THE ETHICS OF ACADEMIC HONESTY

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of each semester, I provide my students with the syllabus for the class. I do this not only because it is required of me. As the professor, I use my syllabus as a contract. I delineate a set of unexceptionable rules that will be enforced in my class from start to finish. The students are notified of the assignments, the readings, the due dates, and other assorted necessities that make it possible to pass the course with a satisfactory grade. Many universities require their professors to present the “Academic Honesty” policy that is codified in the student manual of conduct. A professor can certainly perform her minimal duty by copying the academic honesty policy on the syllabus without having any intention of enforcing it during the semester. It may not be unusual to do this perfunctory action so that the professor's bases are covered for the sake of keeping the university administration satisfied. In my class, I have every intention of enforcing the academic honesty policy. I spend much of the first class discussing what constitutes academic dishonesty. You should not plagiarize your papers. You cannot sneak flash cards into the class so you can cheat on the exam. You cannot access my PowerPoint lectures from Blackboard on your smartphone while you are taking my test. I have my rules and I have my reasons for enforcing the rules.

Some students heed my warning about academic dishonesty. Some do not. Whether or not students believe me to be serious when I say I will categorically punish all violators of the academic honesty policy is not the concern of this paper. My concern is how I can impart to the students good reasons as to why they ought to follow the policy. A student may adhere to the policy for a basic consequentialist reason: I do not want to fail the class. If my professor finds out, I will be punished. As the professor I am seeking an ethically richer reason for compliance with academic honesty. I determined that it was essential for the students to
have a reason for accepting the academic policy that did not focus strictly on the unpleasant consequences of being caught cheating. It did not matter to me whether these consequences came with short term or long term costs.

I have limited time to discuss the policy in class. I would not need to bring it up every class. But I want to the opportunity to teach the students that academic dishonesty is intrinsically wrong. I could justify my rules using Kant’s ethics. From a Kantian standpoint, actions can be intrinsically wrong or right, consequences notwithstanding. But Kant is opaque for many freshman students. For years, I have taught lower level courses such as Introduction to Philosophy and Introduction to Ethics. I tended to use extravagant examples of why you ought to act only on maxims that can be willed into a universal law or why you must respect the humanity of your fellow autonomous moral agents. If I wanted to contrast Kant with Utilitarianism, I could use Bernard Williams’ *Against Utilitarianism* to explain why I felt Utilitarianism to be fundamentally flawed. Murder would not be intrinsically wrong. If one villager is killed, the other nineteen are allowed to live instead of letting all twenty die.¹ This example might convince a student that Utilitarianism is wrong in this instance. In this case, perhaps there should be more to an ethical theory than one that chooses favorable consequences over unfavorable ones. Or perhaps I can assign John Harris’s “The Survival Lottery” to show why a Utilitarian’s concern with maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number of people is not instructive in this case either. Why should one man be killed for his organs so he can “give life” to a greater number of people?² Yet these examples have nothing to do with academic honesty. These thought experiments are interesting and my students often enjoy weighing one action against another when it involves Brandt’s obese spelunker getting caught in the exit of a cave quickly filling with water.³ Yet these examples involve events that neither the student nor the professor is likely to ever encounter. The unlikeliness of the examples it what often leaves the students modestly interested by Ethics 101 in the first place. Secondly, these not so real-world examples have little to do with preparing the students to become and maintain themselves as responsive and reflective in the face of moral matters inside and outside of the academy. Instead of explaining why Utilitarianism cannot argue that slavery⁴ is intrinsically wrong, I can teach the students why slavery is intrinsically wrong from the Kantian standpoint. Academic dishonesty is rampant in higher education. I can surely explain why academic dishonesty is intrinsically wrong. I argue that
moral thought experiments that focus on issues the students are sure to encounter in their lives are far more conducive to their learning and reasoning about ethics. I will leave the issue of slavery for another lecture.

A student should already know that academic dishonesty is wrong. He or she is repeatedly told by professors that it is wrong. A student might even be honest for fear of getting caught. This makes the student’s commitment to honesty conditional. She is only following the rules because the consequences of getting caught are far worse than actually writing her own papers or learning the material so she can pass the test without using a cheat sheet. The student’s reason for maintaining an academically honest performance centers on the fear of harsh discipline. This is not a very thoughtful reason for remaining honest. Many students decide to be dishonest in spite of the threats of failing grades, academic probation, suspension, or even expulsion. Many students will heed the admonitions of their professors. The threat is palpable. But would they ever be honest for the sake of honesty, regardless of its consequences? If a student were to be, then it would behoove her to have good reasons for being honest. First, being dishonest means she is breaking the rules that she is required to follow. By doing so, she is making an exception of herself. The rules apply to everyone else except her. How could this be fair? She can cheat but no one else can? Furthermore, what if every student in her position was dishonest. It would seem as if honesty could not exist if everyone were dishonest. As the professor, why would I have any reason to believe that she is not trying to deceive me? It is possible that I suspect the student is being dishonest. This fact is irrelevant. The student is attempting to pass the class with little or no genuine effort. This treats the professor as a mere pawn, a mere means to an end. How can a student be said to respect the professor and the academy with such disregard for integrity and honesty? Professors could agree that are good reasons to be honest and studious. How can we convince students that these are good reasons for them as well?

**Teaching Kant**

According to Kant, the only thing that can be called inherently good is the will. All other talents, types of temperament, and “gifts of fortune” (power, wealth, and honor) can be used for good and evil. The will is used solely for good. It is not that a good will enables us to achieve greatness or happiness. A good will does not enable us to achieve a desired outcome. A good will “is good through its willing alone—that is,
good in itself.”6 It is through this good will that actions are performed out of duty. An agent is duty-bound to perform actions not because she desires to. She performs these actions because she ought to. Acting morally ought to be devoid of any self-interest, for that would diminish the moral worth of the action. Kant offers an example of a shopkeeper fairly charging his customers, including inexperienced customers. The shopkeeper could treat his customers fairly because he fears if he is discovered to be dishonest, he will lose business. He would only be honest for fear of reprisals from customers. He is doing what he ought to do not out of conformity with duty, but because he has a motive to perform his duty other than for duty’s sake. He would not be honest for honesty’s sake.7 Even though the shopkeeper does the right thing, he does it for the wrong reason. He could be honest simply because it is his duty to be honest. He need not make any reference to any desired outcomes of being honest or not. Similarly, a student can be academically honest not because she truly wants to be honest. It is more likely the case that students are honest lest they fail the class, be placed on academic probation, face suspension, lose financial aid, or even face expulsion. Even though a student would be performing her duty of academic honesty, she would not be performing this duty for duty’s sake. She would be honest because the consequences of being caught will be dreadful. The moral worth of her action is greatly lessened by appealing to her self-interest. It may be commonsensical for a student to appeal to self-interest. However, teaching the ethics of academic honesty from a Kantian standpoint entails teaching students why they should be dutiful for duty’s sake instead of concerning themselves with the consequences of their dishonesty.

According to Kant (1964), a moral agent will determine what her duty is by following a system of imperatives. Imperatives can either be “hypothetical” or “categorical”.8 Kant points out that “[i]f the action would be good solely as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; if the action is represented as good in itself, and therefore as necessary...then the imperative is categorical.”9 An imperative is hypothetical if the action is to be performed as a means to something else, something hoped for. It is an “if...then” imperative. I am not performing the action simply because it is intrinsically good. I perform the action in hopes of securing a desired end. If I pay my taxes, I will stay out of jail. I pay my income taxes to the Internal Revenue Service on time and I do not cheat on these taxes because I fear imprisonment and having my wages garnished if I am noncompliant. I am not paying my
taxes simply because it is my obligation to do so. I am paying my taxes so I avoid the repercussions of being a tax cheat.

An imperative is categorical if the action performed is good in itself. I would pay my income taxes and be completely compliant with the tax simply because it is my obligation to pay my taxes. I should not think about prison or wage garnishing when I pay my taxes. Agents ought to follow a system of categorical imperatives, according to Kant. Were the agent to adhere only to hypothetical imperatives, no agent would do what is intrinsically right. She would be doing what is personally expedient. For Kant, agents should not do what is convenient or advantageous; they simply do what is right regardless of the consequences. A student could function on a system of hypothetical imperatives. She could decide to be an honest student if academic honesty benefits her. Academic honesty would benefit the student by preventing her from getting failing grades, facing suspension, or expulsion. These might seem to be pretty good reasons for being honest. But she would not be honest because it is her duty to be honest. If I am to teach students the ethics of academic honesty a la Kant, I cannot teach them to do what is morally expedient. You are not to be honest because you have a vested interest in being honest. You are honest because you have to be. Honesty is intrinsically moral.

Furthermore, to be a moral agent, one must act autonomously, according to Kant. You can only act on categorical imperatives if you are an autonomous moral agent. To act autonomously means to act in a way that is free from motives or inclinations. You act because the action is good, not because the action is beneficial to you. To act because the action benefits you is to act heteronomously. Acting heteronomously means you are not doing as you ought to do simply for duty's sake. You seek a desired end. Kant argues that a heteronymous action is an action based on a hypothetical imperative: “I ought to do something because I will something else.” To be autonomous is to be free. You cannot consider yourself free according to Kant if your motives or inclinations influence your moral behavior.

How will students determine what it they should do? Kant argues that the Categorical Imperative has three formulations. Kant names the first formulation the “Formula of the Universal Law”. We are commanded to “act only that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” An agent does not actually make laws. The goal of the “universalizability test” is to see whether a personal rule of conduct (a maxim) could be rule that every
other agent could follow (a law). An agent determines what she and all other rational agents in similar circumstances ought to do. Kant claims that if this rational agent can will a maxim into a universal law, this means that the maxim the agent has willed is applicable to everyone. Since the maxim is applicable to every rational agent, it could be a law, not just a personal maxim. The question is whether their personal rule, their maxim, could be universalizable. If so, then any other agent in similar circumstances would have willed a similar maxim into a universal law. The “law” must be followed by all moral agents. If one were to disregard the law, she would be making an exception of herself. But she could say to herself, “Everyone else has to follow the rules, but I will break them because it is convenient.” As Russ Shafer-Landau (2012) points out, following the formula of the universal law means doing what is fair for all. Shafer-Landau asks us to think of two questions when engaging in the universalizability test:

1. What if everyone did that?
2. How would you like it if I did that to you?¹³

How can we be morally competent agents if we do not think the rules apply to us? What if we all failed to keep our promises? What if we all failed to be honest? You broke the promise you made to me. Would you like it if I broke my promise to you? Perhaps not. Shafer-Landau adds that “[i]f our maxim is universalizable, then we are pursuing actions for reasons that everyone could stand behind. We are not making exceptions of ourselves.”¹⁴

A rational, autonomous agent can take the first formulation into account by seeing whether he can will a maxim into a universal law. A maxim is a rule the agent holds only for himself. But if it can be willed into a law, the maxim becomes a law which is binding for all rational, autonomous agents. The agent has to determine whether the maxim can pass a test of noncontradiction. Kant uses the example of promise-keeping to show how a maxim can be willed into a universal law.¹⁵ An agent promises another agent that she will do X, even though the former intends to break her promise. The agent figures out whether she can break her promise by ascertaining whether promise-breaking can pass the universalizability test. The agent personally wishes to break her promise to do X. Yet if she were to try to will promise-breaking into a universal law, her maxim would fail. Promise-breaking cannot bind agents universally because if everyone were to break her promise, the very notion of promises would fail to exist. A promise requires one to keep
her word. Promise-breaking entails that one fail to keep her word. How could a promise exist if no one could be trusted to keep her word? The idea of promising to do X would not make any sense if no one intended to keep the promises they make.

I do not make my students sign notes promising to be honest and fair. The Student Code of Conduct requires them to be so. By enrolling at the institution, they implicitly accept the rules in the conduct. My task is to convince them that they have good reasons for following those rules. My lectures on Kant are supposed to convince them to uphold the value of honesty. Honesty is a compelling trait that all students should have. What would happen if students did not uphold honesty in the classroom?

In order to prove that honesty is universalizable, I must prove that dishonesty results in a self-contradiction. I can pretend that the only moral agents existing in the world are the students and I. I can use the questions that Shafer-Landau asked previously. What if everyone did that? What if every student was dishonest? If dishonesty were to become the norm, as the professor I would not trust any student. It would become impossible to grade my students. The students turn in work they promised was completed by them, and not by someone who wrote an entry for The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. I discover that a student plagiarized her paper. How can I assess her ability to argue cogently for or against Saint Anselm’s ontological argument when I know she copied her paper from an internet philosophy site? I discover that a student cheated on his test. How can I assess his ability to know the difference between an abusive ad hominem and a circumstantial ad hominem argument if he copied his answers from notes he scrawled on the palm of his hand? There would be no such thing as honesty if everyone were dishonest.

How could students trust me to grade their papers and exams if they knew that I randomly assigned grades according to my mood? I would be acting unfairly by breaking the rules I swore to follow. I would be making an exception of myself. Students who cheat do the same thing. Cheaters do not think the rules apply to them. The rules, however, are unexceptionable. We all have to follow them.

I can also ask: how would you like it if I did that to you? I still need to prove that students have compelling reasons to be honest. Asking a student how it feels to have been deceived, lied to, coerced might cause her to become a little more introspective. She can think: When a person acts on maxims that cannot be universalizable, the person or persons who are victimized by such maxims often feel deeply violated. I have yet to meet a student who likes it when her professor lies to her. If I tell a
student she will get an “A” but I instead give her a “D” because I am annoyed with her, she would be justifiably angry. I would certainly be remiss in my duty to give her the grade that she deserves. I would not like it if a professor told me I would get a certain grade only to find out that he lied to me and gave me another grade. I would not be an honest professor if I were to grade papers by only looking at the “Works Cited” page to see if the students did copious amounts of research for their papers. I am supposed to grade their ability to critically examine an issue in philosophy. I cannot do that if I only look at one page. I certainly would not like it if that were done to me as a student. A professor says she will do something, explicitly promising that the aforementioned action will be performed. Then she fails to do so. The student would not like that. But the student also needs to ask herself: what if I did that to my professor? What if I broke my promise to be honest? The student assures me that she wrote her paper. I then discover that she plagiarized. Dishonesty is a violation of her duty. She would not like it if I did that to her. She should also reason that I would not like it if she did that to me. I swore to follow the rules but I am in the presence of a student who broke the rules. She too is making an exception of herself. She is acting a maxim that cannot be willed into a universal law. The student may still feel that honesty is unreasonable. If that is the case, I have an incorrigible student who will fail the class (if caught, of course).

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative requires an agent to treat every other agent as having intrinsic worth, not merely instrumental worth. Kant calls this the “Formula of the End In Itself”. We must “act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” Kant is cognizant of the fact that agents are used as means. They cannot be used solely as a means to an end. For instance, if a researcher wants to perform an experiment on a human being, the researcher must treat all of the subjects as ends. This means that the researcher must get the informed consent of every person who wishes to participate in the experiment. The researcher must give all pertinent information to the subjects if he is to respect them as having intrinsic worth. As Onora O’Neill (2012) observes:

By getting someone involved in a business scheme or a criminal activity on false pretenses, or by giving a misleading account of what one is about, or by making a false promise or a fraudulent contract, one involves another in something to which he or she
in principle cannot consent, since the scheme requires that he or she does not know what is going on.\textsuperscript{17}

You cannot give your consent if you are not fully aware of what is happening. Perhaps you do not want to take part in the drug trials if the researchers actually told you that the pills might cause cancer or paralysis. Your “consent” would be obtained through deception. You may also obtain consent through coercion. You can coerce someone into being part of a drug trial if they are desperate for money. Coercion and deception explicitly violate a person’s dignity and respect that is owed to her because of her humanity. No one is to be used solely for her body. No person who is mentally challenged would be in a position to give her informed consent. Children would not be able to consent either. Vulnerable members of the population may not be able to give their consent. A homeless person is more likely to be under compulsion than a millionaire. The homeless person might consent to the experiment only because he had been given food, shelter, or money in exchange. Had he a roof over his head and money in his wallet, he might be less likely to submit since he would not be under any financial duress.

Treating moral agents as ends and not merely means is reciprocal. As the professor, I cannot use my students as means only. Teaching and research are part of my livelihood. I could choose to skim over their tests and papers so I do not devote too much time to grading. Ascertaining whether the students have been honest is time-consuming for sure. I could make them all happy and give them good grades. That would surely help boost my student evaluations. Yet I fail to treat them as ends if I were to engage in such behavior. Students are not merely a means to a paycheck, pension, and promotion. If I remain concerned only with my needs, I will fail to fulfill the obligations that are concomitant with my role as a college professor. It does not matter how odious I may find grading papers and exams. Nor should it matter if the students would be very pleased if I canceled every class until the end of the semester. My obligations do not entail currying favor with students. I have to lecture. I have to grade. Failure to do so means I am not respecting the students as having any intrinsic worth.

The students will have different obligations to me based on the asymmetry of the professor-student relationship. I have the authority in this relationship. I cannot abuse this authority lest I act in coercive or deceptive ways. The students cannot be coercive or deceptive either. O’Neill adds, “it is morally objectionable to treat others in ways to which they do not consent. To do so treats another as a thing or tool, which
cannot, so does not consent to the ways in which it is used; so fails to
treat others as persons, who can choose, so may withhold consent from
actions which affect them."18 I treat my students as tools if I do not grade
fairly and conscientiously. I would fail to even perform my minimal
duties. Cheating on tests and exams treats me as a tool. Instead of being
diligent and dedicated, a dishonest student seeks to earn an undeserved
grade by submitting work that was written by someone else. Or perhaps
she earns a higher grade because she brought a cheat sheet into class and
made it seem as if she were far better at constructing indirect proofs than
she actually was. The method by which she choose to be dishonest is not
the point. That she was dishonest in the first place is the problem.

The dishonest student abuses the good will and trust of the
professor. The professor should be vigilant when confronted with the
possibility of plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty. There
are ways to check. Yet many professors do not verify if papers have been
plagiarized. They do not ensure that the students in class have not tried
to sneak in notes or electronic devices with access to notes during the
test-taking period. Putting these issues aside, the cheating student still
cheated. The student wants full credit for only a partial output of work. If
she succeeds, she has used her professor as a tool because the professor
never would have accepted coursework that was overtly dishonest
academically. I want to trust the students. When it is discovered that a
student was dishonest, I do feel violated. Whether or not I discover the
dishonest work, a student either has deceived me or has tried to deceive
me. If her deception were obvious, I would have given her the failing
grade at the beginning. This is a critical lesson for students to learn. I do
have to instruct them to be honest lest they violate my humanity. Put
differently, I can tell the student that if you try to cheat, you use me as a
means. You use me as means because you do not respect me or the
institution of higher learning that I represent. As your professor, you are
hoping that I will be another unwitting pawn in your machinations. I will
think you honest and grade you accordingly. When you are caught, your
dereliction of your duties becomes apparent and the final grade will
reflect this. You are not to be honest because you or I prefer it. I am not
conscientious because you or I prefer it to be so. We mutually respect
each other and honor our respective obligations because that is what
competent moral agents do. We follow the rules because we have good
reasons for following them. You do not have to like the reasons.
The third formulation is called the “Formula of the Kingdom of Ends”.\textsuperscript{19} Every agent must act in such a way that she is subject and sovereign in the kingdom of ends. Kant argues:

The concept of every rational being as one who must regard himself as making universal law by all the maxims of his will, and must seek to judge himself and his actions from this point of view, leads to a closely connected and very fruitful concept—namely, that of a \textit{kingdom of ends}…[and] a rational being belongs to the kingdom of ends as a \textit{member}, when, although he makes universal laws, he is also himself subject to those laws.\textsuperscript{20}

The formulation states that every rational being should be treated as having universally self-legislating will. This means the agent ought to treat all other agents as being capable of willing maxims into universal laws. The agent herself ought to be treated by the other agents as having a universally self-legislating will as well. This is the formulation that tends to mystify many students (from my personal experience that is). It is easy to think that the kingdom of ends is some mystical yet unfathomable world in which these faceless, anonymous moral agents live and treat each other with the utmost splendor. But the kingdom is not so mysterious that a student could not understand what she would be required to do were she to be a member of it.

In the kingdom of ends, every agent is seen as person who is capable of making laws that every other agent could follow. This means the agent acts on maxims that to which everyone else could adhere because the maxim is universalizable and does not use any agents as means only. In that sense, the agent is sovereign. The relationship in the kingdom is reciprocal. The agent must also agree to act on maxims articulated by other agents since they also have self-legislating wills. The other agents can make laws that the former could also follow. They too can formulate maxims that are universalizable and do not use agents as means only. This makes the single agent subject. No one actually is subject and sovereign in the kingdom of ends. You must ask yourself if every other agent could act on your maxim. If not, you cannot act on that maxim since it is not universalizable. Does your maxim respect the humanity of the other agents by not merely using them as a means only? If not, you cannot act on that maxim as it does not respect your fellow agents as having intrinsic worth. These are not maxims that your “subjects” could follow. Is the other agent’s maxim one that you could follow as a
“subject”? If not, you cannot act on it. The kingdom of ends is a hypothetical place where as an agent, I lead and can be led because we all act in a manner that is universally binding and mutually respectful.

I have more authority in the professor/student relationship than the student has, this does not mean that the student lacks rights. Nor does this mean that I am a dictator who is accountable to no one. This asymmetrical power is the result of my relationship being a fiduciary one with my students. This is a relationship that is ideally built upon trust and respect. I am supposed to know more than the student. That is why I teach and grade and the student is taught and is graded. The same dynamic can be seen with parent/child, doctor/patient, and lawyer/client relationships. My greater balance of power does not make me completely sovereign any more than the student’s lesser authority makes her completely subject. My greater position of authority provides my occupation with duties that are different than the duties belonging to my students. My duties as the professor include grading responsibly, fairly, carefully, and in a timely manner. I am also required to show up for class instead of canceling the entire semester so I can vacation on a remote island. I can make my own rules, but these rules must be ones that all other people could follow and they must respect the humanity of all other agents. All other professors ought to do the same. How could higher education maintain its integrity and honor if the professors acted on the wrong maxims? Integrity and honor would cease to exist.

Students have their litany of duties to follow as well. While these duties may not be identical to mine, they are just as important. They have to be honest. They cannot cheat on their papers and their exams. They cannot try to coax the professor into giving them a better grade because they appeal to some informal fallacy that makes them look sad and pathetic. They must act on maxims that all of their classmates could follow and these maxims must respect the humanity of their classmates. Their classmates must do the same. They act on maxims to which they are subject and sovereign. For again, how could higher education maintain its integrity and honor if the students act in such ways that violate their duties? They cannot. Integrity and honor would no longer exist here as well.

There is another aspect of the third formulation of the Categorical Imperative that would be edifying for students. In the *Groundwork*, Kant discusses the “dignity of virtue”. According to Kant, everything “[i]n the kingdom of ends…has either a price or a dignity. If it has a price, something else can be put in its place as an equivalent; if it is exalted above
all price and so admits of no equivalent, then it has a dignity.”

“Skill” and “diligence” have a “market price.” These are desirable traits for workers in the marketplace. These traits are not good for their own sake. They are to be used as a means to succeed at one’s job. “Wit”, “lively imagination”, and “humor” have a “fancy price”. These are more intellectual traits that are also desirable for people. But they too are not valuable for their own sake. Your humor might mean you will be more successful as a comedian. Your skill might make you more sought-after for engineering jobs. You might be able to ask for a higher salary as well. Anything that has a price is an object that depends upon the inclinations and various needs of individual people. These are objects that have prices according to the vagaries of human beings. Because people want things for different reasons, no object can have a universal price. Some people value money. Some people value power. These prices fluctuate. These objects are instrumentally valuable only. Nothing that has a price is valuable in and of itself. People will pay the price conditionally.

If something is a dignity it is valuable for its own sake; it is not valuable as a means to something else. It is so valuable that you cannot put a price on it. Human beings have intrinsic value because of our humanity. We cannot be sold for a price. Kant adds that “morality is the only condition under which a rational being can be an end in himself…therefore, morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality, is the only thing which has dignity.”

The fact that we are fully participatory agents in the kingdom of ends endows us with the dignity that ought to be accorded to all autonomous moral agents. Dignity is what we are all owed for our capacity to act on maxims that are universalizable and which treat other agents as ends. Dignity has no price. Fidelity to promises has no price. If we were to break our promises because of some benefit we might gain as a result of this deception, we would be putting a price on promise-keeping. Promise-keeping would be worth less in this particular situation. This would mean that promise-keeping is only valuable if I stand to gain from it. Perhaps this time I gain more by breaking my promises.

Honesty is also a trait that has a dignity, not a price. If you put a price on honesty, then you are honest only if it is profitable. If it is more profitable to be dishonest, then you will be dishonest. A student who wishes to coast through college might find such reasoning comforting and commonsensical. But it is the wrong thing to do. Honesty is not a currency. It is not the trait that a student exemplifies for fear of getting caught being dishonest. By being dishonest, the student does an injustice
not only to herself, but to her fellow agents in the kingdom of ends. If you are the sovereign, you would be commanding your subjects to act on an immoral maxim of dishonesty. They should not oblige you. If you are the subject, you are not following the maxims that your sovereign ought to be commanding you to follow. You would be making an exception of yourself by defying the sovereign. You have regarded academic honesty as a thing valuable only if it leads to passing the course. Or worse, you have decided that academic dishonesty has more value as a means to passing the course. The student has no good reason to act dishonestly. Upon reflection, the student should determine that honesty has “unconditioned and incomparable worth.” A student should value honesty so highly that she has reverence for it. A student would not barter over the price of something if she were to revere it. She would revere it because it has intrinsic worth. Nothing of instrumental value ought to be a part of moral decision-making.

CONCLUSION

I can teach the ethics of academic honesty. I can say that the students must be honest because it is their duty to be so, despite the benefits they may accrue by being dishonest. However, I cannot force the students to follow the rules. I can try to convince them that it is irrational and unreasonable to be dishonest. I may be able to elucidate the meaning of Kant’s opaque prose so that the students understand what he means when he uses words like autonomy and heteronomy. They may understand Kant well enough to write a cogent term paper or essay answer. Yet the students may not fully accept the duties they have been given. This failure to comply with the rules does not mean that teaching ethics is a wasteful expense of time and effort. There is value to comprehending what Kant means by acting only on maxims that are universalizable and acting only on maxims that respect the humanity of other agents. My task is to engage the students morally, even if I teach them a lesson they do not wish to learn.

I have many thought experiments at my disposal. I can always teach the virtues of Kant by invoking the Nazis and their hypothermia experiments. I can teach the students to realize that employing useful data from those hypothermia experiments would mean that the people on whom the tests were performed were treated only as tools since they did not give their consent. I can always reference the use of torture-as-a-way-of-extracting-confessions to explain why appealing to consequences
may be not be morally prudent. By torturing a detainee, you use them as means to gather information. You do not respect him as having any dignity. His only value is that he might have information regarding a terrorist plot. These are compelling examples. Yet I want the students to critically reason about moral matters that directly and acutely affect them. They need issues that are pertinent to them. Nazi doctors and torture are provocative, but typically do not impact the student’s day-to-day activities. Academic honesty does. They need to understand that honesty is intrinsically valuable. They need to understand why they have good reasons for being categorically honest without connecting honesty to their desires. I can make it clear to everyone in the classroom why they have a duty to be honest. I can implore the students to follow their duties. I can even be a fleeting Utilitarian and remind them of the dire consequences of cheating. This does not mean that I will have 100% compliance with the rules. That rarely happens. I do not concern myself with the number of students who are committed to following the rules. I make my case to the students and leave it to them to oblige me or not.

NOTES

3 “Brandt’s Spelunkers”, from What If...Collected Thought Experiments in Philosophy, edited Peg Tittle (Pearson Publishing: NY, 2005) p. 156.
4 See R.M. Hare. “What is Wrong With Slavery?”, Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1979) pp. 103-121
6 Ibid. p. 394.
7 Ibid., p. 397.
8 Ibid., p. 414.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 440.
11 Ibid. p. 441.
12 Ibid., p. 421.
14 Ibid., p. 159.
15 Kant, op. cit., p. 422.
16 Ibid., p. 429.
19 Kant, op. cit., p. 433.
20 Ibid., p. 433.
21 Ibid., p. 434.
22 Ibid. p. 435.
24 Kant, op. cit., p. 435.
25 Ibid., p. 436.