

Kelly Grimsley

Social Political Philosophy 182-018

Dr. Avery Smith

11 November 2022

### Morality of Cheating

The idea that morality should be considered in every action one makes is key to the philosophy that John Rawls presents in his most noted work, *A Theory of Justice*. He claims that justice is not tangible without morality and that justice is necessary to facilitate relationships among individuals that manufacture a well-ordered society. In the podcast produced by Kera Think, the author of *Cheaters Always Win: The Story of America*, J.M. Fenster engages in the discussion of cheating in society and why the phenomenon is so widespread in varying aspects of society and institutions today. The arguments presented in *A Theory of Justice* explain the phenomenon and rebuttal its prevalence.

To understand the disputes made by Rawls, one must first understand his position on contracts and promises. Rawls claims that a promise made in society is similar if not interchangeable with a contract. He claims that while a promise is not considered a moral principle, it is that of a constitutive convention, that it is an unspoken rule that members of a society have agreed to abide by. Because his philosophy is centered around the premise of a well-ordered society, the belief that this society must rely on the commitments made by its individuals is a staple in his argument. To make a promise to another individual or individuals in society, and to fulfill the said promise, creates reliability. Without reliability such a sound society could not exist; if a contract can be made with the knowledge that it will become void, how can there be trust amongst individuals for action to take place? How can one expect justice to prevail

if there is no trust? With this, we can understand that cheating in any institution is an extension of the breaking of a promise, the voiding of a contract. In terms of cheating in a romantic institution which the podcast highlights, to act with infidelity and to go against the obligation one spouse has to the other is acting in a way to violate the other for individual gain. In Rawls' philosophy, this is quite literally acting with injustice; to dismiss the rules laid out in society, specifically the rules laid out in a marriage for personal gain, regardless of the result on other individuals, is to act without morality and respect for others. So, to address the concerns brought about by discussions between Fenster and host Krys Boyd that cheating is so normalized in society is a commentary on how unordered our society is functioning. To take Rawls's understanding of how a society should function and compare it to the way our society accepts the contemporary issue of cheating is an example of how unjust the structure of our society is. To expect that contracts made will face the possibility of being broken or tampered with because of one's aspirations for personal satisfaction is a failure of the whole to uphold justice.

The issue of cheating being justified by the argument that it is so common, and that so many others engage in cheating, that it must be acceptable is a point that Fenster and Boyd take a lot of time dissecting. One would think that if their moral compass was intact, they would recognize cheating occurring, and instead of partaking in it, they would instead call it out. But clearly, this is not the common case because it is so widely used instead to facilitate one's act of cheating. In this argument, cheating goes beyond the institution of marriage and is discussed in the realm of politics, business, finance, and others. From the perspective of Rawls in examining justice, one must be willing to call out injustice when it is presented to maintain a well-ordered society. With this, he claims that those who witness acts of injustice in any institution should not be complacent about its existence, because being complacent is accepting the injustices and

allowing them to prevail. So, the argument that justifies one's cheating with the fact that others participate in it as well goes against the structure of a well-ordered society. To not only be complacent in the violations of a contract but to then use that violation as a justification for your violations is not consistent with acts of justice. While it is hard to understand why that way of thinking is so prevalent in contemporary society, the clear thing to do as outlined by Rawls is to act with morality if you are faced with this decision. When considering the morality of cheating, and then considering the morality of basing decision-making on other people's injustice, it is clear which will better serve the actor. Fenster brings up the quote by George Washington when asked whether individuals should be responsible for upholding the truth, that "Without public virtue, our democracy could not exist," (45:08). Her response to this quote and arguing that treating others with dignity and upholding the same expectations of dignity in others is key to sustain a well-regulated society. The inclusion of this statement by Washington is so important to this argument because it is exactly what Rawls has claimed with his arguments, just replace democracy with society and the claims are nearly the same.

In wrapping the discussion, rather than upholding the status quo of cheating, Fenster recognizes that the justification of cheating is dangerous to society. The author claims that "The pervasiveness of cheating is hurting American productivity... and can be a danger," (37:27). Her recognition that such actions that others may perceive as so minuscule to the capability of Americans, and that some may see as an advantage, is a massive element that is causing a great deal of harm to the productivity of our society. Rawls would concur with the fact that no act of injustice can lead to a society that can be productive and able to overcome past hurdles standing in the way of justice.

To not only act with injustice but to use the injustice itself to justify such an action is a betrayal of trust in society. These two pieces were written and spoken in very different periods both encapsulate the feeling and understanding of how to act justly by calling out injustice when it is presented and using the relationships built on trust and respect to upholding the truth. In understanding John Rawls' and J.M. Fenster's takes on how cheating has devastated the United States and our society, we learn to understand the importance of evaluating morality in every action, and inaction, we choose to take.

Fenster, J.M. "How We Set Ourselves up to Be Cheated | Think." *Kera Think*, 2022 North Texas Public Broadcasting, Inc., <https://think.kera.org/2020/05/14/how-we-set-ourselves-up-to-be-cheated/>.

Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Universal Law Publishing Co Ltd, 2013.