

MARTIN BUBER'S I-YOU RELATION AND THE ETHICS OF CHEATING ON TESTS

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According to Martin Buber's I-You relationship in his treatise *I and Thou*, cheating on an academic assessment could never be ethically justifiable, because it could never create a true I-You relation; not even in special circumstances would cheating uphold an I-You relation.

There are only two possible basic relationships, according to Buber. The first, an I-You relation, can "only be spoken with one's whole being." The other, an I-It relationship, can "never be spoken with one's whole being" (Buber 53). This is because in an I-It relationship, the You can only *experience* the It. To the I, the It is an aggregate of qualities that describe it, such as appearance, location, color, quantity, motion, and more (Buber 69). The It is merely an impression, an imagining, or an aspect of a mood (Buber 58). Thus, the It becomes something that one can experience and thus only describe. Only when everything about the It is "inseparably fused" can the It become the You in an I-You relation (Buber 58). Whatever belongs to the other is included, because the I is no longer confined to knowledge of the other's particulars. No longer is the human or subject a thing among things that consist of things (Buber 59). The You, unlike the It, is not limited by the qualities that describe it.

Additionally, the I and You are equal. The I stands in relation to the You. The I acts on the You as the You acts on I (Buber 60). It is a

relation of reciprocity. As a result, the I-You relationship involves risks. The You and the I have an infinite possibility of being hurt and devalued (Buber 60). This is because the You and the I must put forth their whole beings; doing so makes both parties more susceptible to harm. Also, the world of I-You is sporadic and risky (Buber 83). There is no certainty in the world of I-You; neither party will ever be completely safe.

Although it is precarious and rare, an I-You relation can be an ethical standard. While we cannot guarantee the I-You in our lives, we can avoid its antithesis. It is unethical to devalue anyone, because doing so treats that person as a replaceable thing; an I-It relationship does this. Therefore, an I-It relationship cannot be an ethical standard; this leaves the only other type of relation, an I-You relation. An I-You relation can be the basis of an ethical standard because it requires that the I and the You be equal and true to each other; no party in this relation is being demeaned, as the I and You do not treat each other as merely a list of qualities and descriptions. Neither the I nor the You is being treated as a means to an end. An I-You relation is the only kind of ethical one. However, I-You relations are rare in life and cannot be sought after. I-You finds you (Buber 62). You cannot choose the relation yourself; only with time and patience does it come. Therefore, the majority of the population breaks this ethical standard. One might ask: If humans and things do not actively choose to have an I-You relation, how can they be deemed unethical for something they cannot control? Well, I-You relations may be rare, but it is still unethical to act willfully in a way that clearly violates an I-You relation. Always treat others as if in an I-You relation, whether or not you are. The goal is to live within the possibility of an I-You relation.

Following Buber's idea of an I-You relation, one sees that cheating on an academic assessment will always create a limited, detached,

relationship of I-It. Cheating is defined here as acting dishonestly or unfairly in order to gain an advantage. Academic assessments can be defined as the wide variety of methods that educators use to evaluate, measure, and document the academic readiness, learning progress, and skill acquisition of students (“Assessment”). Cheating of this kind includes having prior knowledge of the academic assessment before taking it (knowledge that the professor did not offer or that not everyone taking the assessment had the opportunity to receive), glancing at another person’s assessment while you are both taking it, and much more. Basically, any willful action that gives a person an *unearned* advantage can be defined as cheating, while the act of earning an advantage may be acceptable, even commendable. For example, a person who studies for the assessment has an edge over someone who has not studied. However, the studier earned that advantage by working. In contrast, if a student received a copy of the assessment before taking it, that would also give the student an advantage. In this case, the student did not earn the advantage; instead, it was unfairly and sneakily gained.

Furthermore, cheating on an academic assessment forms only I-It relationships with every person involved, including those not involved directly. Let us examine three scenarios of cheating.

Scenario 1: You are taking an English exam on the novel that your class recently read, *The Odyssey*. There is just one problem: you never read the book. As a result, you are clueless about the answers to the examination. You copy them from your classmate’s test.

It is not ethically justifiable to cheat in Scenario 1. The relation formed in this scenario is an I-It rather than an I-You, because the

relationship is not reciprocal; you are taking away from your classmates, teachers, and everything and everyone else. You are using them solely to benefit yourself. The person you cheated off of gains absolutely nothing while you, on the other hand, do gain. In fact, that person, along with the rest of your classmates, is negatively impacted, because you are making their grades look worse in comparison. Your grade gets unfairly boosted, making everyone else look inferior, when in reality you should have done worse. Also, you are devaluing the meaning of intelligence and hard work. You are making education itself meaningless. Why bother to learn anything at all, if no one is really learning? If everyone earns educational degrees and titles by cheating, then no one has received an education.

Scenario 2: You and your friend agree to help each other cheat on the physics test that you both have. In exchange for the answers on the test about electricity, your friend will give you the answers to the projectile questions.

Once again, cheating is not ethically justifiable, even though the relationship can be seen as reciprocal. You may argue that the relationship is reciprocal because both you and your friend are benefitting. I-You relations are reciprocal; therefore, the relationship between you and your friend is an I-You relation rather than an I-It one. However, reciprocity is not the only element of an I-You relation. An I-You relation must always involve your whole being and your friend's whole being. By cheating as in Scenario 2, you are inhibiting and limiting each other. You are not allowing your friend to reach his or her full potential, nor is your friend allowing the same of you. Here again, cheating fails to fulfill all the requirements of an I-You relation.

Furthermore, you are still creating I-It relationships with the rest of your classmates and professor. You are still demeaning the value of your education, everyone else's education, and the professor's effort.

Scenario 3: You are in an algebra class. Your teacher decides to give a test. You receive your test and begin by writing your name clearly. You read the first question. It asks, "What is the temperature of the surface of the sun in Kelvin?" You are baffled. This is a math class, not a science class. Your professor has never even mentioned this in class. It is completely irrelevant to the topics that your professor has taught so far, like parabolas and inequalities. The rest of the examination is the same way.

Another specious claim that you might bring up is that in Scenario 3, the test was unfair, so you have the right to be unfair by cheating. As mentioned before, I-You relations are rare. But it is still morally wrong to purposefully create an I-It relation. No matter the scenario, you must always act as an I or a You in an I-You relationship. Furthermore, there may be something that you can do that is not morally wrong. For example, you can speak to the professor, the administrator, or someone else. Even if this does not prove to be a solution, it keeps open the possibility of one. If everyone responded to injustice by being unjust, the world would be in an endless cycle of injustice where everyone was always unjust. Two wrongs never make a right.

Is it ethically justifiable to cheat in any of these scenarios? No, because in none of these scenarios is an I-You relationship formed. Instead, I-Its are formed. Cheaters violate mutual benefit that should come from an I-You relation (Downes). They use others to benefit themselves. Perhaps you may argue that the rule of reciprocity is broken

only when you cheat directly off of someone. But there are other modes of cheating, such as writing the answers on your hand or something along those lines. In such cases, you are not taking or receiving from anyone. You are only copying from a non-human, right? But this still defies a reciprocal relationship; you are still making the efforts of your classmates and professor futile.

Although many may argue that cheating can be justified in specific scenarios, it can never approach the standard of Buber's I-You relationship. Even in special circumstances, cheating is always unexcusable. It is a deplorable act; taking the low grade will always be better than cheating. A grade is just a number, while morals are everything.

Works Cited

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