

Make the ~~Punishment~~ ^{Crime} Fit the ~~Crime~~ ^{Punishment}

Mar 7 2006

In basketball, doing something patently illegal can be beneficial. In cricket, on the other hand, there is absolutely no advantage to breaking the rules. The bowler's aim is to throw the ball into the wickets – three wooden sticks stuck in the ground – that the batsman protects, and it's against the rules for the batsman to place his legs in front of them as protection. If the ball does hit the batsman's legs on its way to the wickets¹, the umpire declares the batsman 'out LBW', where LBW is short for 'Legs Before Wicket'. You foul, you're out. In contrast, in basketball, the opposing team merely gets a couple of free shots at the basket.

Recently I was part of a bizarre interaction with some students from another department registered for a quantitative course I teach. One week I assigned a homework set consisting of three or four problems on options valuation. A week later the students handed their solutions to the teaching assistant, who graded and returned them. A few days later, two students approached me and, one after the other, handed me their solutions, claiming they had done the last problem correctly, even though the grader hadn't realized it. They each wanted twelve extra points.

Now the grader gets my solutions to the homework as a guide, but often some students hand in different but nevertheless correct solutions. I took their problem sets home and examine them. Both students had eccentric, cryptic, but ultimately correct answers. But both were eccentric and cryptic in exactly the same way, word for word, number for number, decimal place for decimal place.

That evening I emailed the two students that their solutions were correct but identical, and asked them to come to my office sometime. Our subsequent conversation went something like this.

“Your two homeworks are exactly the same,” I said.

“You didn't say it's not OK to work together,” one of them replied².

“Yes,” I said, “But that doesn't mean it's OK to copy.”

“Well, I had homework from many courses so I had to make a judgement call.”

Over the next few hours I tried to deconstruct that last remark. The students had obviously made more than one judgement call.

The first call, the one the student was referring to, the only judgement call he thought he'd made, was the decision to collaboratively plagiarize. It wasn't a good (i.e. moral) call, but it wasn't an obviously bad (i.e. potentially unproductive) one; the chances were reasonable that they could have gotten away with it.

¹ The umpire's judgement call.

² Murray Gell-Mann, won the Nobel Prize in physics for his correct prediction of the existence of subatomic particles that showed up as gaps in a Mendeleev-style table of particles he constructed. Impressed by the fact the gaps represented particles that existed, he then jokingly formulated the so-called Totalitarian Principle in physics: Everything not forbidden is compulsory.

The second call, to resubmit their plagiarized work for regrading, was bad judgement indeed. It wasn't worth the candle. The major risk was getting caught and perhaps punished; the minor reward for successfully grubbing a few extra points would have had literally no effect on their final grade³. What a skewed set of risk preferences they had!

The third call, given that they were going to resubmit, was whether to resubmit to me, the professor, or to the teaching assistant. There again, they made a bad (i.e potentially unproductive) call. The assistant has many papers to grade, while I oversee only a few, so I am much more likely to spot something amiss.

The fourth call, given that they were going to resubmit to me, was whether to do it together or separately. They chose to give their two identical solutions to me, in person, simultaneously.

The fifth call was the most elegantly recursive one, but also the most deeply myopic. When confronted with what they had done, they chose to refer to the first call as a 'judgement call,' as though what was in question was their business-like *judgement* rather than their dishonesty. In this way, they made what they had done sound like an ultimately unwise business choice, as though, for example, they had decided to create a new diet soda and then chosen the wrong can design.

I didn't send them off the court. I took the total of 100 points they would each have received for doing all the problems correctly, and divided it in two, giving them fifty points each. It will have a negligible effect on the scoreboard at the buzzer.

³ They wanted 12 extra points out of 100 on one of ten problem sets that together counted for 20% of the final course grade. Each homework set, completed correctly, counted for 2%. Twelve points on one of them counted for about 0.2%, pretty negligible.