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The Other Academic Dishonesty: Why Grade Inflation is Ethically Wrong

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Abstract: While there is general agreement among educators that grade inflation is wrong, there are few discussions in the existing literature of the way in which it is wrong or what makes it wrong, and fewer attempts to approach its wrongness through moral philosophy. I argue that grade inflation—understood as an evaluation of a student's work or performance that reports its quality as higher than it is—counts as ethically wrong on the three most widely accepted normative ethical theories, and that as such it should be considered ethically wrong *simpliciter*. I consider three objections to my argument and show them to be mistaken, and conclude by suggesting one way for educators to resist inflating grades in contexts that encourage such inflation.

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Keywords: grade inflation; grading; academic dishonesty; applied ethics; philosophy of education; professional responsibility

Introduction

Educators are likely to agree that grade inflation is wrong, yet evidence suggests it is also commonly practiced throughout secondary and post-secondary education, at least in North America. As a representative statistic, Catherine Rampell reports that 43% of grades at U.S. colleges and universities in 2011 were A or A-minus, whereas these comprised 31% of grades in 1988 and only 15% in 1960.[1] As for personal or anecdotal evidence, I trust those with teaching experience will have witnessed instances of grade inflation directly or heard of instances through colleagues. As for my own experience, I was a sessional instructor at an Ontario college from 2004 to 2011. During this time I noticed many colleagues making assignments and tests easier by requiring less while lowering expectations for what counted as meeting these requirements, ignoring a widespread lack of literacy and—based on what many students showed me of their work for other courses—giving A's or B-pluses to mediocre or incompetent work.

In 2011, prior to leaving this teaching job to pursue a second MA and a PhD in philosophy, one of my students expressed her frustration with what she saw of her peers' work and their instructors' assessments of them in a letter to the college's president. Her observations from a student's perspective exactly mirrored my own. From what she saw,

> students were, in the majority, given A's on assignments without following the assignment's requirements. [She] witnessed numerous times students complaining about receiving a B or less when the assignment, in [her] opinion, did not follow instructions, was hard to understand/read, and was admittedly thrown together the night before.

Concerning literacy, she reports that

> marking level[s] and assignments rarely reflected/required the basic use of proper English grammar and sentence structure. [She] often read classmates' work and did not understand how a professor was able to assign a mark when the written portion of the assignment was missing the most BASIC [sic] level of literacy and competency.

In relation to the difficulty and rigour of assigned work, she writes that many of her assignments

> were more appropriately designed for a high school level student. [E]xaminations … did not require students to have comprehended the material, and often professors did everything in their power to ensure students received high marks (giving away answers, very easy multiple choice, etc.).[2]

Assuming this is not isolated to one college during one decade but is fairly widespread, does it mean that educators are deceiving themselves with respect to their own grading practices when they publicly opine against grade inflation? Do some experience cognitive dissonance, like the teacher quoted by Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh and Meira Levinson, who says: "How do [teachers] live with themselves? We just take part in this thing… Am I a partner in crime…a full contributor [to] grade inflation"?[3] Or do teachers inflate grades as a lesser of two evils, thinking it wrong but justifying it by other factors?

While largely acknowledging that grade inflation is wrong, little attention is paid in the current literature to precisely *how* or *why* it is wrong. A few have raised this question,[4] but no one seems to have approached it substantially from the perspective of applied ethics or in terms of a normative theory specifying grounds for judging when, and why, actions or practices are wrong. Finefter-Rosenbluh and Levinson come closest, looking at possible motivations for grade inflation through the lens of care ethics, but admit to "offer[ing] no definitive conclusion … to

the question of 'what is wrong with grade inflation (if anything)?'."[5] This leaves a gap in the literature that this paper is intended to fill.

I begin my paper by giving a working definition of grade inflation and then argue that grade inflation, so defined, is unethical. To avoid tying my argument to a single ethical theory or normative framework, I propose the following principle: *If X counts as ethically wrong on the criteria of several philosophically respectable normative ethical theories,*[6] *then, unless another ethical theory is more likely to be correct than the aforementioned theories (and barring ethical nihilism), X really is prima facie ethically wrong*. In accord with this principle (which we can call the Principle of Theory Convergence), I give arguments for why grade inflation counts as ethically wrong on the three most currently prominent normative ethical theories: deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. The discussion in these sections will be somewhat cursory from necessity; while much more could be said about why grade inflation counts as wrong on each theory, and more nuance accorded to each theory than I have space for, I aim only to demonstrate that grade inflation is ethically wrong on all three theories. I then consider potential objections and show why these objections fail, concluding that grade inflation really is *prima facie* ethically wrong. I end with a brief consideration of what, practically, can be done to resist inflating grades by teachers working in conditions that might implicitly encourage it.

Defining Grade Inflation

Existing definitions of grade inflation, such as "an increasing proportion of excellent grades scored…without evidence of a concurrent increase in … actual performance"[7] or "attainment of higher grades independent of increased levels of academic attainment",[8] define it in terms of a comparison between one set of students and another, or between one student's grades at different times. This is not surprising as most discussions of the phenomenon conceive of it in terms of statistical patterns, typically an increase in higher grades over time, as seen in the statistics from Rampell above. However, while such patterns might indicate that grade inflation occurs, *defining* grade inflation in these terms restricts it to being a macro-phenomenon—a pattern of grade distribution over time—rather than an action that an educator can take. This might be thought to explain why there have been so few discussions of grade inflation as *ethically* wrong.

I contend that any definition of grade inflation should focus on actions rather than statistical trends. Acts of assigning grades are logically and temporally prior to grade averages, so grade

inflation cannot *primarily* be a difference between averages but must relate to that of which they are averages. Moreover, if grade inflation is something that can be ethically wrong it should be conceived as an action rather than an object—i.e., the act of assigning a grade, rather than the grade(s) assigned. There is nothing unethical about the average GPA being higher at one time than another or among one group compared with another, as long as this corresponds to a difference in quality of performance across times or between groups. Intuitively, what *is* wrong is for grades not to match the level of achievement they purport to measure. It is just as intuitively wrong for averages to remain the same over time if the quality of students' work decreases, but standard definitions cannot account for this. I propose that grade inflation be defined as follows: *an evaluator assessing a student's work (product or performance) where this assessment, according to the conventions by which it is governed, characterizes the work's quality as better than it is*.[9]

The conventions according to which assessment is governed might include a rubric or list of qualitative descriptions associated with certain grades, or outcomes that need to be met to pass or earn a credit. The actual versus the reported quality of work can be determined by comparing what students have done with what an assignment's instructions required them to do, the learning outcomes for the course, etc., including standards of minimally literate writing where appropriate. When assignment instructions are not followed or outcomes are not met, awarding a student even a low passing grade in a course will count as grade inflation on the above definition, since granting a credit certifies that the student has actually learned or done what was expected in that course to a basic degree.

This makes grade inflation distinct from *grade compression*, which involves a change over time in the meanings conventionally associated with grades such that grades at the higher end of the scale come to be associated with a lower level of quality than previously, e.g. giving A's to work that is good but not outstanding. While this has negative consequences, such as making it less possible to distinguish between different degrees of good work leading to a decreased ability to indicate improvement—as long as assigned grades honestly report the quality of a student's work according to these compressed standards, it is not clear that anything is *ethically* wrong. However, as I show below, there *is* something ethically wrong with grade inflation as defined above—where the inability of statistical trends commonly offered as evidence of grade inflation

to distinguish between inflation and compression gives a further reason not to define grade inflation in terms of statistics.

Why Grade Inflation is Wrong: Deontology

Many forms of deontology have their basis in Kant's ethics, the central principle of which—the categorical imperative—is given in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in two formulations. The first involves the universalizability of the maxim or principle on which one acts, holding that one should "act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."[10] Since grade inflation involves misrepresenting the quality of a student's work or performance, it is dishonest and so faces the same problems as do other cases of deception. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that the "communication of one's thoughts to someone through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks on the subject is an end that is directly opposed to the natural purposiveness of the speaker's capacity to communicate his thoughts."[11] Communicating necessarily involves willing that others believe you, where one cannot will this *and* will universally the maxim, 'people should say whatever is convenient, whether or not they believe it to be true,' since the end of communication would become impossible to attain. If everyone were to act on this maxim, no one would believe others and so communication could no longer serve its purpose.[12]

Similarly, assigning a grade that communicates to a student or another (admissions officer, scholarship committee, etc.) that the student has understood or accomplished more than she has goes against the function of grading, which is to report the quality of work done so that interested parties can use this information for various purposes, whether this is the student knowing what to keep doing, what to change, how to improve in future work, an admissions officer or selection committee knowing which candidates meet their criteria, etc. Since the various functions of grades all presuppose the effectiveness of this reporting,[13] one cannot consistently assign a grade *and* will universally the maxim 'one should assign a grade that characterizes work as being better than it is.' If everyone were to act on this maxim, grading as a practice would be undermined since no one would believe that a high grade correlated with high quality work. Thus, inflating grades violates the categorical imperative and so, for Kant, is impermissible.

As well as contravening the first formulation of the categorical imperative, grade inflation violates Kant's second formulation, the Formula of Humanity. This holds that one should always

"act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[14] Inflating a student's grades involves treating the student as a means if done to avoid dealing with complaints or to have the student view one more favourably, especially with the hope of receiving higher teaching evaluations.[15] It might be objected that inflating grades for non-self-interested motives such as boosting confidence or increasing chances of admission to good schools will not violate the formula of humanity, or that even with self-interested motives it will not do so because it promotes students' ends by giving them something they value, and so does not treat them *merely* as means. However, this objection fails. If high grades are valuable because of benefits to students such as scholarships or admission to good programs, inflating them still involves treating *someone* as a means contrary to that person's ends—viz. those awarding the scholarship or selecting applicants for admission, so it violates the formula of humanity. Moreover, it makes the student (perhaps unknowingly) complicit in the deception insofar as she will be the one to use the inflated grades to gain the benefits in question, where this surely violates a duty not to implicate others in unethical behaviour.

Since grade inflation violates both formulations of the categorical imperative, it clearly counts as ethically wrong for Kant. While I have focused on Kantian deontology, similar considerations will apply to other deontic approaches such as W.D. Ross' plurality of *prima facie*[16] duties. Ross also posits a *prima facie* duty of veracity based on a promise not to lie being implicit in conversation,[17] and takes lying as "*prima facie* to do a positive injury to another person."[18] Moreover, grade inflation involves what Sarah Stroud's 'quasi-Rossian' account of lying calls a "relationship of infidelity,"[19] since the person grading, *qua* educator, occupies a position of authority with respect to the academic subject-matter. Legitimately assigning grades must be done in one's capacity as a credible source of knowledge about the quality of the work or the student's performance. Assigning a grade involves assuming responsibility both for the accuracy and trustworthiness of what it communicates and for one's competence to judge what is being graded. Assigning a grade that misrepresents what it communicates violates this responsibility.[20]

Since it is hard to see how any plausible system of deontic ethics would not involve at least a *prima facie* duty of honesty or fidelity, then, in the absence of any overriding factors, grade inflation should be taken to count as wrong on deontic ethical theories.

Why Grade Inflation is Wrong: Consequentialism

Both act- and rule-based varieties of consequentialism tie rightness and wrongness to the net benefits or harms of the outcomes to which a given action (act-consequentialism), or a general rule to perform a type of action, if widely followed (rule-consequentialism), will lead. A rule consequentialist approach to grade inflation will consider some of the same factors as the deontological argument above, especially the potential for the positive function of grading to be undermined by widespread grade inflation.[21] While rule consequentialists and deontologists are both concerned with rules for acting, the former take the consequences of acting on these rules to be what holds moral weight, not the logical consistency between the rules' maxims and practical willing.

Unlike lying in general, where it is implausible that individual lies can damage the institution of communication itself,[22] evidence suggests the function of grading *actually is* being undermined by grade inflation. One example comes from McGill University in Quebec, which in response to reports of rampant grade inflation in Ontario in recent years has reportedly begun *deflating* grades of applicants from Ontario high schools by five percent to compensate for possible unfair advantages they might have over applicants from other jurisdictions.[23] While I would argue that making this sort of judgment of individual students' grades on the basis of a statistical generalization, and without any acquaintance with the students' work, is itself ethically questionable, it illustrates how the practice of grading and its functions actually can be undermined: if grade inflation is known or reasonably believed to be common, there is no way to determine whether a particular applicant's grades are accurate short of assessing each applicant's work directly, and so there is no clear way to counteract possible unfairness that is not itself unfair (or unreasonably time-consuming).

Evidence of such effects will be among the negative outcomes a consequentialist will consider, with their actual occurrence holding more weight than the mere potential for other beneficial outcomes. A rule consequentialist will also count other possible effects of grades no longer being reliable indicators of ability or achievement, such as the perpetuation of social or economic injustices that can occur when admission and scholarship committees no longer have a reliable merit-based criterion and are left with the reputation of a school or letter writers, which favours students who are already well-off.[24] It is unclear what long-term benefits could accrue from grade inflation being widely practiced that might outweigh these actual and potential

harms, so it is unlikely that rule consequentialism will condone grade inflation when all relevant factors are considered.

Act consequentialism counts specific actions as right so long as their outcomes are more positive than negative overall, and in principle will hold that any one instance of inflating a grade is justified if it has better consequences than assigning a lower grade in that case. I suspect teachers who inflate grades often rationalize their choice by assuming students will benefit enough to justify the dishonesty of this false report. Benefits might be thought to include pleasure at receiving praise, increased self-confidence, and the promotion of a positive attitude towards education, whereas low grades might be thought to lower self-esteem and discourage or disengage students from learning. However, even if these consequences follow in a given case, they are short-term and must be weighed against additional *long-term* consequences such as becoming habituated to assess one's strengths and weaknesses inaccurately, not learning how to deal emotionally with failure, being less able to recognize and learn from mistakes due to not being told where and how one can improve (where this limits the ability to learn), and becoming disengaged in the long run due to a lack of challenges and incentives to learn more than one already knows or can do.[25] Other large-scale outcomes that might follow include negative economic effects due to a less-competent workforce, decreased levels of civic and political awareness, and lower levels of critical thinking and abilities to filter and understand information.[26]

Not only do these drawbacks outweigh any short-term positive consequences, but effects such as the short-term promotion of a student's self-esteem are *themselves* contributing factors for negative long-term consequences, since what results from being told one's abilities are greater than they are is *false* self-esteem, insofar as it rests on a false conception of oneself. Shielding students at earlier stages from dealing with temporary setbacks and failures when these are likely to be less serious sets them up to be affected *more* negatively by failure at later stages where more is likely to be at stake, including their (inauthentic) senses of self.[27] Thus, not only are the supposed short-term benefits outweighed by plausible long-term negative consequences, they make certain negative consequences more likely to occur, further undermining their beneficial status.

More tangible benefits for students that might result from grade inflation include getting into a good university or graduate school, earning a credit needed to get a degree or a degree needed

to get a good job, winning awards, etc. However, these benefits are likely to be short-lived since being passed on to a higher level of school, or graduating with a degree that certifies certain abilities and achievements without having the skills and knowledge to operate at these higher levels or in certain jobs, will create difficulties overall. Just as being given a higher belt in karate than one's skill merits and advancing to the next class can result in getting beaten, being passed to a higher level of schooling when one is not sufficiently prepared will almost certainly result in an intellectual and emotional 'beating,' and so does the student no real favours in the long run.

So, most positive outcomes that might be thought to justify grade inflation in particular cases, almost certainly will be outweighed by greater negative outcomes, and moreover may contain the seeds of their own destruction by helping to pave the way for these longer-term negative consequences, where these are not likely to be counterbalanced by any further long-term benefits. Thus, for both rule and act consequentialism, grade inflation will count as unethical on most, if not all, 'cost-benefit analyses.'

Why Grade Inflation is Wrong: Virtue Ethics

Unlike deontology and consequentialism, which focus primarily on the goodness or rightness of acts, virtue ethics focuses on an agent's character and defines right action derivatively, if at all. As Rosalind Hursthouse formulates it, for virtue ethicists "[a]n action is right [if and only if] it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically (i.e., acting in character) do in the circumstances,"[28] where "[a] virtuous agent is one who has, and exercises, certain character traits, namely, the virtues" and where virtues are "character trait[s] a human being needs for *eudaimonia,* to flourish or live well."[29] This risks circularity if not supplemented by a substantive account of what a virtue is, such as Aristotle's characterization in *Nicomachean Ethics* of a virtue as "a characteristic involving choice, [which] consists in observing [a] mean relative to us, a mean which is defined by a rational principle, such as a man of practical wisdom would use to determine it."[30] A virtue, in other words, is a reliable disposition (i) to value, and so aim at, what is most appropriate to do in a situation—a 'mean' between what would be excessive or deficient to do in that situation—and (ii) to characteristically succeed in hitting this 'mean'. Among virtues are typically included dispositions to act *justly* rather than unjustly, *temperately* rather than self-indulgently or self-abasingly, *generously* rather than stingily or extravagantly, *courageously* rather than cowardly or recklessly, and, importantly, to be *truthful* rather than to

exaggerate or downplay that of which one speaks.[31] On this approach, whether grade inflation is wrong is a matter of whether it would be in character for a virtuous person to inflate a student's grade, which is a question of whether doing so is best characterized in terms of virtue or vice terms—would it be just or unjust, generous or extravagant, courageous or cowardly, honest, etc.?

Grade inflation as explained above is clearly dishonest, and can manifest other vices depending on the reasons why it is done. For example, if it is done from a desire to avoid dealing with student complaints about grades or pressure from administrators about class averages, it will manifest cowardice insofar as giving low but honest grades in the face of pressures takes courage. Not inflating grades also requires temperance to risk receiving low evaluations and foregoing the pleasure associated with receiving praise and professional rewards. As Aristotle notes, a virtuous person does not only want to be honoured, but to be honoured *for the right reasons* and *by the right people*, i.e., those qualified to judge her worth and disposed to do so honestly and fairly.[32]

This last point has implications for students and their attitudes towards grades. It would be a comparable virtue of a student to want high grades *only* when these are earned for the right reasons and based on accurate judgments of their achievements. Since one effect of widespread grade inflation is students coming to expect high grades for whatever they submit, or to expect them for the wrong reasons, e.g., for effort, or the fact that they enjoyed or attended the class,[33] and since this counts as wanting to be honoured for the wrong reasons, grade inflation could be said to encourage the formation of a vice in students. A virtuous educator will aim at further developing her students' characters *qua* learners as well as increasing their knowledge and so will avoid inflating grades, not wanting to habituate students to prefer dishonesty, false honours, and inauthentic pleasures.

If one inflates grades from a desire to be generous, although the motivation may be commendable, the action will be a misguided application of this motive, i.e., a failure of practical wisdom. Virtue, for Aristotle, is not only a matter of being disposed to aim at the mean but also to succeed in hitting it.[34] Just as a truly generous person will not give someone something that will end up harming him—where one who is generous and practically wise will have a reliably accurate sense of when this will be the case—it is not *actual* generosity to inflate students' grades since this denies them a chance to learn from mistakes, in addition to consequences such as greater emotional distress from future failure. Moreover, grade inflation is unjust on

Aristotle's conception of justice as people receiving no more and no less than they deserve.[35] This applies both to grades themselves and, especially, to benefits that grades can lead to such as scholarships, admission to good schools, jobs, etc. Not only is giving students a merit-based benefit they have not earned unjust on Aristotle's conception, it is unjust towards others such as the other applicants over whom the students with inflated grades now have an advantage.[36]

Since Aristotle characterizes justice as "the highest of all virtues" and "complete virtue and excellence in the fullest sense",[37] and since grade inflation counts as unjust, it will count as unethical on Aristotelian virtue ethical grounds even before considering the virtue of honesty. Thus, virtue ethical approaches influenced by Aristotle—including those that posit vocational or professional virtues such as Alasdair MacIntyre's, Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking's, and David Carr's[38]—will consider grade inflation unethical. While beyond the scope of this paper to explore in more depth, virtues specific to educators will include honesty, justice, temperance, courage, etc., specifically as related to educational practice.[39] Moreover, good educators will be disposed to uphold the integrity of the practice itself, which grade inflation damages by promoting disengagement, fostering values that undermine the aims of education, and disposing students to be less able to acknowledge and learn from failure, less likely to value education for its own sake, and less likely to want to develop themselves beyond what they already know and can do.

Three Potential Objections

I have argued that grade inflation counts as wrong according to the currently most prominent ethical theories. Three potential challenges, however, remain to be considered: first, from the perspective of care ethics, another ethical theory distinct from, and arguably not reducible to, the three considered; second, an argument in favour of grade inflation from the perspective of rational choice theory that fits broadly within an act consequentialist framework, and third, a concern that combines elements of the first two challenges.

Grade Inflation as Caring?

Care ethics is currently influential among pedagogical theorists and philosophers of education. As with virtue ethics, the focus is placed on the sort of person one is rather than on rules for action. As Virginia Held puts it, "[c]aring, empathy, feeling with others, being sensitive

to each others' feelings, all may be better guides to what morality requires in actual contexts than may abstract rules of reason, or rational calculation."[40] According to James Rachels, care ethics "begins with a conception of moral life as a network of relationships with specific other people, and it sees 'living well' as caring for those people, attending to their needs, and keeping faith with them."[41] Since caring educators will want their students to do well, and will aim to nurture and provide for them pedagogically, it might be thought that giving passing grades for 'effort' and generally avoiding assigning low grades that will be perceived as 'bad' will be justified by care ethics. Many teachers who think grading leniency is justifiable may assume this, thinking it encourages students, promotes self-esteem, and rewards effort. It also may be thought that giving high grades is a way to help make students' future lives better, especially students from underprivileged communities or historically disadvantaged groups, and so is a form of nurture and support.

These justifications for grade inflation, while well intended, are mistaken. Genuine care and support focuses on others' long-term interests rather than short-term preferences or temporary pleasures; just as caring parents will not 'spoil' their children and will have the courage to stick to 'tough love' when in their children's best interests (if not their preferences), genuinely caring educators will give students honest critical feedback so they can improve and will find other ways to mitigate any disappointment or self-doubt, since giving a low grade is sometimes practically necessary in order to communicate such feedback effectively. Likewise, caring educators will not want to contribute to students' future emotional distress when an inflated sense of ability collapses due to failure, even if it means helping students learn to deal with a lesser degree of emotional distress in the present. Teachers are not often in a position to follow their students' long-term progress, which allows them to *think* they have helped students based on short-term results when they do not see the difficulties, disappointment, and distress their students run into later when it becomes apparent that they are not as capable as they have been lead to believe by 'lenient' grades.

Furthermore, the idea that giving high grades is a reward or benefit assumes grades to be 'goods' in themselves—either positive (rewards) or negative (punishments)—that can be separated from, and so are contingently related to, the abilities and achievements they supposedly report. This misconstrues the purpose of grading, assuming the same perspective as the 'grade oriented' focus of students who see earning grades, and not the learning or

achievement to which grades are meant to correspond, as the primary goal of education. While grades certainly can be motivational, this cannot be their main function lest the activities and processes involved in learning become subordinated as mere means to the end of 'scoring points.' It is worth considering Alasdair MacIntyre's example of a child motivated to learn chess by being promised candy just for playing, and more if he wins. The candy here is an external good contingently related to chess-playing, whereas the goods internal to that practice include "the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity," etc.[42] As MacIntyre notes, if candy is the goal, the child will have no reason not to cheat, whereas if the goal is "trying to excel in whatever way the game of chess demands...if the child cheats, he or she will be defeating not [the opponent], but himself or herself."[43]

The main goal of teaching someone to play chess, and the 'proper' motivation to have for playing it, is to realize these internal goods and not merely to give or receive candy. Similarly, genuinely caring educators will want students to value and pursue, and come to attain and even excel in, the 'goods' internal to that subject or skill. Inflating grades not only does not lead to this, but presents an obstacle to it for the reasons given above. Since awarding high grades not earned through actual achievement does not truly 'provide for' or 'nurture' students, and does not lead to their long-term well-being but sets them up for future disappointment and distress, the idea that grade inflation is 'leniency' or 'generosity', and that this is a form of caring for one's students, is mistaken.

Grade Inflation as Institutional Self-Interest?

A second challenge comes from Raphael Boleslavsky and Christopher Cotton,[44] who argue that schools should *encourage* grade inflation because it is in a school's financial and reputational interest for as many of its graduates as possible to get placed in top graduate programs or get good jobs. High grades are needed for this, since students will be competing with graduates from other schools who may have had *their* grades inflated, and inflating grades themselves can serve the above aim at no financial cost. They also argue that policies encouraging grade inflation will lead to an improved quality of education since institutions will want to preserve their reputations with graduate schools and employers by having graduates capable of meeting the expectations accompanying their high GPAs.

The claim that better learning will *follow* from institution-wide grade inflation seems backwards and psychologically implausible, given evidence suggesting that being given high grades without earning them *decreases* motivation to learn.[45] Moreover, if schools can do something to increase the quality of learning so their students live up to their high grades, why not do this in the first place and let *earned* high grades follow? What the authors also fail to acknowledge is that just because a particular course of action is the most expedient or cost-effective means to an end does not entail that it *ought*, morally, to be done. It is not naive to insist that the *ethical* wrongness of an expedient means counts against it when there are other possible means of reaching this end that are not themselves ethically wrong; being ethical involves sometimes taking the more difficult path. In effect, what the authors advocate promotes furthering an unsustainable practice for short-term gains. Their argument fails to count against grade inflation being *ethically* wrong, or to show that teachers or institutions have a *good* all-things-considered reason to inflate grades in response to problems caused by grade inflation itself.

Grade Inflation as Preventing Injustice?

Part of Boleslavsky and Cotton's argument points to a more serious challenge: assuming that grade inflation is prevalent, teachers who *do not* inflate grades might do students a disservice by making them less able to compete for social and economic benefits with students whose grades *are* inflated. I take this objection to be the most serious, since it speaks to both care ethics and act-consequentialist concerns, holds some weight for virtue ethical approaches, and could be considered a situation where a Rossian *prima facie* duty of honesty might be overridden by a duty to prevent injustice. It is unjust for some students to have an unmerited advantage over others, and if one can do something to prevent injustice, it might seem not only caring but what one *ought* to do, provided the means by which one prevents the injustice are not themselves more unjust.

Compassionate teachers will feel torn when faced with the possibility that assigning an honest grade could hold a student back from future pursuits, but inflating grades only perpetuates the problem in a way analogous to an arms race between countries. Arms races, whether literal or metaphorical, are notoriously unsustainable in the long run and so will count as wrong on a rule consequentialist approach, and on any deontic theory involving some version of Kant's

universalizability test. Furthermore, apart from the fact that it perpetuates the problem and contributes to injustices against others, two assumptions implicit in the objection are worth analyzing.

The first is that students with non-inflated grades will be at an *unfair* or *unjust* disadvantage compared to students with inflated grades. However, while it would be unjust for a student who did not merit some benefit to get this benefit due to grade inflation over a student who does merit it, it is not clearly unjust or unfair for a student whose grades are not the highest to be passed over in favour of someone with higher grades, whether inflated or not, so long as there are at least some candidates who are more deserving than the student in question. If a student truly deserves a merit-based benefit, she will already have earned the highest grades among the contenders, before inflation. The objection only works if it is assumed that no other contender will have earned, on their own merit, higher grades than one's own student would earn honestly, but the chance of this is so small as to make the assumption unwarranted.

The second assumption is that 'doing well' in education is not a matter of learning but of gaining benefits that learning can result in, and hence confuses the goods internal to education, which educators are professionally responsible for promoting, with *external* goods. An ethical educator will, of course, want students to have positive well-being, and will want to help make this possible; however, their professional responsibility is centered on their students' learning and development, where the student 'doing well' in the sense of attaining material goods falls outside the scope of their responsibilities *qua* educators. Just as cheating or acting unjustly for the benefit of friends or family is unethical, dishonesty in grading is unethical when done to give students a greater chance at a life with material benefits.

Conclusion

I have proposed that if an action counts as ethically wrong on the criteria of most or all philosophically respectable normative ethical theories, it should be accepted, *prima facie* and fallibly, as ethically wrong *simpliciter*, and I have argued that grade inflation—understood as an educator evaluating a student's work as better than it actually is—counts as ethically wrong on the criteria of deontic, consequentialist, and virtue ethical theories. Since these represent the most prominent theories in contemporary normative ethics, it follows that grade inflation is *prima facie* ethically wrong. That is, it just is ethically wrong unless all three of these ethical theories

can be shown to be mistaken or inferior to some other ethical theory on which grade inflation, so defined, is justifiable. I have considered a possible objection from care ethics as one such alternate theory and have argued that this objection is mistaken. Since this objection fails, along with those considered in Section 6, then, in the absence of any other plausible normative ethical theory on which grade inflation would not count as wrong, I conclude that it is ethically wrong. If this is right, it reveals grade inflation to be an as-yet unrecognized form of *academic dishonesty* on the part of teachers—one that should be treated as seriously as plagiarism is for students, given its potential to undermine the social and personal benefits that are tied to the intrinsic values of education.

The question remains: given its ethical wrongness, what can teachers do in a context in which grade inflation is encouraged due to implicit or explicit pressures from students or administrators, and in which *not* inflating grades might have negative consequences for their students or for their careers?

David Blum's[46] proposals to reduce grade inflation include more standardized rubrics, separating evaluative and teaching roles, and a move to pass/fail grading. However, while these might encourage consistency among different teachers' grades within a department or institution, they fail to address the problem at the level of individual grading decisions, since they do not prevent whoever evaluates students from misrepresenting their work as better than it is. Blum's suggestion that students' teaching evaluations not be used for hiring, promotion and tenure is more promising, since it would remove a strong incentive to inflate grades. While teachers are not themselves positioned to make this change they can advocate for it, perhaps citing studies showing that teaching evaluations are also flawed insofar as they fail to measure effectiveness in promoting learning and are likely prone to gender and racial bias,[47] and so should be eliminated for additional reasons.

If the wrongness of grade inflation is not simply having a high number of good grades but the dishonesty involved in producing them, educators can do more to teach students how to do what is expected of them in the course, and not only teach 'content', which will make it more likely that more students will do well and so legitimately earn higher grades. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer multiple suggestions, one idea in this spirit is for assignments to be structured so that the process of completing the assignment itself teaches students how to do it *well*. With an essay, for instance, one can make the steps in the writing process—formulating a

question or thesis statement, writing an outline, reviewing another student's draft, etc.—each worth a small part of the grade, or be ungraded but required in order for the final essay to be accepted, where it is crucial that each step be accompanied by detailed feedback on what can be improved going forward. There is no guarantee, of course, that this will result in significantly high grades, and it will work only if students *do* try to improve based on the feedback at each stage, but as long as requirements and expectations are explained clearly, grade-oriented students who do not (yet) value learning for its own sake may take it seriously and come to value learning itself once they experience how effort can lead to an improvement in both quality *and* grades.

Whether or not this particular suggestion is employed, it is one way to teach students to be better at completing the kinds of work required in a course without this taking away from in-class time. While giving feedback at each stage will be time-consuming, taking this time to teach students how to achieve at higher levels is in line with a pedagogical responsibility to promote students' development as thinkers, knowers, and learners. Moreover, since it will likely lead to higher grades being earned honestly, or at least will better illustrate for students how grades are earned and not merely given, it is likely to achieve the same end as grade inflation—i.e., more higher grades, happier students, etc.—while creating the opportunity for students to value learning and achievement intrinsically. Of course, this is contingent on teachers having the courage to give low, and even failing, grades when doing so is an honest reflection of the quality of the work concerned.[48]

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www.onlineuniversities.com/blog/2013/05/why-students-should-fear-grade-inflation. Accessed 29 June 2018.

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Notes

[1] Catherine Rampell, "A History of College Grade Inflation," *The New York Times* (July 14, 2011). For further statistical evidence see H. Holi Ali, "Investigating Factors Responsible for Grade Inflation in College Education," *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*, 2, 5 (2013): 93-106; Paul Anglin & Ronald Meng, "Evidence on Grades and Grade Inflation at Ontario's Universities," *Canadian Public Policy*, 26, 3 (2000): 361-68; David Blum, "Nine Potential Solutions to Abate Grade Inflation at Regionally Accredited Online U.S. Universities: An Intrinsic Case Study." *Qualitative Report*, 22, 9 (2017): 2288-311; James Côté & Anton Allahar, *Lowering Higher Education: The Rise of Corporate Universities and the Fall of Liberal Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Donald Crumbley, Ronald Flinn & Kenneth Reichelt, "What is Ethical About Grade Inflation and Coursework Deflation?", *Journal of Academic Ethics* 8 (2010): 187-97; Harvey Mansfield, "Grade Inflation: It's Time to Face the Facts," *The Chronical of Higher Education* (April 6, 2001): 1-3; Margaret Placier, "'But I Have to Have an A': Probing the Cultural Meanings and Ethical Dilemmas of Grades in Teacher Education," *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 22, 3 (1995): 45-62; Stuart Rojstaczer, "Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities," online, www.gradeinflation.com (updated March 29 2016); and Nan Schroeder, *Grade Inflation: Faculty Lived-Experiences and Perceptions* (Ed.D Dissertation, Northcentral University, 2016).

[2] These excerpts from the student's letter are quoted with her permission (e-mail correspondence, 26 February, 2018).

[3] Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh & Meira Levinson, "What is Wrong With Grade Inflation (If Anything)?", *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 23, 1 (2015): 3-21: 10.

[4] For the few who consider grade inflation from an ethical perspective, see Mary Biggs, "Grade 'Inflation' and the Professionalism of the Professoriate," in L. Hunt (ed.) *Grade Inflation: Academic Standards in Higher Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008): pp. 109-20; Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, *op. cit.*; Louis Goldman, "The Betrayal of the Gatekeepers: Grade Inflation," *The Journal of General Education*, 37, 2 (1985): 97-121; Richard Kamber & Mary Biggs, "Grade Conflation: A Question of Credibility," *The Chronical of Higher Education* (April 12, 2002): B14; Richard Kamber & Mary Biggs, "Grade Inflation: Metaphor and Reality," *Journal of Education*, 184 (2004): 31-37; and Rodney Roberts, "Are Some of the Things Faculty Do to Maximize Their Student Evaluation of Teachers Scores Unethical?",

Journal of Academic Ethics, 14 (2016): 133-48. These authors note harms that may result from the practice, but none fully explains or defends the claim that it is wrong on balance.

[5] Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, "What is Wrong with Grade Inflation?", p. 18.

[6] "Philosophically respectable" here means that the theory is accepted as at least plausible by the majority of professional normative ethicists. Since I do not claim that *only* these theories are correct, but that something counting as wrong on all these theories lends weight to the claim that it *really is* wrong, I avoid the objection that the range of ethical theories considered in this paper is narrow or exclusionary.

[7] Ali, "Investigating Factors Responsible for Grade Inflation," p. 94.

[8] Charles Eiszler, "College Students' Evaluations of Teaching and Grade Inflation," *Research in Higher Education*, 43, 4 (2000): 483-501: 489.

[9] As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, my argument presupposes that assessments of the quality of a student's work can be accurate or inaccurate. This raises the concern that accuracy, while possible in assessing work in primarily quantitative subjects such as mathematics, physics, and chemistry, is not as obviously possible in assessing more qualitative work in areas like the arts and humanities.

I do not see that the presupposition of my argument is problematic and take the objection to be based on either an overly strong distinction between subjects as quantitative or qualitative, a narrow conception of "accuracy," or both. The proper response is to distinguish between what accuracy can mean in relation to assessment of work in mathematics, the "hard sciences," etc., with the criterion here usually being the correspondence of a student's answers to *a priori* or empirically verified facts, and what accuracy can mean in relation to the qualitative assessment and evaluation of, say, an English or philosophy essay, a short story, musical composition, or painting, etc., where the criterion is usually the correspondence between the student's work and the instructions the student was given for the assignment (e.g. a written "prompt," a rubric, etc.), the clarity of the work as a demonstration of the student's understanding of the assignment, and the student's "knowledge-how" in developing an appropriate response.

Another way to think of this is that in the former case, i.e., with respect to work in mathematics, logic, chemistry, etc., what is in question is an evaluation of the accuracy of the work, whereas in the latter case, i.e., with respect to work in humanities and arts subjects, what is in question is the accuracy of the evaluator's judgment of how fully and well a piece of work fulfils the instructions the student was given, e.g., how clearly a student's essay demonstrates an understanding of the concepts involved, the student's ability to analyze and apply these concepts, etc. While judgments of this sort are "subjective" in the sense that they necessarily involve a subject, this does not entail that they are *merely* subjective in the sense of consolidating an individual's arbitrary opinion, nor does it entail that accurate judgments are impossible or likely to be the exception.

The position that such judgments can be accurate only if they correspond to some predetermined set of criteria assumes that the sense of accuracy that applies to assessments in disciplines like mathematics, the hard sciences, etc., is the only sense that can be relevant here, and so risks begging the question. While anyone with experience grading in the humanities or creative arts will know that comparative evaluations of quality between individual cases—e.g., judging which of two essays is a low A-minus and which is a high B-plus—can be difficult to make with any sense of certainty, experienced graders in these subjects will also know that, in

most cases, it is not difficult to judge whether a piece of work does an excellent, good, adequate, or poor job of fulfilling the instructions for the assignment.

Speaking from my own experience, I find that students who did not do as well on a given assignment as they expected and want to understand their grade better are themselves always quick to see the difference in quality if they are shown one or two anonymized samples of that assignment which earned a very good or excellent grade, thereby affirming the lack of difficulty in making this sort of qualitative judgment.

[10] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor & J. Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4:421.

[11] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6:429.

[12] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:422.

[13] See Robert Paul Wolff, "A Discourse on Grading," in R. Curren (ed.), *Philosophy of Education: an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 459-61, for a discussion of criticism, evaluation, and ranking as functions of grading.

[14] Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:429.

[15] See Eiszler, "College Students' Evaluations of Teaching and Grade Inflation," *op. cit*.; see also David Martinson, "A Perhaps 'Politically Incorrect' Solution to the Very Real Problem of Grade Inflation," *College Teaching*, 52, 2 (2004): 47-51, and Roberts, "Are Some of the Things Faculty Do to Maximize Their Student Evaluation of Teachers Scores Unethical?", *op. cit*. Nearly all current discussions of grade inflation cite student evaluations of teaching as a common motivation, especially given how they are used in determining academic employment, tenure and promotion, etc.

[16] This is technically *pro tanto*, but I observe Ross' terminology.

[17] William D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 21.

[18] Ross, *The Right and the Good*, p. 55.

[19] Sarah Stroud, "Lying as Infidelity: A Quasi-Rossian Account," in M. Timmons (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics, Vol. 7* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 27-93.

[20] See Stroud, "Lying as Infidelity," pp. 90-94.

[21] It is worth noting that Mill holds a similar view to Kant concerning the potential for lying or false promising to undermine the social institution of communication, although he is concerned with the consequences, i.e., a reduction in overall utility. See John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, A. Ryan (ed.) (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 317-18, 334.

[22] Cf. Stroud, p. 83—although in light of the way that misinformation has been so easily spread recently in online communications, e.g., through "social media" and with the rise of the phenomenon of "fake news." it is less clearly implausible than it was in pre-Internet contexts that individual acts of lying can negatively affect the institution of communication. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.)

[23] See Jim Dueck, *Education's Flashpoints: Upside Down or Set-Up to Fail* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), cited in Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, p. 15.

[24] Finefter-Rosenbluh & Levinson, p. 9.

[25] See Côté & Allahar, *Lowering Higher Education*, pp. 67-68, 75-79, on connections between grade inflation and student disengagement.

[26] See Biggs, pp. 115-16; Côté & Allahar, pp. 67-68, and Justin Marquis, "Why Students Should Fear Grade Inflation," online, https://www.onlineuniversities.com/blog/2013/05/why-students-should-fear-grade-inflation (May 24, 2013).

[27] Côté & Allahar, pp. 72-73.

[28] Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28.

[29] Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 29.

[30] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. M. Ostwald (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), II.6 1106b36-1107a1.

[31] Aristotle, *NE* IV.7 1127a22-32; see also Hursthouse, pp. 10-12.

[32] Aristotle, *NE* I.5 1095b22-30.

[33] See Placier, "'But I Have to Have an A'," pp. 58-59.

[34] Aristotle, *NE* VI.9, VI.12 1144a8-9.

[35] Aristotle, *NE* V.3.

[36] Cf. Aristotle, *NE* V.1 1129b7-11, V.2 1130b30-34.

[37] Aristotle, *NE* V.1 1129b28-31, 1130a11-13.

[38] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984); Justin Oakley & Dean Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and David Carr, "Virtue Ethics and Education," in N. Snow (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Virtue* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 640-58.

[39] The American Association of University Professors agrees in their 2009 Statement of Professional Ethics, requiring that professors "make every reasonable effort ... to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit." Online, https://aaup.org/report/statement-professional-ethics.

[40] Virginia Held, "Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50 (1990): 321-44, p. 332.

[41] James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, third edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill), p. 170.

[42] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 188.

[43] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

[44] Raphael Boleslavsky & Christopher Cotton, "Grading Standards and Education Quality," *American Economics Journal: Microeconomics*, 7, 2 (2015): 248-79.

[45] See Côté & Allahar, *Lowering Higher Education*, pp. 67-68, 75-79.

[46] Blum, "Nine Potential Solutions to Abate Grade Inflation."

[47] See, e.g., Therese Houston, "Research Report: Race and Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching," *Seattle University Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning* (2005), online, https://sun.skidmore.union.edu/sunNET/ResourceFiles/Houston_Race_Gender_TeachingEvals.pdf,

and Bob Uttl, Carmela White & Daniela Gonzalez, "Meta-analysis of Faculty's Teaching Effectiveness: Student Evaluations of Teaching Ratings and Student Learning are Not Related," *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 54 (2017): 22-42.

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