to resources - in particular financial resources - is strongly correlated with sporting success: see <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21705575-more-cash-ruthlessly-funnelled-towards-winners-explains-britains-medal-haul-how-britain>, or consider the relative success of Macclesfield Town and Manchester City football clubs. Is being better-funded a form of cheating, particularly in the context of inter-country competition?

There is a strong focus on the use of "performance-enhancing drugs" as a form of cheating in sport. Do members of the circle agree that - for example - taking EPO (a drug which boosts red blood-cell count) - is less "fair" than spending time at high altitude or in a room with altered atmosphere, either of which may achieve the same effect as taking the drug? Why?

2. BUSINESS

"When you're behind, cheat". Management aphorism, Courtaulds plc, c.1985
Cheating is not confined to sport: people cheat in all walks of life. It isn't necessary to break the law (e.g. engage in insider dealing) to cheat in business. Persuading good customers to place an order before the month-end to help company sales figures might well be considered cheating, as might reading a competitor's price from his quote lying on a customer's desk. Almost everybody who's made expense claims has "cheated" by including a private expense in one at some point. Is cheating in

business different from cheating in sport? If so, how and why?

3. EDUCATION

"Harvard College announced today that it is formally investigating allegations that "nearly half the students" in a spring 2012 course "may have inappropriately collaborated on answers, or plagiarized their classmates' responses, on the final exam" for the class." <http://harvardmagazine.com/2012/08/harvard-undergraduate-academic-misconduct-investigated>

This article, and some academics, assert that cheating in education is getting worse. This could be a consequence of evolving moral standards, it could be put down to improvements in the "cheating technologies" available to students, or it may simply be a reflection of change in the balance between risk and reward. Is cheating in education more clear-cut than cheating in sport or business? Or is there nothing distinctive about it? Consider paid tuition and moving house to a better school's catchment: both viewed as cheating by some, but by others as no more than human parents deploying the resources available at hand to maximise their offsprings' chances of success, just like nation states in pursuit of sporting prestige (see above).

4. GENERAL

The abstract of Green's article continues like this:

"This article offers a ``normative reconstruction'" of the concept of cheating by showing both what various cases of cheating have in common, and how cheating is related to, and differs from, other morally wrongful acts, such as stealing, promise-breaking, deceiving, disobedience, and disloyalty. A paradigmatic account of cheating is developed that entails two elements: First, the cheater must violate a prescriptive (rather than descriptive), mandatory (rather than optional), regulative (rather than practice-defining), and conduct-governing (as opposed to decision-governing) rule. Second, the rule must be fair and enforced even-handedly, and must be violated with an intent to obtain an advantage over some party with whom the rule-breaker is in a cooperative, rule-governed relationship".

To what extent do members of the circle agree with this two-element account of cheating? Do they think that it moves us towards an objective assessment of cheating, given that the text refers to violation of a "fair" rule, and that "fairness is a subjective concept?

Finally, how much cheating do you - personally - accept, and is your perception of cheating really fair?

CJF

See also: [Stuart P. Green Cheating Law and Philosophy 23 \(2\):137-185 \(2004\)](#)