Code of the Cheaters

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An Irish friend told me this story, no doubt apocryphal, about a match between Trinity College Dublin (which at one time used to enjoy first-class status) and an Irish Law Society side captained by a High Court judge. The game was tight with Trinity needing five to win in the last over. Off the last ball the batsman hit what looked like a six but a young barrister on the boundary made an athletic leap and caught it. The Law team were celebrating and Trinity accepting defeat graciously when the fielder came up and confessed that his foot had been over the boundary when he made the catch. Celebrations from Trinity this time, and polite acceptance of defeat through gritted teeth by the Law team. But as they all walked off the judge said to the fielder ‘Who do you think you are? Bloody George Washington?’

An excellent story. But, as any cricketer will tell you, the judge was quite wrong. The young man had no choice but to confess. It would have been shameful for him to pretend he’d taken the catch fairly. He wouldn’t have been able to live with himself.

It is interesting to compare cricket with baseball on the self-policing of catches. In cricket we expect the fielder to say whether he caught the ball or not. The Television Review System is complicating the situation somewhat, with its tendency to make fair catches look as if they weren’t taken, but traditionally the batsmen, and indeed the umpires, have accepted the fielder’s word on whether a catch was fairly made or not, even at the highest levels of the game.

The contrast with baseball is striking. When a baseball outfielder ‘traps’ the ball—or picks it up on the half-volley, as we would say—he will generally leap up as if he has caught it, and hope to persuade the umpires that the batsman is out. This is by no means considered bad sportsmanship in professional baseball. It’s what you’re supposed to do. You’d be letting your side down if you didn’t try your hardest to take advantage of the umpires’ uncertainty.

No doubt many cricket fans will take this to be yet more evidence of the inferiority, not to say degeneracy, of the American summer game. But I think that this is the wrong reaction. I love cricket above all other sports, but baseball is also a fine game, with many virtues of its own. What is more, it has a great deal of pride in its traditions, and a strong concern, not say obsession, with propriety and good behaviour. The difference between the two games is only that their different customs place different moral demands on the players. While it would be disgraceful for a cricketer to pretend to a catch he hasn’t made, this is morally quite acceptable in a baseball player.

This might seem puzzling. How can exactly the same action be immoral in one sport yet moral in another? We seem to be getting dangerously close to the idea that all morality is relative, that there is no real difference between right and wrong, just different ideas of what is socially acceptable. But this does not follow at all. I am as much a believer in absolute moral standards as the next philosopher. It is just that somehow this absolute morality manifests itself differently in cricket and baseball.

To resolve this puzzle, we first need to distinguish between morality and convention, and then to understand their relationship. From an early age, all humans recognize that there is a difference between morality and convention. They understand that morality is universal, independent of authority, and to do with genuine welfare, while convention varies across societies, depends on decree, and governs matters of no intrinsic importance. In a typical study, 5-year olds were asked whether the teacher’s permission would make it all right (a) to put your elbows on the table and (b) to steal. The children all agreed that putting elbows on the table would be legitimated by the teacher’s say-so, but they felt differently about stealing. ‘No, it would not be OK’, said one thoughtful boy. ‘People would just come and take your stuff.’

At first pass, the difference between cricket and baseball is clearly a matter of convention, not morality. No issues of human welfare hinge on whether catches are self-policed or left to umpires, both games could easily enough decree that things be done differently, and the example itself shows that nothing universal at issue. Conventions for dealing with catches are more like whether or not you can put your elbows on the table than the genuinely moral issue of stealing.

If we think about it, every sport has an agreed set of such conventions, a set of principles that govern the players’ behaviour. I’m not talking here about the formal rules that define the game (or ‘laws’ in the case of cricket), but rather the code of practice, the set of expectations that the players bring to the game and define their sense of sportsmanship. When youngsters are introduced to a sport, they are taught how to behave, what tricks are acceptable and what not, and in time they will teach these traditions to the next generation.

Often these codes of practice allow—indeed encourage—infractions of the formal rules. In basketball, for example, if you are one point down and your opponents gain the ball with twenty seconds to play, you are downright *supposed* to foul them. It’s the only way you can stop them keeping the ball until the final whistle. So you foul them, halt the clock, and hope that you can beat their score once you get the ball back after their free shots. It’s an accepted part of the game. Everybody expects you to do it, the referee’s whistle is pretty much a formality, and nobody thinks of it as bad practice at all.  
  
There are also converse cases, where you can violate a sporting code even though you are not breaking the rules. Claiming a catch you didn’t make is a case in point. After all, nothing in the laws of cricket says you have to own up. Another example is Trevor Chappell’s famous underarm ball to stop New Zealand hitting a six off the last ball of a one-dayer against Australia in 1981. While this was entirely in line with the laws, it was universally condemned as against the spirit of cricket. (The Kiwi prime minister, ‘Piggy’ Muldoon, didn’t hold back: ‘the most disgusting incident I can recall in the history of cricket . . . an act of true cowardice and I consider it appropriate that the Australian team were wearing yellow.’)

It is interesting to compare the extent to which notions of fair play float free of the official rules across different sports. The great Simon Barnes, erstwhile chief sports correspondent of the Times, once reported a friend of his explaining, ‘I would die rather than cheat at golf. In cricket I cheat sometimes . . . And when I played football I cheated all the time.’ The point wasn’t that Barnes’ friend became a worse person when playing some sports rather than others. Each sport has its own definite code of fair play, and he was sticking to that code in each case. But these codes bear very different relations to the formal rules in different sports.

Golf is at one end of the spectrum. It’s easy to tee up your ball in the rough when no-one is watching. But so improving your lie is quite beyond the pale, even in the most insignificant competition. Someone caught surreptitiously fiddling with their ball won’t just be penalized the two strokes required by the rules. They will be ostracized in the bar and very likely expelled from the club.  
  
In soccer, by contrast, all kinds of technical infractions are an accepted part of the game. You steal as many yards as you can at throw-ins, you tug and pull your opponent as the corner comes over, you give away a free kick rather than let the attacker beat you. Still, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t also a clear sense of what is and isn’t acceptable. It may be all right to take a card to stop your opponent beating you, but it’s not all right to take one for a two-footed tackle that breaks his leg. When one side kicks the ball out because someone is injured, everybody respects the obligation to give it back at the throw-in.  
  
And so it goes. In rugby union, punching and even stamping are regarded as in the spirit of the thing (remember the saintly captain Willie John McBride’s decree on the 1974 Lions tour—‘let’s get our retaliation in first’). On the other hand, disagreeing with the referee is a decided no-no (a couple of seasons ago the French coach voluntarily dropped his star forward Louis Picamoles for mildly mocking a referee’s decision). In cricket, it has become acceptable to ‘sledge’ batsmen to distract them, but everybody shuts up once the bowler begins his run-up. Again, the laws allow you to run out batsmen who are backing up, but it just isn’t cricket not to warn them first.

To digress for a moment, this last convention occasioned some controversy on the last Sri Lankan tour of England, when the English batsman Jos Buttler was ‘Mankaded’ by Sachithra Senanayake in the final one-day international. Even though Senanayake has clearly warned Buttler in the previous over, a number of English commentators took the Sri Lankans to task, suggesting that they were guilty of sharp practice, standards were slipping, it never would have happened in their day. However, to anybody with a proper knowledge of the game, this was a shameful application of double standards, with no justification apart from a desire to stir up trouble in the tabloid press. An explicit warning has always been the fielding side’s sole defence against a batsman who is backing up too enthusiastically. The more serious commentators agreed, observing that the Sri Lankans were left with no real alternative to Mankading given that Buttler was continuing to charge down the pitch. Michael Atherton, Alec Stewart and Michael Holding all laid the fault squarely at Buttler’s door, pointing out that any properly-trained batsman would have taken pains to keep his ground once he had been warned.

Let us go back to my original puzzle. How can one and the same action—claiming a catch you know you haven’t made—be morally shameful in cricket but acceptable in baseball? The points I have made about different conventional codes in different sports might not seem get to the bottom of things. True, we can now see that the cricketer who falsely claims a catch is departing from the customs of cricket in a way his baseball counterpart isn’t. Still, the issue wasn’t just that the cricketer was being unconventional, but that he was being *immoral*. Yet deviating from social customs is by no means always a moral transgression. Somebody who holds their knife in the wrong hand, or who addresses a duke as ‘my lord’ rather than ‘my grace’, may be committing an embarrassing *faux pas*, but it would be silly to condemn them as morally inferior simply because of their social incompetence.

Well, while it is true that customs or conventions are not themselves the same as moral principles, the customs of some social group can often make a difference to what morality requires of its members. The most obvious examples involve physical co-ordination. Take driving on the left rather than the right. In itself this certainly isn’t a moral issue. But once everybody else is driving on the left, it would be downright immoral, and not just eccentric, to insist on driving on the right. The point is that we have an absolute moral duty, applicable across all societies, not to endanger the lives of others recklessly, and this imposes a moral requirement on us to conform to the specific highway code of our society, whatever that might be.

The same logic applies to rules of etiquette. It is a matter of arbitrary convention that shaking hands is the normal manner of greeting in England, while bowing is expected in Japan. But at the same time it is a universal moral rule that we should respect our fellow human beings and not insult them wantonly—from which it follows that we all have a moral obligation to hail our fellow citizens politely with whichever form of greeting is expected locally.

Another universal moral principle is that you should keep your promises and not renege on commitments you have made. This is the one that matters for sporting purposes. Anybody taking part in a cricket match has effectively agreed to abide the cricketers’ code of practice, and in particular not to claim catches they haven’t made. So someone who does pretend that they’ve made a catch, when they haven’t, is like someone who enjoys a restaurant meal with friends but then sneaks off without paying. They are relying on the good behaviour of their fellows to gain an unfair advantage.

That is why the cricketer is immoral while the baseball player is not. The deal made by baseball when they sign up to a game is different. They aren’t counting on each other to self-police catches, and instead have agreed to leave it to the umpires. And so they are not breaking ranks and taking advantage of the others if they try to get away with a dodgy ‘catch’. The point generalizes. The different understandings of fair play observed by different sports are like contracts that you enter into when you start a match. This is why players who violate the spirit of the game aren’t just choosing to be unconventional. They are transgressing the universal moral principle that you shouldn’t gain advantage over others by breaking your promises.

Sports fans are very quick to complain about standards. Their favourite targets are sports other than their own and the depravity of the present day. Cricket fans are sniffy about baseballers, rugby fans are shocked by footballers, golf fans look down on tennis players, and all of them agree that contemporary sports performers can’t hold a moral candle to those of past generations.  
  
If you ask me, these jeremiahs are nearly all mistaking conventional differences for moral failings. The different standards upheld by different sports are at first pass just alternative contractual arrangements, different sets of expectations about what the players owe each other. Given these arrangements, the players of any given sport have a moral responsibility to adhere to their agreed code. But it doesn’t at all follow that the sports with less restrictive codes are morally inferior.  
  
Of course, sporting codes change over time, just as social rules of etiquette do. There is now more shirt-pulling in soccer than when I was young, cricketing tail-enders are any longer spared the short stuff from the fast blowers, in gridiron football it is now standard practice to ‘ice’ the kicker, rugby spectators no longer fall silent for place kicks, and so on. But I see no reason to view these changes as moral deterioration, as opposed to a shift from one set of workable social expectations to another.

Still, having said this, I don’t want to insist that all sporting codes are equally admirable. Some sports do end up encouraging genuinely immoral behaviour. The comparison with social conventions is again instructive. As a general rule of thumb, it is not a bad idea to observe existing social customs. However, the principle ‘when in Rome . . .’ only takes us so far. Not all social mores are harmless rules of protocol. Many traditions demean women, others reinforce prejudice, and some are downright abhorrent. Female foot binding in China, racial segregation in the American south, and the subjugation of Jews were all once regarded as acceptable, indeed essential components of respectable society. With codes like these, it is more honourable to breach than observe them. We can be thankful that they are all now regarded as occasions for shame rather than pride.

When should we conclude that some sporting code is morally corrupt, and not just an alternative set of workable conventions? It is hard to lay down general principles. A first thought might be that a code is bad to the extent that it authorizes violations of the rules. However, as we have seen, this doesn’t hold up. It is often perfectly proper to break a rule and take the penalty. I have already mentioned the example of basketball players fouling in the last seconds to stop the other side running down the clock. Similarly, rugby players will kill the ball to prevent an imminent try. A snooker player will ‘miss’ rather than leave a ball on. Nobody thinks of these ploys as immoral sharp practice. They are normal moves in the game.  
  
What about codes that encourage players to deceive the officials? Surely that’s beyond the moral pale. Not necessarily. In baseball young catchers are taught to ‘frame the pitch’—to choreograph their catching movements in such a way as to make balls look like strikes. Rugby try-scorers will disguise the fact they grounded the ball short of the line. Cricket batsmen who have feathered the ball will feign insouciance in order to persuade the umpire they are not out. (Some will feel that this last example represents a moral falling-off from the time when batsmen ‘walked’. But it is something of a myth that there ever was such a time. In serious games with proper umpires batsmen have nearly always waited for the umpire’s decision. If there ever was a tradition of walking, it was restricted to

a few English gentlemen amateurs who affected this theatrical means of showing their social superiority for a couple of decades after WWII. And even then they weren’t always consistent. Colin Cowdrey was notorious for walking for obvious decisions, but not for the harder ones, in the hope that his reputation as a walker would influence the umpire.)

In the end, I doubt that there is any mechanical formula for morally grading codes of accepted sporting behaviour. The relations between the scoring systems, the rules and the officials are too complex and varied to allow any easy generalizations. Perhaps all we can do is recognize particular cases where established sporting codes license morally corrupt behaviour. I have just argued that breaking the rules and concealing the truth are by no means always vices in sporting contexts. But other things surely are. It is not hard to think of examples.  
  
The rugby culture of punching opponents tends to spill over into biting, eye-gouging and even sticking your finger up your opponent's bottom (though it should be said that this last practice is frowned upon even by front-row forwards). Until recently competitive road cyclists fed themselves a battery of performance-enhancing drugs, and this self-abuse was compounded by the corrosive hypocrisy of repeated public denials. And contemporary soccer is becoming increasingly mean-spirited, with some countries viewing it as a praiseworthy skill to get an innocent opponent sent off by feigning a blow to your head.  
  
I would say that these practices are the sporting equivalent of Chinese foot binding. They take us beyond local customs and into the realm of objective immorality. Even if the sporting communities in question condone them, this doesn’t make them all right. Still, these extreme cases shouldn’t make us suspicious of every unfamiliar sporting code. In most cases divergent sporting conventions are no more significant than alternative systems of etiquette. To look down on other games just for being different is the sporting equivalent of despising all foreigners for their uncouth ways. The true sports fan will recognize that there are many equally good ways of arranging games—even to the extent of allowing that baseball players are morally entitled to claim catches they haven’t made.