

## On Cheating

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Given the appropriate circumstances almost everyone will cheat. This is the message for which the recent book by Dan Ariely *The (Honest) Truth about Dishonesty* (2012) provides experimentally supported chapter and verse. This is not news. The question is what is to be done about it?

In one of his most telling experiments he finds that however thorough, pervasive and persuasive the ethical advice, admonitions and aspirations, the students of an Ivy League university are just as likely to cheat in a standardised test system (and to the same extent) as students from other universities who have not been so indoctrinated (Ariely 2012). Ariely does provide some grounds for hope. For example, when a subject is asked to sign a commitment to tell the truth before filling in a document (such as a tax return) it is more likely to yield more accurate data than when that same subject is asked to sign the truth statement after the form has been completed. People are markedly influenced by the behaviour of their peers and mentors when they are present *at the time at which the opportunity to cheat is available* and can observe one's actions.

It seems, from a reading of Ariely's book, that the most effective ways of preventing cheating are to get ahead of the game. In the first place it should be made clear by statements and actions that any infractions of the code of being honest will be dealt with immediately and comprehensively. Secondly, research supervisors and thesis advisors have to make clear to their students that they require the reporting of data honestly, no matter that the data do not fit in with the expectations of the Principal Investigator, the literature or that of a colleague working in parallel. Thirdly, it is important for research supervisors and mentors to make sure that the junior researchers for whom they are responsible are fit and well and, in so far as it is possible, free from inordinate or excessive pressures either from their work or in their personal lives. The creation of an environment of mutual trust and respect is

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vital for the success of such provisions so as to achieve the honest selecting and reporting of data and their eventual publication.

So what should the “ethics education” curriculum of students in science and engineering contain? It follows from the above that ethics education is not simply about recounting the history of ethics or of the enumeration and elaboration of the different systems of ethics, regulations or codes. It also seems that teaching ethics from case studies, however interesting, is not the only method for the inculcation of ethical behaviour in the student or postdoctoral associate when engaged in research. Rather we should take up the understandings from Ariely’s book coupled with the recommendations of Melissa Anderson (Anderson 2007) that when engaged in research and seeking to make the unknown, known, it is important to involve colleagues openly at all levels while the research is in progress.

The downside to this is that researchers who think that they are on to some discovery that will revolutionise contemporary thinking will not be of a disposition to openly share their suspicions and findings until they either have a patent or have had their paper accepted by a reputable journal.

An answer to this conundrum is to advance the “professionalisation” of scientists and engineers (a notion that has been examined both in the USA and the UK from time to time). This puts the individual on his or her merit. It requires that each person who attains the professional rank takes an oath of commitment to safeguard the reputation of the profession in its quest to enhance the wellbeing of society. The achievement of professional status should be clearly set out as the objective of those who wish to practice the advancement of science and engineering. The requirements for this elevation contain the acquisition of a knowledge and skill base as well as the appropriate experience. Membership or fellowship of an appropriate institution is also necessary as a peer-based assessment of worthiness and competency. Within this institutional setting and beyond, a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness is also a prerequisite for the achievement of the sought after status.

The consequences of being raised to the status of a professional are to be experienced in the way in which society responds to the manifestation of the activities of such an individual. There may be advantages in promotions, job offers, access to more prestigious journals, opportunities to deliver one’s messages or teachings and, in special cases, it may be necessary to hold a professional rank to certify the efficacy and safety of products before they can be released for sale or promoted for use.

In sum, an education in ethics serves to prepare students at all levels for their professionalisation. In this way, both the individuals and society benefit.

## References

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- Ariely, D. (2012). *The (Honest) truth about dishonesty*. London, UK: Harper Collins. (See in particular pp 42–44).