

One of the things I continue to marvel at in modern life is the discovery of solutions to what have always seemed like intractable problems. In the history of warfare, for example, the slow pace of communication was traditionally a thorny obstacle which often played into the success of one side and the failure of another. Sometimes, though, it didn't serve either side particularly well. The Battle of New Orleans, the last conflict of the War of 1812, resulted in 2600 casualties, but occurred 2 weeks after the war's official end. Word simply hadn't gotten to the combatants in time to avert the carnage. People died because nobody could pick up a phone. Today, a myriad of communication technologies would avoid at least that sort of unnecessary shedding of blood.

We've long assumed that the automobile, a luxury of modern transportation, comes with the necessary evil of traffic accidents and the deaths of tens of thousands of people annually in this country alone. Now, the promise of self-driving cars will vastly reduce that number.

I'm hopeful, as well, that virtual education will eventually end the necessity of the snow day. Districts around the country are trying out virtual solutions. It's hardly in the same league as the two earlier examples, but it would noticeably improve my life anyway.

The interesting things about these problems is that they at one time seemed insoluble. General Jackson didn't fume about why someone hadn't invented the telegraph and Henry Ford spent zero time figuring out how to put an automaton behind the wheel. You can't regret what you don't know.

In education, one of our intractable problems is academic dishonesty. Cheating. Students find ways to do well on tests and assignments and projects without actually learning the material and/or putting in the work. Crib notes, plagiarism, glancing at your neighbor's paper, are all means by which students upend and erode the best efforts of teachers. Today, students have even more powerful and easier means of cheating including plagiarism through the use of the internet, screenshotting tests, and real-time information exchanges involving the use of a cell phone or related device. Every time educators come up with new, stringent methods of preventing or catching the academic fraud, the academic fraud comes up with new, innovative ways of evading those methods. It is a report card arms race emanating, in my opinion, ultimately from humanity's fallen nature.

And I find it demoralizing. For me, education is more than a cultural or social task. It is a sacred duty. Teaching the next generation holds at bay the four horsemen of the apocalypse as well as the dark forces which would force the retrenchment of the scientific and political advances of Western Civilization which, not coincidentally, have solved so many of our seemingly unsolvable problems. An individual student's dishonesty may seem like a minor traducing of what education is all about but such soilings of purity of academia can quickly become contagious. One rat pokes his nose through the fence surrounding town and, if unchecked, you're soon living in Hamelin.

In fact, when cheating becomes present even among just a few students, it quickly gains ground among the vast majority of them because such dishonesty pushes expectations so high that students who would never considering cheating otherwise succumb to it out of frustration that if they don't, they can't possibly do well in comparison. (If you don't believe this read some of the explanations of steroid-using professional athletes as to why they found it necessary to use a drug they knew would harm their health in the long-run.)

Given that I've already referenced solutions to problems deemed unsolvable before they were solved, I am not without optimism that someday cheating will be essentially wiped out altogether. Until then, however, I have to say that my frustration over cheating was at least ameliorated recently by a 2016 article in *The Wall Street Journal*. The paper analyzed data on allegations of academic dishonesty from a number of major public universities. What they found was that the prevalence of cheating was five times higher among international students than among domestic (i.e. American) students.

Though the logic behind it is not unassailable, it suggests to me at least a couple of conclusions. First, Western Civilization's dim view of cheating continues to have a hold on our hearts, minds, and souls to an extent not enjoyed by non-Western society's. The West holds aloft honesty as something to be aspired to regardless of the benefits it provides. Honesty is right because it is right. Second, if international students are cheating at a rate five times that of American students, then perhaps the comparisons between American students and those from other countries that annually slap us in the face with the inadequacy of our schools and those who work within them are a bit suspect. Is it possible that some of that differential is due to student dishonesty on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)? I hold back on this conclusion only because it is too tempting to believe, providing too much comfort when it would be better to spend what attention and resources we can muster to improve our own educational system rather than take solace in the possible sliver in the others' eye.

Part of that improvement must involve new counter-measures for dishonesty at all levels. (Student dishonesty is only one variable in the equation. School administrators, teachers, and parents all have culpability as well.) And maybe, just maybe, we will finally arrive at some stunning, currently impossible-to-imagine solution which will end cheating in one fell swoop. I cannot imagine it, though. But, then again, of course I can't.