LANCE ARMSTRONG AND THE SCARLET C

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Cyclist Lance Armstrong cheated his way to seven Tour de France 'victories'. Such cheating is wrong because it harms society. To explain how that harm affects all of us, I use Aristotle's ideas of virtue ethics to argue that Armstrong, despite his charitable work, is not a virtuous person. Virtue is to some extent determined by society, so we need to be clear that Armstrong is not a person to emulate. A society which does not clearly disapprove of vice is less than it might otherwise be because a good society is one that encourages virtue in its citizens.

I read the blogs of Canadian runner Rob Watson (leblogdurob.com), which gives me access to his tweets. Watson (@robbiedxc) tweeted his approval that Lance Armstrong (LA) would not be allowed to participate in the Chicago Marathon, and the following exchange took place (2012 09 07):

> (To Watson) '@robbiedxc: Lance denied entry into Chicago marathon'. Why such a hater? #jealousfool
>
> (From Watson) @drdmacd serious? I will hate on Lance all damn day. Cheating ruins the purity of sport. It's disgusting, cheaters make me sick. #blindfool
>
> (To Watson) @robbiedxc do you think people really care about the cheating? Both my parents had cancer. What have you done for the world lately? #petty
>
> (From Watson) @drdmacd I lack influence and power, but I have this set this up; [He includes a charity website] His charity and his cheating are seperate entities.

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Although the dialogue would not be out of place in a primary school playground, and at least one of the tweeters would benefit from a critical thinking course, there are a few important underlying arguments at work here. Argument 1 is that someone who cheats in sport deserves opprobrium that should extend into areas of their life other than that in which they cheated; in simple terms, that they should wear a scarlet C. Argument 2 is that that many people don't care about athletes who cheat so (a) cheating is no big deal and (b) LA is a big hero who has raised a lot of money for cancer research and so (c) that makes him a much better person than Watson and therefore (d) exempt from being criticized by people such as Watson. Argument 3 is that LA's professional cycling and his charitable fundraising are distinct activities; (presumably) we can excoriate him as a cheat yet still laud his charitable work.

I will argue in favour of the scarlet C, and that arguments 2 and 3 are bad so we should not accept them.

Let me dismiss argument 2 straightaway. I think cheating is a big deal (2a). I will deal with this below by arguing that it harms society as a whole. That the end justifies the means (2b) is a utilitarian argument. It is countered by those like Kant who think that it is always wrong to harm others no matter what the outcome, and so if the means involve using or harming people without their consent the act is wrong. I expound this idea below. But Kant can always be used to dismiss a utilitarian argument, so I will argue further below that a communitarian/Aristotelian view of society is a more appropriate model for discussing cheating and its effects than is a simple utilitarian or deontological one.

If an argument makes a utilitarian claim (which I take 2c to be) it should at least be consistent. Thus argument 2 should acknowledge that Watson is entitled to express any idea he wishes, no matter how daft, and irrespective of his social standing or accomplishments (as long as it causes no harm) because in general utilitarianism treats all people as having equal standing in moral matters. Thus to privilege

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Armstrong in some way over Watson (2d) makes argument 2 incoherent. An additional counter to 2c and 2d is that Watson placed 11th in the 2012 Rotterdam marathon in a time of 2 hours 13 minutes and 36 seconds (the winning time was 2:04:48; world record for the men's marathon is 2:03:38) and he is a person dedicated to attaining some form of excellence in distance running. So, as an athlete, Watson is a person of some standing. Given that I will successfully deal with (2a) and (2b), the second argument is bad.

The third argument is that LA's charity work can be considered in isolation from his Tour de France (TdF) peccadilloes. I think that it cannot because LA himself has up till now bound them together. For example the website of the Livestrong foundation identifies itself as 'Official partner to the Lance Armstrong Foundation' and contains a link to same (and, perhaps ironically, a section on Living Well). The two sites are integrated and both are branded by the Armstrong name. LA is prominent in society both for his TdF prowess and for his cancer charity, and his charitable work has been successful because he recovered from testicular cancer and 'won' the TdF seven times. LA has coopted a particular shade of yellow for his charitable work which is not a million shades away from the TdF's maillot jaune. Those who sponsored his cycling also sponsor his foundation. The conjunction is extremely important because it is likely that LA would not have been as influential and successful in his charity endeavours had he branded himself solely as a cancer conqueror or solely as a seven time TdF winner. This argues that up until now, LA, the driving force of the foundation and of Livestrong, has not wanted his charity and his cycling to be detached, and also that they are not separated in the public view. Of course, they may be separated in the future and we can conceive of the charity and foundation as having an existence independent of Armstrong but at the time of writing the charity would not be what it is without LA, cancer survivor and extraordinarily successful cyclist. The charity work and the TdF winning cyclist are inseparable.

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A utilitarian may not condemn, or care about, Armstrong's cheating because it (apparently) resulted in a greater good. It is difficult to quantify that greater good in anything other than a 'more awareness of cancer is a good thing' way, and it is impossible to determine what the situation would have been without LA's efforts. I disagree with the utilitarian because I think that we are all harmed by LA's cheating, so the utilitarian calculus will result in greater harm than good. However, the argument that harm to society is the same as harm to every individual in society is not obviously one that would appeal to a utilitarian, who might accuse me of the fallacy of division, and so I must go outside utilitarianism to support my view. The utilitarian view describes how people reason, but it is inadequate to describe how society is harmed by LA.

A Kantian take on cheating is that cheating in sport is morally bad because the cheater has broken the rules. An athlete implicitly agrees to compete on the same terms as other participants. The winner shows that they have, through hard work and strength of character, been able to perform best. A cheater undermines that contest because they are not competing on the same terms; they have given themself some advantage unavailable to truthful competitors. We are not able to turn It is OK to cheat into any sort of moral imperative. The form of Kant's argument that we cannot turn cheating or some other bad maxim into a moral imperative is that if we were to try to do so, it would logically lead to the collapse of society (my choice of words, not Kant's). This is because if everyone were to adopt such an imperative, then athletic competition would become a matter of cheater versus cheater, which is entirely antithetical to the purpose of athletic contest. I use the phrase *collapse of society* to describe this reasoning because it suggests that adherence to a false moral imperative can lead to harm to society.

Cheating is thus a big deal because it can never be done by a person of good will. It is one of those things we tend to think of in absolute terms, and we teach it to

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children as such. Lying is always wrong, gratuitously hurting people is always wrong, cheating is always wrong, and so on.

Another aspect of Kant's moral view also comes into play and goes some way towards explaining how society is harmed by a cheat. One formation of the categorical imperative is that we should always treat people as ends in themselves, never as a means to an end. That is, we must respect people as such. A person who cheats denies worth to others because the cheater is ignoring their aspirations and goals; the cheater devalues them. Not only does this harm the others directly, but it shows that the cheater is taking advantage of honest competitors in order to meet his or her goals; the cheater is using others as a means to accomplishing those goals. And it does not matter how 'worthy' those goals might be because the cheater who decides that raising money for cancer is more deserving than the aspirations of honest competitors is denying agency to both those affected by cancer and those who do not cheat.

In his example of the shopkeeper who gives correct change to everyone, Kant makes the point that we cannot know if a person is acting morally (that they recognise what is their moral duty and act rightly because it is their duty) or if it is the case that their actions coincide with what their moral duty is but that they are acting that way for other reasons. But no such doubt exists when a person does wrong. An individual such as LA must know, if they use other people as a means to his or her own end, that they are doing wrong because he or she knows that those they are deceiving would not, as moral beings, willingly engage with the cheater's enterprise. This then is the harm done to society: in acting wrongly the cheater is subverting the view that all individuals have equal worth and in honouring a cheat we are honouring the subversion and thus diminishing ourselves.

I think there is a real harm to society even if only one person decides to cheat, but neither a Kantian approach

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nor a utilitarian approach are able to adequately describe it. Against a utilitarian I argue about how the calculus of harm to society is performed. Against Kant I argue that logically society is diminished but it is difficult to show actual harm in any concrete way. I will now show that an Aristotelian approach is able to describe and account for the harm done to society by cheating and is therefore to be preferred to either the utilitarian or the Kantian approach. A moral theory that describes how people actually deal with moral concerns is to be preferred to one that does not because ethics is, in Aristotle's view, a practical concern.

I am a communitarian, which means that I hold the view that ethically there are societal interests which we need to consider in our moral decision making, particularly when those interests might conflict with what I see as my own interests. For me, utilitarianism and deontology don't give adequate recognition to this conflict because they largely see morality in individual terms. Aristotle recognised that ethics was a political study; we require ethics in order to know how to live well in society.

Two distinct concepts in the Aristotelian framework of virtue ethics are the *good society* and the *good life*. A good society is one that actively encourages goodness and well-being – virtue – in its citizens. It is not hard to argue that a good society cannot be one which discourages good behaviour in its citizens, nor one that encourages bad behaviour, so I will leave that as an exercise for the reader. The good life is one that a person tries to lead in accordance with virtue. Virtue can crudely be considered to be the set of all individual virtues. Individual virtues are qualities which can often, but not exclusively nor necessarily, be identified with social norms and include individual values such as courage, truthfulness and charity. The question of whether individuals' values determine society's or vice versa is complex so I want to simply to claim that there is a relationship between society's values and the virtues an individual practices. In his ethical writings Aristotle occasionally uses the home and family as a model for society, and this

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suggests to me that values inculcated by a person's family reflect those which are highly regarded by society.

In order to live a life of virtue, a person must dispose themselves to such a life. In Aristotle's view a disposition is a state of a person's character in which a person intends or wants to act in a particular way, in this case virtuously. A disposition is controllable, in contrast to a natural tendency, which is a way way person has of behaving without having to think about it. A single virtue represents a state which is intermediate between two extremes of vice, one of excess and the other of deficiency. Thus the virtue of truthfulness is a disposition to tell the truth (because a person recognises that truthfulness is a virtue) and is intermediate between what Aristotle calls boastfulness (outright lying, acting with no regard for the truth, the vice of excess) – and self deprecation (understating or not fully disclosing the truth, the vice of deficiency). Cheating involves telling less than the truth, such as claiming never to have tested positive for doping, and telling more than the truth, such as claiming never to have doped. Although it is conceivable that there are situations in which being precisely truthful may not be desirable, on the whole the virtuous individual will attempt to be truthful all the time. The individual desires a life of virtue because the pursuit, practice and contemplation of such a life lead to happiness (as Aristotle said, 'happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with complete excellence').

A person's behaviour in any particular situation is influenced by the nature of the situation, the individual's natural tendencies, their disposition towards virtuous behaviour, and their life situation. A person who holds strongly that the end justifies the means may be less truthful than someone who values their own personal integrity or reputation highly, but it is difficult to see how the end justifying the means can be explained as virtuous behaviour. The idea suggests that there is some higher virtue which permits the individual to override other virtues. Since to override a virtue is to act towards vice, this idea of one virtue overriding another

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leads to virtue promoting vice, and that seems cockeyed. Virtue must be consistent or it is worthless. Our reason enables us to determine what, for any particular virtue, our virtuous behaviour consists in. Clearly, in the example of truthfulness – and a cheat is someone who denies the truth – virtuous behaviour lies in telling the truth and this may not be overridden by any other supposed virtuous behaviour.

Society has values which may differ from individuals' values, but the values of society (for example, that we have the right to free speech, or that capital punishment is wrong) influence our considerations of what is virtue in two ways. First in our upbringing, and second through mechanisms of honouring people. Unfortunately, society doesn't post a list of what the virtues are; we each have to figure it out for ourselves. Our parents teach us virtuous behaviour as children: to share, to tell the truth, not to steal. Some virtues seem to be universal (the wrongness of murder, theft and adultery, and the rightness of truthfulness for example), while others – or their importance – seem less so. Although we will always be able to find exceptions to the claim, most people are brought up in ways which conform to society's norms and values.

Our society values accomplishment and achievement, and the rewards for those who exhibit these can be considerable. Winning the TdF is an accomplishment beyond most people, but winning the TdF seven times by cheating is not virtuous behaviour. Cancer is feared, but there are many types of cancer. According to the American Cancer Society (in May 2012) the five year relative survival rate for testicular cancer is 99% if the cancer has not spread from the testicle(s), 72% if it has spread to lymph nodes or other organs, and 95% overall. According to an article on the National Institutes of Health's *Medline Plus* site, in 1996 LA's cancer had metastasized to his lymph nodes, liver and brain. Surviving a serious cancer is considered an achievement.

Society identifies virtuous people. If everyone admires a person for being virtuous then we can infer what virtuous

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behaviour is. If society roundly condemns particular behaviour we can figure out what virtuous behaviour is not. If we see society bestowing honour on people for particular actions, then we construe those actions as virtuous. We also learn to identify any natural tendencies we have and how to restrain them if they lead us towards vice. Thus as we develop, within a family, from children to adults we learn what it is to be virtuous, and, given that we form a disposition to be virtuous (and we should because we see virtue esteemed and honoured both in the family and in society, and therefore desirable), our knowledge of what virtue is provides a guide for our own behaviour. It is important to note that our circumstances and our situations change, as do the events in the world, so that although we require an ongoing disposition towards virtue, what precisely virtue comprises for an individual is not necessarily constant in practical terms.

If society influences our understanding of what virtue is then we need society to be fairly consistent in both its designation and its recognition of virtue. We will not be able to live a life according to virtue if virtue itself is a moving target. Social norms, inasmuch as they represent virtue, can and do change, but tend to do so relatively slowly. What constitutes virtuous behaviour will from day to day appear to be steady, although there may be gradual change over time. We also need society to present a unified view of virtue. If society has the view that athletic competitions should be drug free, but turns a blind eye to doping in cycling, and, indeed, honours cyclists who are known to be less than clean, then we get an incomprehensible view of what is virtue; a 'do as I do, not as I say' situation.

A good society is one that encourages virtue in its citizens. A society which is not unanimous on what constitutes virtue cannot encourage virtue in its citizens. It is thus a lesser society than it would otherwise be. Those who see doping as acceptable appear to us, in such a society, no less virtuous than those those who see it as unacceptable

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simply because there is not an unambiguous societal view of what virtue is. This is how a society which is corrupt – one in which the appearance of virtue is not matched by performance – harms all individuals within it because they are denied a reliable means of determining what virtue is. If people are unable to determine what virtue is, they cannot act virtuously by being disposed to virtue. They cannot even be virtuous by luck because they cannot be disposed to act virtuously if they do not know what a virtue is. Thus they cannot be excellent and are so harmed. A good society cannot tolerate corruption because its citizens are directly harmed by being prevented from recognizing what a good life is.

We see in LA a seven time TdF winner and cancer survivor and he inspires us to act like him because he is virtuous in society's eyes. We see in him a person who is untruthful and we realize he is not virtuous. This leads us to question whether we ourselves are virtuous; are the judgments we formed about virtue from using LA as an exemplar correct? We are harmed because we cannot be sure that we have not been misdirecting out lives.

One indication of virtue is in how a society honours people. The intrinsic worth of a medal or an invitation to *Desert Island Discs* may not be great, but they are hugely instructive of what constitutes virtue. I think that signs of dishonour are just as importantly instructive because they clearly and unambiguously identify what is not virtue. Those who are guilty of crimes are dishonoured through punishment and adverse publicity. Thus it is appropriate that LA is sanctioned not only by being stripped of his TdF wins but also that he be excluded from further athletic competition of any kind. But this is done more or less without ceremony.

I want to go further than this. The removal of LA's name from the record books identifies that he has done acts which are not virtuous, but it does not say much about his character. LA is not a virtuous person. A virtuous person has a disposition to virtue, which informs all activity in their life. In deciding to enhance his performance by means which were proscribed and to maintain that his success

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was through athletic performance alone (excessive bravado), and by steadfastly maintaining the deceit (deficiency in truthfulness), LA showed that he does not have a disposition to virtue. On the contrary, he shows that he has a disposition to vice. A person with a disposition to virtue may not always succeed in acting virtuously, but their disposition will ensure that they recognise their failure and will try to do better next time. A person without such a disposition cannot be virtuous.

It is just as instructive to have exemplars of non-virtuous people as it is to have exemplars of virtuous behaviour, which leads me to the view that LA should be publicly dishonoured. That he should metaphorically wear a scarlet C. Often social disapprobation is the only measure of how wrong we consider an action to be, but its instructive effect is reduced if it is not overt.

I find it really puzzling that people are happy to overlook LA's cheating and its extent on the grounds of the benefits to cancer research that have accrued from LA's activities. I attribute it to the fact they do not realize they have been harmed by the deceit. I have tried to show that the harm done to society – which is a harm we each suffer – by diminishing society's values, and in accepting the utilitarian argument, outweighs the millions of dollars raised through LA's cycling and charitable activities.

I am indebted to a former student, Alexandra Mogyoros, who in 2005 wrote a guided study paper on the Aristotelian analysis of athletes using genetic modification to enhance performance. She made it clear to me why the athlete who cheats cannot have a virtuous character, and I have used her conclusion herein. I am also extremely indebted to my friends Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray and Charlene Elsby for their helpful comments on the draft.

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Note

Without an admission from Lance Armstrong that he used banned substances in his seven TdF wins, or of photographs of him in the act, we cannot be *certain* that he cheated. Ten reasons which support the view Armstrong cheated are given in *Bicycling* magazine: http://www.bicycling.com/news/pro-cycling/you-jury (accessed 2012 09 17)

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