

Using an Honor Code as a Moral Reminder

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Preliminary Note: This white paper is designed to encourage instructors to use an Honor Code or Pledge, or to require a similar written and signed affirmation, to help discourage cheating by students, especially in the current COVID-imposed remote instructional context. This white paper is mainly an annotated reprint from two recent New York times articles, both of which—from different angles—address this issue:

Just How Dishonest are Most Students: Many are tempted to cheat, but honors codes are surprisingly effective in curbing the problem, Op-Ed, New York Times, Christian B. Miller, Nov. 13, 2020,¹ and, The Ethicist, Column, New York Times, Magazine Section, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Nov. 17, 2020.²

The full texts of these articles are included in the Appendix.

Part One: Addressing Cheating in the Online Context

To dissuade cheating, Wake Forest University Professor of Philosophy Christian Miller suggests...

...that a practice that has been used widely in other educational contexts be extended to the world of online testing: pledging one's honor. Honor pledges not only are surprisingly effective in curbing cheating; they also promote honesty. Students who abide by them refrain from cheating not because they can't, but because they choose not to.

Of course, for the Honor Code to be effective, it must be more than, as Dr. Miller describes, a

P.R. stunt for schools looking to burnish their image. Or administrative mandates that do not have buy-in from the faculty. Or just a formality, where students check a box on a form during first-year orientation and then never give it any thought for the rest of the year. [Indeed,]

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/17/magazine/online-cheating-exams-ethicist.html>. Christian B. Miller is a professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University, the director of the Honesty Project and the author, most recently, of "The Character Gap: How Good Are We?" (<http://philosophy.wfu.edu/miller/>).

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/13/opinion/sunday/online-learning-cheating.html>. Kwame Anthony Appiah is professor of philosophy and law at NYU, emeritus Laurance S. Rockefeller professor of philosophy at Princeton University, and an honorary fellow at Clare College, Cambridge (<http://appiah.net/>).

[e]mpirical research has repeatedly found that schools that are committed to honor codes have significantly reduced cheating rates compared with schools that are not.³

At this moment, however—going into finals of Fall Semester 2020—providing immediate prescriptions is more useful than opening a conversation on broader institutional dynamics. To be sure, I intend to raise, in the appropriate venue, the broader question of institutional commitment. For now, however, I turn to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s New York Times column, *The Ethicist*, to provide a rough-and-ready on-the-ground intellectual foundation for the use of an Honor Code or Pledge, prior to, in Part Three, providing three easily implementable examples.

Part Two: In the Short Term: Invoking a Higher Moral Sensibility

After calling for the obvious—“to design a test that makes cheating harder”—Dr. Appiah picks up on Dr. Miller’s thread and writes, simply, that *“sometimes reminding people of moral ideas can get them to live up to them.”* He further provides three basic philosophical perspectives for the simple notion. For future semesters, you may wish to consider embedding this part of the discussion directly in a course syllabus section on Academic Integrity to inculcate your students with the honesty imperative from the outset of the course. For now, however, they are offered as substantive justifications for taking the time to implement an Honor Code or Pledge.

In plain terms, we’re talking about “character, trust, and consequences.” In more philosophical terms, the approaches are (1) considerations of character, or “virtue ethics”; (2) trust writ large, or deontologism, i.e., the obligation or duty of position without regard to consequences; and (3) consequentialism, in the form of outcome analysis, simply put, the cost of getting caught.

Prof. Appiah deconstructs each of the three:

First, there are considerations of character: Dishonesty is a vice. So is intellectual laziness, which can make cheating appealing as a substitute for effort, and so is the vanity that may make you seek a better grade than you deserve. You don’t want to be the kind of person who cheats.

Second, you have duties arising from your relationship with your teachers and your fellow students. It is a betrayal of the teacher’s trust if you try to pass off the work of others as your own or misrepresent your own level of comprehension. It’s disrespectful to your teachers, and of course, it’s unfair to fellow students who have kept to the rules, given that your work may be ranked higher than it ought to be.

Third, it is reckless, posing harm to you and your classmates. The penalties for plagiarism are severe and can include being expelled from the university. If your exam performance seems far better than your class contributions, your teachers will often recognize that. Lying when asked about it compounds the problem and can also lead to serious consequences. Your cheating can also disadvantage your honest classmates by distorting the curve. Besides, a key

³ See review article: McCabe, Trevino & Butterfield (2001), *Cheating in Academic Institutions: A Decade of Research*, in *Ethics and Behavior*, Vol. 11(3), pgs. 219-232, published online: 08 Jan 2010 at: https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327019EB1103_2.

purpose of the exam is to tell you how you're doing, which won't happen if you cheat. And if you don't care about how you're doing, why take the course?

People who have studied ethics, or just watched "[The Good Place](#)," will recognize these three sets of considerations as drawing from three major currents of moral reflection: virtue ethics, which is centered on character; deontology (from "deon," a Greek word for that which is binding or required), which is centered on obligation or duty; and consequentialism, which is centered on the harms and benefits that result from our actions. Ordinary moral thought draws freely from all of these traditions.

To students who cheat routinely, all this will seem naïve or sentimental or irrelevant. They want the best grades they can secure because good grades will help them get ahead and land the kind of job they [believe] they want[, and often, to which they believe they are entitled]. In the workplace, though, you can't call your fraternity brothers every time you face a problem you can't handle, and I don't know of online services that will write office memos for you. Ethics is about living well. Preparing for exams can help you develop skills that are useful in later life. All of which is to say that one person you're letting down when you don't do the work is you.

Dr. Miller highlights two key approaches to demonstrating institutional commitment to an honor code: setting the tone of the institution, by way of a commitment ceremony, held as part of orientation, at which students publicly pledge to uphold the school's code, and affixing a requirement, to each graded assignment, to affirm the honor code by signature. To the immediate point of what it means for a student to affix their signature to an Honor Code or Pledge, Dr. Miller echoes Dr. Appiah's simple notion of a "reminder."

Signing an honor code can, among other things, serve as a moral reminder. As we know from both ordinary life and recent experimental findings, most of us are willing to cheat to some extent if we think it would be rewarding and we can get away with it. At the same time, we also want to think of ourselves as honest people and genuinely believe that cheating is wrong. But our more honorable intentions can be pushed to one side in our minds when tempting opportunities arise to come out ahead, even if by cheating. What a moral reminder does, then, is help to place our values front and center in our minds.⁴

Dr. Miller concludes by impliedly invoking one of my favorite adages, i.e., *we do the best we can with what we have*:

...as we settle into the routine of online instruction, we should consider trying to extend the impact of an honor code virtually as well. Honor codes won't eliminate cheating. Deeply dishonest students will not be deterred. But fortunately, the research confirms what experience suggests: Most students are not deeply dishonest.

⁴ To support this assertion, Dr. Miller cites Mazar, Amir, and Ariely (2008), *The Dishonesty of Honest People: A Theory of Self-Concept Maintenance* in *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 45(6), pgs. 633-644, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1509%2Fjmk.45.6.633>.

THE ETHICIST

How Do I Deal With Cheating in the Age of Zoom?

By Kwame Anthony Appiah

Nov. 17, 2020

A student of mine revealed that he did poorly on my (Zoom, of course) exam because he was on his phone helping his fraternity brothers. I know his cheating isn't ethical — no dilemma there — but what about my role? I can't stop cheating on Zoom, so should I do nothing? What is my responsibility in creating an environment where everyone is on the same plane for evaluation? Humberto B.

The best way to prevent people from succumbing to temptation is to reduce the temptation. So you can try to design a test that makes cheating harder. In the humanities, you might be able to ask students to write essays in real time on topics not announced in advance, for example. But things are harder with quantitative subjects, especially in combination with large class sizes. In the era of Chegg and Discord (an online tutoring service and a group-chat platform), not only answers but also “show your work” explanations for those answers can be at a student's fingertips. Various online proctoring services are available, but none are complete solutions. And the sort of one-to-one discussions, and

evaluations, that are possible in seminars may just not be feasible in large-enrollment classes. Still, sometimes reminding people of moral ideas can get them to live up to them. Here are three basic angles of approach.

First, there are considerations of character: Dishonesty is a vice. So is intellectual laziness, which can make cheating appealing as a substitute for effort, and so is the vanity that may make you seek a better grade than you deserve. You don't want to be the kind of person who cheats.

Second, you have duties arising from your relationship with your teachers and your fellow students. It is a betrayal of the teacher's trust if you try to pass off the work of others as your own or misrepresent your own level of comprehension. It's disrespectful to your teachers, and of course, it's unfair to fellow students who have kept to the rules, given that your work may be ranked higher than it ought to be.

Third, it is reckless, posing harm to you and your classmates. The penalties for plagiarism are severe and can include being expelled from the university. If your exam performance seems far better than your class contributions, your teachers will often recognize that. Lying when asked about it compounds the problem and can also lead to serious consequences. Your cheating can also disadvantage your honest classmates by distorting the curve. Besides, a key purpose of the exam is to tell you how you're doing, which won't happen if you cheat. And if you don't care about how you're doing, why take the course?

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Just How Dishonest Are Most Students?

Many are tempted to cheat, but honor codes are surprisingly effective in curbing the problem.

By Christian B. Miller

Dr. Miller is a philosophy professor.

Nov. 13, 2020

I teach philosophy to college students, and there was no way I was going to give them exams this semester, with our classes being held online. Why not? Simple — cheating. It is nothing personal with these particular students, but I have read enough psychological research to know that it would be very hard for them to resist looking for help in places where they are not supposed to, such as their notes, their friends and the internet.

I am fortunate that papers are a great alternative means of assessment in philosophy courses. But they do not work so well in certain other fields, like the sciences. In this time of widespread online learning and home-schooling, what can be done to curb cheating on exams?

One solution is remote proctoring, where the student is video-recorded during the exam, with any suspicious web browsing reported. That might be effective, but it strikes me as a crude approach, relying as it does on active surveillance, which creates an overt atmosphere of distrust. Naturally enough there are also privacy concerns, as well as some anecdotal evidence that remote proctoring technology encodes racial biases.

Instead I suggest that a practice that has been used widely in other educational contexts be extended to the world of online testing: pledging one's honor. Honor pledges not only are surprisingly effective in curbing cheating; they also promote honesty. Students who abide by them refrain from cheating not because they can't, but because they choose not to.

It is easy to be cynical about honor pledges and honor codes. They can seem to be — and sadly too often are — P.R. stunts for schools looking to burnish their image. Or administrative mandates that do not have buy-in from the faculty. Or just a formality, where students check a box on a form during first-year orientation and then never give it any thought for the rest of the year. Honor codes like these are indeed mere facades.

But many schools and programs, from elementary to graduate level, take their honor codes seriously. And for good reason. Empirical research has repeatedly found that schools that are committed to honor codes have significantly reduced cheating rates compared with schools that are not.

Donald McCabe at Rutgers Business School and Linda Treviño at the Smeal College of Business at Penn State found a 23 percent rate of helping someone with answers on a test at colleges without an honor code, versus only 11 percent at schools with an honor code. They reported impressive differences as well for plagiarism (20 percent versus 10 percent), unauthorized crib notes (17 percent versus 11 percent) and unpermitted collaboration (49 percent versus 27 percent), among other forms of cheating.

A serious commitment to the honor code is crucial to its efficacy. As Professors McCabe and Treviño insist, an honor code should be “well implemented and strongly embedded in the student culture.”

What does that look like in practice? A few schools start the academic year with an actual commitment ceremony, where each student has to publicly pledge to uphold the school’s code. To this can be added a requirement to affirm the honor code on each graded assignment.

When I was an undergraduate at Princeton, every paper we turned in had to have the honor code written out and then signed. Now as a professor at Wake Forest, I make my class recite aloud with me before each exam our entire honor code and then sign it.

Signing an honor code can, among other things, serve as a moral reminder. As we know from both ordinary life and recent experimental findings, most of us are willing to cheat to some extent if we think it would be rewarding and we can get away with it. At the same time, we also want to think of ourselves as honest people and genuinely believe that cheating is wrong. But our more honorable intentions can be pushed to one side in our minds when tempting opportunities arise to come out ahead, even if by cheating. What a moral reminder does, then, is help to place our values front and center in our minds.

This is borne out by recent findings in the lab. In a widely cited study, Nina Mazar at the Questrom School of Business at Boston University and her colleagues had one group of students take a 20-problem test where they would be paid 50 cents per correct answer. It was a hard test — students averaged only 3.4 correct answers. A second group of students took the same test, but they graded their own work and reported their “scores” with no questions asked. The average in this group was 6.1 correct answers, suggesting some cheating. The third and most interesting group, though, began by signing an honor code and then took the test, followed by grading their own work. The result? An honorable 3.1 correct answers. Cheating was eliminated at the group level. Signing the honor code did the job.

Studies of honor codes and cheating have typically been conducted in face-to-face environments. But as we settle into the routine of online instruction, we should consider trying to extend the impact of an honor code virtually as well.

Honor codes won't eliminate cheating. Deeply dishonest students will not be deterred. But fortunately, the research confirms what experience suggests: Most students are not deeply dishonest.

Christian B. Miller (@CharacterGap) is a professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University, the director of the Honesty Project and the author, most recently, of "The Character Gap: How Good Are We?"

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