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Football and Philosophy

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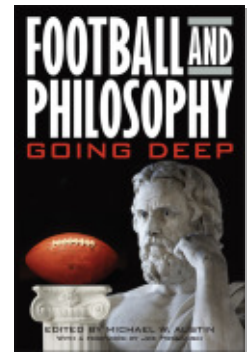
Published by The University Press of Kentucky

Austin, Michael.

Football and Philosophy: Going Deep.

Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

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THE TRUE NATURE OF CHEATING

It is the game of the century. Two powerhouse college football programs, both undefeated the entire year, will meet in the BCS Championship game. Each year, the Bowl Championship Series has matched two excellent teams in the season's final game, but never has the game brought together two more accomplished and successful teams with two such different philosophies.

State University has had the leadership of Coach Smith for almost two decades. He has created a program that not only wins on the field but also graduates its student-athletes. State takes great pride in always being in compliance with all NCAA rules—not an easy task, given the enormous multitude of rules—and doing everything in the right way. State has produced a half-dozen Heisman winners in this period, as well as many student-athletes who have gone on to be prominent physicians, lawyers, and businessmen.

In contrast, Coach Jones was hired by Central University just a few years ago. Central has aggressively pursued football dominance. Coach Jones is known to be tireless in his recruiting, tough with his players, and relentless in his desire to win. While others sometimes think that Central goes too far, its fans love the maverick approach of their coach and the “take no prisoners” attitude on the field. These fans are not upset that Central is on NCAA probation or that the school's graduation rate is poor, to say the least.

Game day arrives. Students from both universities have been drinking since Wednesday. Even State's and Central's faculty members, many of whom normally cannot find the football stadiums on their campuses,

are excited about the game. Literally thousands of members of the media are on site. Everyone expects a great game—though the nagging feeling that Central will cheat persists.

State kicks off; Central runs it back to the 25. The two teams face each other at the line. Then it starts.

Central's linemen start trash-talking. "I've got a pet turtle that's faster than you," "You look cute in those tight pants," and other such demeaning remarks.

The media have the field covered with new, powerful microphones. To give the television audience the sense of what it is like to be part of the game, they pick up the sounds on the field—including these remarks by Central's players. Viewers are stunned. Calls come into the network from State's fans demanding the referees assess a penalty to Central. In the stands, a chorus erupts yelling that Central is cheating.

Are they cheating? Have the referees missed a penalty call? The NCAA football rules prohibit unsportsmanlike conduct. But is this mild trash-talking by linemen included? Central's players do not seem to be overly aggressive in their comments. They have, in fact, been effectively coached in the matter of trash-talking—they have strict orders to keep their comments at the level of harmless needling, designed to irritate without really being offensive.

But then several State linemen lose it. Their comments in reply to Central's comments are far more offensive, including angry racial slurs and other personal insults. They have stepped over the line as to what is acceptable within the guidelines. The referees penalize State. Its fans are outraged by the idea that their team has been penalized for actions that were clearly provoked by Central's trash-talking.

After a third down, Central must kick the ball away. State begins its drive and quickly marches down the field. State's quarterback is on top of his game. It looks to be a long day for Central's defense.

Coach Jones grabs his backup middle linebacker off the bench and tells him to get into the game and take out State's quarterback. "We need to get that guy out of the game. Take him down!" The linebacker enters the game, and he does what he is told. He blindsides State's quarterback on a late hit, wrecking his knee; he is carried off the field, ending his season.

With that, State's fans go wild! The entire side of the stadium is

screaming “Cheaters!” (among other things). The television announcers look at each other and simultaneously mouth the word “cheaters.” But Central’s fans merely smile and say that’s only hardnosed football.

Who is right? Did Coach Jones cheat by sending in a “hit man”? Coach Jones and his linebacker broke the rules, which clearly say that it is not permitted to intentionally harm another player or for a coach to instruct a player to do so. It is wrong, but is it cheating? If the linebacker is caught and thrown out of the game, is it cheating then? In fact, he was caught and thrown out of the game, and no doubt he will be severely punished, as will Coach Jones. But did either of them cheat?

What is cheating, after all?

Let’s roll up our sleeves and do some philosophy. We will return to the big game later.

What Is Cheating?

One good way to articulate the nature of cheating is to develop a definition of cheating. We start with some examples from which to generalize, including the story we have been telling about the big game, and then test and revise the definition. The goal is to develop a definition that captures our intuitions, or commonly held and widely shared beliefs, about cheating. We strive to find a definition that withstands test cases (counterexamples) and explains the key concept in a way that makes clear its underlying meaning.

The central idea to be captured is that cheating is a reflection of the intentions and attitudes of the participants—the players, coaches, and fans—in the context of rule-governed sports. We are principally concerned with organized sporting events, such as high school, college, and professional sports. In these contests, the rules are formally stated, promulgated, and understood by the participants. To obtain a general definition of cheating, it must also fit, though perhaps loosely, less-organized gaming contexts, such as a touch football game, a weekend game of golf, and even a Saturday night poker game. Whenever there is a sports contest or competition governed by rules that the participants are expected to know and understand, there is the potential for cheating.

What are the rules themselves that govern a game? Organized sports are actually played under two kinds of rules. First, there are the *formal*,

or *constitutive, rules* of the game. These are usually written rules adopted and endorsed, and subject to revision, by appropriately authorized governing bodies. These rules specify what is permitted or not in the game itself, what kind of equipment is used, the requirements for the field of play, and so forth. Second, there are the *informal rules, or conventions*, that are associated with the game. These are usually not written, and they are typically not subject to review or revision by a governing body. Conventions can be different for different locales and groups, and they can change over time. It is an informal rule of most college sports, for example, that the players will shake hands after the event. If they fail to do this, there is no penalty, but it is bad form. The participants in a game, especially at the highly organized level, understand both the formal and the informal rules of the game.

Cheating involves intentionally breaking the rules in an effort to gain an unfair advantage over your opponent. Indeed, this is at the core of the concept of cheating. At first appearance, moreover, it seems that only breaking the formal rules of a game could count as cheating. If you intentionally refuse to shake your opponent's hand after a game, you are breaking an informal rule of the game and being rude, but you are not cheating. Further, a player who does not understand a rule might fail to act in accordance with that rule (thus breaking it) but not be guilty of cheating. Such a player would still be assessed a penalty. Cheating, that is, is purposeful. It is natural, then, to think of a cheater as someone who intentionally breaks a formal rule of the game for the purpose of gaining an unfair advantage in the contest. Let us express all this as a formal definition:

- (C) A person, P, cheats with regard to a game if and only if:
- (1) P is a participant in that game as a player or coach; and
 - (2) P intentionally breaks a formal rule of the game with the purpose of gaining an unfair advantage over P's opponents in the game.

Before considering the adequacy of this definition, we want to clarify one point. Although we have formulated the definition for players and coaches, we believe that there may be cases in which officials, and even fans, are guilty of cheating. To capture such possibilities, we could formulate a definition parallel to (C) applying to officials that would replace condition (2) by something like

- (2*) P intentionally judges that a formal rule of the game was broken when it was not, or was not broken when it was, with the purpose of enabling one participant (or group of participants) to gain an unfair advantage over the other (or others) in the game.

Fans or others associated with the sporting event may be guilty of cheating when they intentionally assist a participant (or group of participants) in breaking the formal rules of the game with the purpose of providing an unfair advantage to that participant (or the group of participants). We could capture this in yet another auxiliary definition. However, let us focus on the core of the concept of cheating, which involves participants in the game, namely, the players and coaches. The resultant definition can be expanded to cover these additional categories of cheaters in the manner we have suggested.

The situations that have arisen so far in the game between State and Central can be used to illustrate this definition. Both Coach Jones and his linebacker have chosen to intentionally harm State's quarterback, which is against the formal rules of the game, in order to gain an unfair advantage. The actions of Coach Jones and his linebacker satisfy conditions (1) and (2) of the definition (C), and thus each is guilty of cheating in this game. That is as it should be and provides confirmation of our definition.

In the examples of trash-talking, the answer is more complicated. The formal rules in college football make it clear that abusive and provocative language is not permitted, since it is unsportsmanlike conduct, and it is subject to a penalty. When the State linemen began making extremely derogatory comments about Central's players, they were breaking this rule. But they were not breaking the rule to gain an unfair advantage. They were doing so because they were angry at the Central players; they lost it, as it were. So, the State players were properly penalized for breaking the rule, but they were not cheating. Not all rule breaking is cheating.

The Central players were smarter. Their comments were provocative, but they did not cross the line. Their comments were meant to anger the State players, which they did, but without breaking the sportsmanship rule as judged by the officials on the field. Since they did not break a formal rule of the game, they were not cheating. Rather, the Central players were exercising gamesmanship, which is not cheating. The officials correctly did not penalize the Central players, despite what State's fans wanted.

Cheating and Performance-Enhancing Drugs

So far, so good. Our definition seems to get the right results in the examples considered. Unfortunately, there are counterexamples. To see this, let's turn for a moment to a case from another sport, professional baseball. This one is based on the real-life superstar Barry Bonds. As of this writing, Bonds is just a couple of home runs away from breaking Hank Aaron's hallowed, all-time home run record.

Bonds is accused of using performance-enhancing drugs at an earlier time in his career. At this time, he remains under investigation, but there has been no proof that can stand legal scrutiny that he intentionally used performance-enhancing drugs.

For our purposes, the interesting part of this case is that Major League Baseball (MLB) only recently passed a formal rule prohibiting the use of performance-enhancing drugs (steroids, for example). Prior to this time, there was no such rule in professional baseball. Bonds is under investigation for using those drugs prior to the passage of the rule. That is, when he presumably was using those drugs, it was not contrary to the formal rules of baseball. Their use and the ways in which he obtained the drugs may have been illegal at this earlier time, but at that time Bonds broke a different rule, namely, that one obey the law, not a rule within baseball against using these drugs—since, again, there was no such rule at the time.

Imagine now, strictly hypothetically and for philosophic purposes only, that Bonds did use performance-enhancing drugs, but only at times before the passage of MLB's antidoping rules. Imagine also that he obtained these drugs legally. Thus, he did not break any formal rule during any of the games in which he played.

Under these imagined, hypothetical conditions, did Bonds cheat? According to definition (C), he did not. To cheat, in accordance with (C), you have to break a formal rule of the sport, and he did not do so at the time he was using performance-enhancing drugs.

But that conclusion appears to us to be incorrect. Using performance-enhancing drugs gave him an unfair advantage, even if MLB failed at that time to have a rule against it. Part of the issue is whether Bonds had an unfair advantage, not whether the politics within MLB prevented a rule from being passed. But another part of this issue is whether there was an

informal rule or convention against the use of such drugs at the time. We believe that there is now, and always has been, such a conventional stricture against these drugs.

To capture this point, a straightforward revision of the definition is necessary:

- (C.1) A person, P, cheats with regard to a game if and only if:
- (1) P is a participant in the game as a player or coach; and
 - (2) P intentionally breaks a formal rule or informal rule or convention of the game with the purpose of gaining an unfair advantage over P's opponents in the game.

That is, condition (2) is broadened to include informal rules and conventions. We have claimed that there is a strong convention in baseball, as there is in all sports, against using performance-enhancing drugs, even at times when there is no formal rule against it. This revised definition (C.1) gives the right answer, under the hypothetical conditions, that Bonds cheated.

Bonds's supporters might object, even in this hypothetical case, by rejecting our claim about the conventional rules. They might argue that there is no convention in baseball, or for that matter in any professional sport, against using performance-enhancing drugs. In the case of professional sports, the players are adults and they may choose to take whatever steps they want to enhance performance. Steroids may have unfortunate health consequences, but an adult may choose to take the risk. It is only those with some vague ideal of "pure" sports, the supporters may say, who hold that there is a convention against the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Using drugs to enhance your strength is no different in principle than lifting weights for that purpose, and there certainly is no convention against the latter.

There is a difference between defining cheating in terms of informal conventions and being able to tell, in any individual case, whether there is such a convention. In the case of formal rules, there is not a similar problem; formal rules are written, and all we have to do is check the official rulebook. But when we add informal rules and conventions to the definition, there can be cases in which it is difficult to know whether the definition applies.

In this hypothetical case, however, we believe there is good evidence for an informal convention or rule against the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Bonds and others accused of using these drugs, even in the absence of formal rules, go to great lengths to deny that they used them. If there were no informal prohibition against using performance-enhancing drugs, then no one would protest strongly. It simply would not matter whether these drugs were used. Similarly, if there were no informal convention or rule against the use of these drugs, then there would not be investigations as to whether they were being used. The investigations are occurring, in part, because there is a convention, known to the public and the players, against using performance-enhancing drugs. Notice that there are no investigations, denials, or cover-ups in connection with weight lifting.

Incidentally, adults cannot do whatever they want to enhance athletic performance. In baseball, they cannot secretly pay off the opposing pitcher or the home plate umpire to assist them when at bat. Such approaches give an unfair advantage to some athletes over others. Similarly, they cannot enhance performance by taking drugs.

Cheating to Win

Back to college football. Consider now another case, a rather fanciful one. Suppose Coach Smith learns that several of Central's best players are academically ineligible but are playing anyway because Coach Jones has hidden the fact. Rather than report Coach Jones to the authorities, Coach Smith puts several of his own student-athletes into the game despite their being academically ineligible. Coach Smith rationalizes his action by saying to himself that he needs to do so to create a "level playing field." Central's Coach Jones would have an unfair advantage unless Coach Smith too played his academically ineligible stars. As Coach Smith sees it, neither team has an unfair advantage as a result.

Both Coach Jones and Coach Smith are cheating. It is clearly against the rules in college football for a player to be academically ineligible. Definition (C.1) gives the right answer in the case of Central's Coach Jones. He broke this rule in order to gain an unfair advantage. But the definition gives the wrong answer in the case of State's Coach Smith. He

broke this rule not to gain an unfair advantage but rather to level the playing field, to remove his opponent's unfair advantage. This wrong answer constitutes a counterexample to definition (C.1).

To correct for this problem, motives other than gaining an unfair advantage should be recognized for cases of cheating. In the case at hand, Coach Smith is breaking the rules in an effort *to enhance his team's chances of winning*; he is not attempting to gain an unfair advantage. Ironically, he wants to eliminate all unfair advantages in the game. The goal of enhancing one's chances is broader than, and includes, the goal of attempting to gain unfair advantage. If someone intentionally breaks the rules in the effort to achieve this broad goal, then he or she cheated. With that in mind, definition (C.1) should be modified:

(C.2) A person, P, cheats with regard to a game if and only if:

- (1) P is a participant in that game as a player or coach; and
- (2) P intentionally breaks a formal rule or an informal rule or convention of the game with the purpose of enhancing P's chances of winning the game.

This revised definition yields the right results in the case of Coach Smith's actions, as well as Coach Jones's, while preserving the correct answers in the earlier cases.

The latest example raises considerations having to do with the goals that might motivate one to cheat. It is natural to think of winning the game, or enhancing one's chances of winning, and the like as the primary motivations for purposeful breaking of the rules. While we think this is so, we also find that other goals might motivate cheating behavior. For example, we can imagine a superstar in some sport who is so much superior to his or her opponents that winning a contest is hardly ever in question. Rather, what motivates this individual to cheat in a particular event is the desire to achieve a new world record, or to gain notoriety as the first to win five such events in a row, or something of that sort. We could also imagine a player who has gambled on the outcome of the game and purposefully drops a pass, or overthrows one, in order to influence the outcome of the game in favor of his bet. Breaking the rules for any of these purposes would certainly count as cheating even if the primary motivation is not just winning the game. We think that such motives can be

incorporated into our basic definition in a straightforward manner, but we will not attempt to make that revision here.

Unfortunately, there are further counterexamples even to our revised definition of cheating, and these examples lead to a significant complicating factor. Consider a situation that often arises in football games, but also in any game where there are clear time limits. Suppose the score is State 14 and Central 12, and there are twenty-five seconds left on the game clock. State has the ball, and it is third down. To avoid allowing Central to have any chance of getting the ball and scoring, State's Coach Smith instructs his team to purposefully let the play clock run down, thereby assuring that they win the game. This kind of strategy is very common; indeed it is expected by players, coaches, referees, and fans, and it is considered to be acceptable, if frustrating, behavior in an organized game of football. And yet it would count as cheating in accordance with our definition (C.2). State's coach intentionally breaks a rule with the goal of enhancing the chances of winning the game. Although State must take its penalty, and perhaps a few boos from Central's fans, no one would consider it to be a case of cheating.

To fix this problem, let us turn to the field of ethics for an analogy. It often happens that conflicts develop between different sets of ethical, moral, or legal prescriptions, and a decision must be made concerning the dominant rule. For example, if a person owes money to a bank for a mortgage loan, then that person *prima facie* has an obligation to pay the loan in a timely fashion. However, if unforeseen circumstances beyond that person's control force bankruptcy, then the obligation to pay the loan is overridden (at least temporarily) by these unforeseen developments. The *prima facie* obligation to pay the mortgage is *defeated* by the circumstances that drove the individual into bankruptcy. In the case at hand, the informal rules of a game can sometimes override the formal rules, and when this is so, a *prima facie* case of cheating might be nullified. In the case of running out the clock, there is an informal rule or convention, accepted by everyone involved in the game of football, that judicious use of the game and play clocks as a strategy to win is acceptable. When a coach uses this strategy, the informal rule nullifies the charge of cheating, although it does not nullify the play clock rule. So, in this case, there is an intentional rule violation with the goal of enhancing the

team's chance of winning, but the prima facie charge of cheating is defeated by the informal rule concerning strategy.

To account for these types of cases, a further revision of the definition is required:

- (C.3) A person, P, cheats with regard to a game if and only if:
- (1) P is a participant in that game as a player or coach; and
 - (2) P intentionally breaks a formal rule or informal rule or convention of the game with the purpose of enhancing P's chances of winning the game; and
 - (3) There is no generally accepted informal rule or convention of the game that allows P to intentionally break this rule for the purpose of enhancing P's chances of winning the game.

This revision gives the right answer. There is a generally accepted convention that allows coaches to use the play clock to their advantage.

The End of the Game

Well, State wins. The fans leave the stadium in anticipation of next year's game of the century, the students sleep off their hangovers, and the faculty go back to their classrooms. And now we know what cheating is.