

WHY WE CHEAT: TOWARD A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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It seems appropriate with the resignation of Oregon's former governor John Kitzhaber over an ethics scandal, to assess our concept of cheating and dishonesty. We have "ethics watchdogs" that look out for such violations. We also have "ethics committees" that assess where and how far the lines are crossed and recommend consequences. The subsequent investigations by the FBI and IRS show seriousness of these accusations. In this case, Kitzhaber and his fiancée, Cylvia Hayes, are simply accused of cheating. They lied by failing to disclose payments they received, and "influence peddling", that is, using their positions for private gain. And so, the "ugliness" of this dishonesty that is a pandemic problem in our world, from Lance Armstrong's use of performance enhancing drugs to the corruption in Cameroon, has gotten people thinking about causes and solutions.

Why do we as humans cheat, and is there anything we can do to extract its rootlets from the soil of our lives and society? Scientists are now not only claiming that they are unraveling the complex causes behind dishonesty and fraud but are also finding ways we can eliminate such tendencies from society. In their recent article in the *Scientific American* entitled "Why We Cheat" (www.ScientificAmerican.com/Mind, May/June 2013, 31-37) microbiologists Ferric C. Fang and Arturo Casadevall assert that scientists have discerned that cheating is the evolutionary result of one organism seeking advantage over another with the least cost or effort. The higher the animal's social intelligence and the greater animal's capacity for creativity (thus the bigger the brain's neocortex), the more likely cheating will occur, they argue (33). Furthermore, cheating is infectious, a kind of social contagion, as seen in various studies of how cheating spreads (36). Their ultimate solution is to be found in reward/penalty systems that hope to modify attitudes and behaviors (36-37). This work is fascinating, to be sure, but we are nonetheless compelled to ask a simple question: does science have the last word on cheating? What would a basic Christian assessment of Fang and Casadevall's claims look like, assuming both positions agree at some level on the necessity of a "more ethical culture" (37)?

First, Christian or not, it is patently obvious that humans have a higher social intelligence and creativity than animals. Animals, after all, do not talk on I-phones. At the same time, many animals are not stupid beasts. There is a difference between a mollusk and a primate, for example. Nonetheless, Christians view humans as made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27), and so there is a qualitative difference—ontologically speaking—between animals and them. At the same time, we do share certain qualities and capacities with some animals, beyond limbs with five digits, etc. Scientists have observed that primates can exercise a sort of tactical deception. The authors note, for example, female baboons in Ethiopia conceal their mating with younger males from the alpha male by hiding from his view (33). But can these commonalities only be explained by an evolutionary link? Is the existence of tactical deception among animals equivalent to human motivations behind cheating? Can human dishonesty be reduced merely to an advanced form of animal deception? Couldn't the animal version merely be a satisfaction for mating when they are in their seasonal "heat"? But even if there is more to animal "cheating" than this, only humans are truly unique among God's creations, because we are made in His image, having the rationality, self-determination and ability to relate to their Creator and other creatures in a morally culpable way. Furthermore, we should not be completely surprised if the effects of the Fall (Gen 3) reach not only into the human relationships, but into animal ones as

well. For example, God promises in the future restored Creation that the wolf will lie down with the lamb in a demonstration of the reversal of animal aggression in nature (Isa 11:6; 65:25).

Second, the Christian worldview acknowledges God as Creator and thus the standard of morality. This is no mere theological voluntarism, in which God's might and freedom causes Him to determine morality, and thus morality of honesty and immorality of cheating, on an arbitrary basis. Cheating and dishonesty contradict the Creator's character. The Bible's description of God is that He is truthful and faithful to His infinitely wise and perfect standard for what is holy, righteous and good. When He finished creating the universe, the earth, animals and humanity, He declared it to be good (Gen 1:31). All was in perfect harmony, or in biblical terminology, "shalom". Yet God's standard of morality is much more than an expression of a greatest conceivable neo-platonic form of perfection. God, not only as the Creator, but also as a person, takes His moral standards personally. Proverbs 6:16-19 declares that God hates dishonesty and cheating; He finds them morally repulsive and reprehensible. As a result, He has commanded His people not to practice such things. In the Ten Commandments, cheating violates the prohibition against bearing false witness, for example, and it also is a form of stealing—a violation against coveting what our neighbors have (Exodus 20:15-17; Deut 5:19-21; Matt 19:18; cf. also Lev 19:11-12). Cheating also violates what Jesus calls the Great Commandment(s), because it demonstrates a lack of love, loyalty and trust in God and refuses to love one's neighbor as oneself (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18; Matt 22:36-40).

C.S. Lewis is indeed correct in claiming all humans assume the existence of a universal moral standard, otherwise they would not quarrel about fairness and being wronged (*Mere Christianity*, Macmillan, 1952, 17-21). That is why society is attempting to root out cheating, fraud and other types of dishonesty around the world because they are violations of social justice.

Thus from a Christian perspective, cheating cannot be wrong simply because it produces bad consequences. Fang and Casadevall's last phrase, "deception has its costs" (37), sums up their utilitarianism. To them, the source of cheating and the solution to it are to be found in a cost benefit analysis. However, in light of a creator God who is the first cause and designer of all that exists, Christians cannot succumb to a pure utilitarian perspective and response to the pandemic problem of cheating.

For the Christian, proper motivation against cheating stems from placing it in its proper relational and ontological contexts. Relationally, fraudulent desires and actions are against God as our sovereign creator and against the inherent worth and dignity of our neighbors. And yet, honesty, faithfulness, and genuine love for God and neighbor push us past the temptation to cheat into another realm altogether. This is no mere secular altruism, but a divine love of the worthy and . . . the unworthy, based upon the Creator's own example (Romans 5:5-8; 1 John 4:19). Ontologically, authentic Christians produce virtues out of who they are. They are not only cleansed from the guilt and eternal punishment that comes with every relational violation (1 Cor 6:9-11), but produce the fruit of their new nature as God's children who are indwelt and empowered by His Spirit (1 John 3:23-24; 4:7-8; Gal 5:22). Thus, the fear of loss of money, reputation or career, that science claims is a principal driver of cheating (35), can only be fully conquered by trust in a God who is a good Father, who not only knows what we need before we ask Him (Matt 6:32; 7:11), but will provide the only justification for our existence (Phil 3:7-10).