

# **THE ETHICS OF CHEGG**

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Cheating is an evergreen ethical issue in academia, with cheating occurring at almost all levels of study, in almost all cultures, and almost all of the time. Students will usually condemn people who are viewed as cheaters, but students frequently have different ideas on what constitutes cheating from both each other and faculty. Our analysis focuses on the ethical considerations of students using Chegg.

For our discussion, we presuppose that using Chegg, and other websites, to view and copy solutions to problems as being a form of cheating. We arrive at that conclusion, because using these resources, a student presents work or ideas as their own that they have not spent the time or effort to produce.

The ethical dilemmas involved in cheating stem primarily from the fact that students are pursuing an immediate improvement in their grade and/or trying to avoid committing their own resources to developing the grade. Usually, the instructors attempt to discourage cheating by implementing punishments with the assumption that students will not cheat if there is an inherent risk when cheating. Currently, this model is not very effective. What this paper discusses is the fascinating phenomenon that occurs when it comes to cheating with Chegg as opposed to other cheating techniques such as copying classmates on tests or other manners of cheating.

What's fascinating about the concept of Chegg versus other manners of cheating is that it includes the process of essentially paying to cheat. Since Chegg members have to pay a monthly subscription for access to their service, the psychological decision-making process is different than copying a colleague's homework. Most forms of cheating don't require a payment (except possibly paying someone to complete a paper or homework assignment, but Chegg is arguably used more often). Therefore, when one decides to pay for Chegg, they are making a long-term "investment", knowing that they will have access for at least a month, and with payment being recurring it usually lasts for even longer. With 40 million customers, Chegg offers enough benefits to retain their clientele ("Chegg reaches..", 2016).

In many ways, it might appear to the student that they are commissioning someone to produce the intellectual work for them similar to how a Medici would commission a work of art. While we believe that this is inaccurate, because the student is still submitting this work as their own product, it does influence how students think about Chegg. Indeed, when we were talking with a small group about cheating and Chegg, a classmate overheard and asked us if Chegg actually counted as a form of cheating.

We wanted to try and understand why people are willing to cheat, despite many viewing cheating as unethical. In some surveys a majority of students indicated that cheating was ok, although our survey showed that over 85% of our respondents viewed cheating as unethical. At the same time, surveys have indicated rates of cheating exceeding 85% of students, while our survey indicates rates in excess of 75% with only 5% of students confident that they have not cheated (Kessler International, 2018). Taken together, this indicates that a large percentage of students view cheating as unethical but still engage in cheating. Our goals are to understand why some people may not view cheating as unethical, and why some people engage in cheating despite believing it to be unethical.

We suggest two different approaches to determine the ethics of cheating. Our first will use an approach grounded in Kantian ethics and try to universalize maxims in different situations. Our second approach will analyze cheating based on utilitarianism.

Our first approach will consist of us proposing a maxim that states a reason to cheat, ie I will cheat because I want to have an advantage over my classmates. It will then look at the effects of universalizing the maxim, i.e. if everyone cheats. We will then examine the results of universalization, and see if the maxim is still valid or if there have been any other issues that arise. We assumed that most cheating would occur to gain an advantage over a student's peers or as a way of insuring success from an academic grade perspective. In any case where the universalization of the maxim leads to a contradiction, we conclude that the maxim is unethical. (Kant, 2019)

Using Kantian's methodology, it would follow:

Chegg Cheating: A student decides to use Chegg to finish their homework. Is it unethical?

a. The maxim of the action is, "I will use Chegg [action] when I don't know the

answer[circumstances] for the motive of \_\_\_\_\_ . [motive].”

b. The universal law is, “Everyone will use Chegg when they don’t know the answer for the motive of \_\_\_\_\_.”

If we initially assume our maxim is “we will cheat in order to gain an advantage over our classmates” or “we will cheat in order to be competitive,” the maxim will not be universalizable. If everyone adopts this maxim, everyone would share this same “advantage/competitive edge.” Since everyone shares this advantage, we can assume that it becomes the norm and does not actually provide anyone an advantage. Therefore, it is impossible to universalize the maxim that one should cheat to gain an advantage over others is impossible, so we conclude that it is not ethical to cheat for the purpose of gaining an advantage over others.

Alternatively, we could consider the maxim that we should cheat in order to improve our academic grade. If we universalize the maxim, every student would cheat in order to improve their grade. If a professor graded on a true bell curve, then even though everyone cheated the grades would remain more or less stagnant since the curve would be adjusted for the now higher academic grades which would prevent the universalization of the maxim. We assume that most professors do not grade on a true bell curve, and we would point to the numerous articles on grade inflation as proof of this assertion. We therefore believe that universalizing the maxim would not inherently defeat it. That being said, everyone always cheating would cause the education system to be meaningless, since the results would not be indicative of what students have learned. Due to it rendering the educational system meaningless, it would appear that the underlying goal of the student, proving that they have learned marketable skills, is made impossible.

No matter what maxim we assume for cheating, we do not believe it is possible to justify cheating from an approach grounded in Kant’s ethics. The fact that Kant considers motive equally as important as the consequences means that you seriously have to consider the hearts and minds of the students who participate in cheating. It seems that no matter how you slice it, there doesn’t seem to be a reasonable motive for utilizing Chegg when it comes to Kantian thinking that deems it appropriate. The reality that universalizing the action always yields negative impacts on others means that in order to act ethically, one must consider that the short-term effects of cheating

using a service like Chegg doesn't outweigh the long-term negative impact that cheating as a whole has on society. Which leads one to consider, are students not educated in the long-term effects of cheating, or are students willingly ignoring the facts in order to reap whatever benefit the student receives from cheating?

Moreover, when considering the consequences, you have to look beyond simply the initial results of the cheating (i.e. an improved score on an online quiz), and look at the long term effects in terms of how universalizing the law leads to unforeseen consequences that create an unethical standard. Therefore, based on previous commentary, it could be presumed that the mindset of the student is superficial, since logically if one cared for the well-being of society, they would do what others in society expect them to: discipline themselves to learn, grow, and better themselves for their future occupations and thus better their community and society. Obviously, with the amount of cheating that occurs at universities, especially while using Chegg, we see that their mindsets are set on temporary convenience rather than on the long-term goal of bettering society.

Utilitarian ethics is concerned with choosing the action that will maximize the utility of society (Driver, 2014). In this case, we can assume that so long as a student is not caught cheating, their utility will only remain the same or increase, at least in the short term. Since they are not suffering any immediate repercussions from being caught, we assume that their utility cannot be decreased. Additionally, the act of cheating implies that they accomplish something without using as many resources. By definition, successful cheating, managed to gain the advantage and not get caught, would increase the student's utility. If the student cheated, was not caught, but also did not manage to get an advantage, the student's utility will be unchanged. In the unlikely event that the student is caught cheating, their utility would decrease significantly. Overall, we suggest that students assume that there is either no probability of being caught cheating or at the very least a very small probability. The overall conclusion for a "rational" student then is that their utility is increased by cheating.

At the societal level, students probably assume that cheating is a "victimless crime." After all, by copying another student's answer, a student improves their grade without changing their peer's answer and therefore grade. Essentially, on small time scales cheating would not decrease the utility of others. By combining the change in the student's expected change in utility with the expected change in society's utility, a student would reach the conclusion that cheating

was permissible with utilitarian ethics, since it increases the overall utility of society.

On larger timescales, cheating has adverse effects on the student and society, even if the student is never caught. A student who cheats, will almost certainly not learn as much as they would by doing the work properly. That means that if they are ever required to recall that information, they will probably not be able to. In extreme cases, this can lead to career-ending mistakes which would significantly decrease that individual's utility. Whoever employs that student will lose utility, if they have to teach that individual something that they should have learned but did not learn due to cheating. Schools with widespread cheating and anyone associated with that school can suffer a long term loss in utility since their reputation will decrease if it becomes known that a significant number of students receive high marks despite not learning everything that is needed. In the long term, adverse consequences from cheating will decrease the utility of both the cheater and the rest of society.

We would also like to acknowledge that most of the utility loss in the long time horizon comes from abstract effects, i.e. loss of reputation. Students probably are less likely to factor these concerns in, since abstract concerns are easier to ignore, harder to predict, less certain, and more difficult to understand. Combined with the fact that these events happen after a time delay, and students are unlikely to take these effects into account. This means that students can naively apply utilitarian ethics, ignoring long term abstract effects, and come to the conclusion that cheating is ethically permissible. In fact, we believe that students use this technique without realizing it, since our limited survey indicated most students who cheated said they cheated because it seemed like an easy way to help their grades without affecting others. It appears that the students take the short-sighted view that cheating helps them without immediate concrete consequences.

We propose that students are willing to cheat, even if they view it as unethical due to what amounts to economic concerns. They do an internal cost analysis and conclude that their utility is most likely improved by cheating. They then choose to follow this course of action because they cannot see how it will affect other people. Despite "knowing" that cheating is wrong, students cheat because they use an informal form of utilitarian ethics to justify cheating.

Chegg could potentially be an amazing resource for students. Some of the features that usually aren't mentioned are textbook rentals, online tutoring and other extremely beneficial services. The problem

is that for the typical student in an entry level class (which can be an extremely important first step for more advanced classes), homework assignments tend to turn into a constant cycle of copying the question, pasting in google, and clicking the first Chegg link that pops up and immediately scrolling down to the example. It's the inevitable step. They may tell themselves that they will use it to check answers, then progress to "I'll use it to see how they did it". However, reliance leads to convenience, and the internal cost and benefit analysis leads to their minimizing time spent on assignments, thus an easy way out by solely copying the answers.

Beyond the ethical philosophies there is one question: in the long-run, does using Chegg to cheat (or even cheating in general) benefit society? It's very easy to see the mindset of the cheater: one incident won't impact anything. The reality is that when we create an environment that allows or even encourages cheating, we lead essentially to the universalization of the law as previously discussed in the Kantian section of this paper. Much in the way that people don't vote because the impact of their vote is miniscule, students cheat. Yet with the amount of people cheating, one must wonder how much better society would be without Chegg. Would students be better prepared for their future careers? Would universities have better reputations based on the type of graduates they push out? While students have cheated for longer than Chegg has existed, the fact remains that Chegg has facilitated a lack of discipline among students. Thus, whether or not you

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