

## Why Be Honest?

A Reflection on Academic Integrity by John Kavanaugh S.J.

“I become the kind of person I am now choosing.”

(The first form of this reflection was presented orally to the Saint Louis University Forum on Academic Integrity. It was then amended to appear as an “Ethics Notebook” column in America Magazine. This is its final form.)

*Recently I was asked to give a short reflection on Academic Integrity to some faculty at Saint Louis University. One of the reasons may have been my efforts to encourage all teachers of Core Curriculum Courses to spend some time, possibly even a class, on the problem of cheating, whether by plagiarism, fudging scientific findings or just copying on exams.*

*A 2002 report by the Josephson Institute of Ethics released data from a survey of 12,000 high school students that indicated 74% of them had cheated on an exam at least once the previous year. It was a jump of 13% in ten years, 3% from just the previous two. There were similar troubling figures about stealing and lying, which led Michael Josephson, the president of the Institute, to suggest that cheating had become something of a national norm.*

Students, even all of us, realize that cheating, if found out, usually guarantees some punishment. What is often not realized is *why* dishonesty is ethically wrong. Why *not* lie?

A case can be made that the moral atmosphere in which we all live and breathe is, in stark and maybe extreme terms, a culture of cheaters. Although most professions and trades, we may hope, are made up of honest people, think of the cast of characters that often dominates our news. Politicians, CEOs, accountants, tax chiselers, lawyers, priests, students. And, yes, Presidents, too.

The last president was impeached for lying under oath. The present president is accused by some as having lied us into a war. The partisans of the previous president, those for the most part now condemning the present president, said, “What’s the big deal?” Those who detested Clinton’s deception see not a whit of it in Bush. The few who do, say, “What’s the big deal? Even if the evidence wasn’t there, the results were good.” Such are the privileges of selective moral outrage.

And that is the *second* part of our problem. The human tendency to exempt ones own party, ones nation, and oneself from moral standards accompanies every ethical infidelity. In the United

States, however, supported as we are by an ethos whose moral mottos are “my liberty,” “my choice,” “my happiness,” “my way works,” moral exceptionalism is commonplace. “Weapons of Mass Destruction,” for example, are decried by our president as the bane of the world. *Except for us*. It is hard for us to understand why other nations might think we are lying or at least posturing, but from their point of view, not only do we have more WMD than all the other nations of the world combined. We actually used them to kill tens of thousands of civilians.

In a classroom, one cheats, of course, for a good reason. If I get away with it, I might feel like a success. But all that I’ve got away with is learning nothing and paying a tuition for it. All that I’ve succeeded in is in being a fraud. I disrespect the teacher, the discipline, my fellow students and enter into the erosion of trust that is taking place throughout the country.

Even on the utilitarian account so prevalent in America, while the short range results of deception may, if undetected, seem appealing, the long range negative consequences are devastating. Lies inevitably erode one’s own self-respect as well as trust in relationships. They also eat at the trust required for any profession and for society itself. What have Enron and Arthur Anderson done for investment and accounting? What has the Jayson Blair episode done for journalism and the New York Times? What have the deceptions of famous historians done for historians and the academy? As for deceptive politics, it only generates a society largely comprised of uninvolved cynics on the one hand and conspiracy theorists on the other.

To be sure, we may have excuses, whether on the personal scale or the international scale: “Everyone is doing it.” “It doesn’t hurt anyone.” “It got good results.” But excuses are themselves indications of the deception and they compound the lie. They require even further repression and denial.

So far, these are arguments from bad consequences. There are also strong appeals that can be made from a sense of duty. In many ways, such a sense of duty and responsibility (strongly Kantian in tone) may lay behind the relative success of honor codes. Each of us have probably felt a surge of admiration for someone who does not lie, even for a big payoff.

Possibly the best case for honesty, even academic honesty, however, may rest on a form of virtue ethics. It is related to two questions: Whom do you admire? What kind of person do you want to be? Put negatively: the question is, what kind of behavior makes you feel small and ashamed? Usually it is some form of inauthenticity. It is when you feel like a fake, a fraud.

That is what a cheater is. And even small deceptions unfold into a way of life, of pretending, of looking good, of dreading the

truth. In every consequent deception, I become the kind of person I am now choosing. Possibly, all of us confront fraudulence in our lives; I know I do. And I know when I have succumbed.

But I've also seen, at least in others, how an integrated authenticity ennobles a person. It is a sense of wholeness where we do not repress the moral impulse, where ethical passion inhabits every arena of our lives: the classroom, the boardroom, the bedroom, the War Room.

A commitment to honesty, even in small things, yields a growing knowledge of one's true self. Only on the basis of that truth, can one be loved -- not only by oneself, but by anyone else. The reason why so many people complain of not feeling loved is that they let so few, if any, even themselves, know their truth.

When those of us who are teachers show our students that we actually care about such things, perhaps that care itself helps them, encourages them to become the kind of persons they most deeply want to be. If this were the way we lived our personal and political lives, it might also make our families and our nation the kind of realities they often can only pretend to be.