

Student A!

English 118

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### Virtue Does Not Make an Honest Man

Honesty and integrity are two basic morals that American society has tried to impress upon its people. In turn, the American public has come to expect the same morality from their leaders and role models. When this mutual trust is broken, people feel cheated, deceived and ultimately their unwavering confidence in truth is damaged. In the 1950s people's daily lives were becoming absorbed into television. Unfortunately, with television in its infancy there were no regulations to keep the new media abiding by the same moral laws. During this time cheating was discovered on a popular quiz show called Twenty-One when it was revealed that the producers gave certain contestants answers to the questions before the show. The show's most current and popular winner, Charles Van Doren, devastated his admirers when he confessed he had taken part in cheating on the show as well. He deceived society not only as an icon of intelligence and integrity, but also as a fellow citizen; he was never formally reprimanded. Charles Van Doren should be held accountable for his actions on the quiz show, Twenty One, because he knew he was acting dishonestly but continued to do so, thereby allowing materialism and fame to take precedence over his moral values.

Charles Van Doren knew that accepting the answers before the show was dishonest from the first time he interviewed at NBC for the quiz show. When the producer of Twenty One, Dan Enright, approached him about receiving answers in advance, Charles Van Doren replied, "It just doesn't seem right, I'd have to say no." Charles thought the question was a test of his morality.

His initial reaction to cheating proves that Charles Van Doren knew that it was wrong. During the first live show he was asked a question that he had answered correctly during the initial interview to be on the show. At that point he realized that the game was actually fixed, but he chose to answer correctly anyway. After the show he was terrified by the situation, seeming withdrawn and wary of cheating. However, once he fully grasped the amount of money he had won, and his new fame came into perspective, his integrity was lost and he became hooked into winning the game.

One of Charles Van Doren's strongest motivations to continue playing the quiz show dishonestly was the money. He understood that continuing to win would mean receiving fortunes in winnings compared to his salary as a professor at Columbia University. The idea of winning over \$100,000 sparked greed inside him. Although he displayed feelings of guilt and anxiety about cheating, the monetary benefits were too tempting to stop. He purchased a new town house in the city, dated many women and quickly developed a taste for the finer things in life like expensive restaurants. For the first time in his life he was living like a rich man, not a poor man with a wealth of intellect.

Besides being driven by the materialistic acquisitions, Charles Van-Doren became consumed by his new fame. Charles came from a prominent east coast family that was well admired for their incredible intelligence. The first time that Charles was introduced to the viewers on the quiz show, Jack Barry, the host, immediately credited him by the accolades of his father, uncle and mother. Until that point he had never been the Charles Van Doren but always Mark Van Doren's son. Now it was he who was in the spotlight. People idolized him for the knowledge he displayed and the charming, wholesome exterior he projected. He was a repeated guest on NBC's popular The Today Show. his class attendance increased to standing room only

and he was even featured on the front cover of Time Magazine. One scene in the film showed Charles pretending to tie his shoe, waiting for the right time when he could be met by more of his fans just finishing their classes. Ironically, until he was on the quiz show, he really was an honest, charming, wholesome, intelligent man. The equitable, conscientious Charles that once was, was now being consumed by greed, vanity, fame and most of all, guilt.

As weeks turned into months on the quiz show, Charles Van Doren showed an increasing guilty conscience, however, he was too intertwined in the benefits of the scandal to start playing honestly and risk losing everything. He wanted to come clean to his father one evening when they shared a piece of chocolate cake. Charlie explained his most cherished childhood memories of coming home after school to a piece of chocolate cake and told his father, "I can't think of anything that will make me feel that happy again." His father replied, "Not until you have a son." His father's statement made the reality and consequences of cheating much more personal. It became clearer that he wasn't just deceiving viewers he had no connection with, but also his family and friends who had undoubted faith in him. He looked utterly terrified at the thought of his loved ones knowing the truth. Eventually Charles decided to "take a dive" on *Twenty One* without the producer's knowledge, because he feared that the cheating might be exposed and he was too far integrated into the hoax to get out any other way.

Charles Van Doren further proved his guilt with lack of action when a government investigator, Dick Goodwin, questions him over several occasions about cheating on the show. Goodwin learns of the cheating on Twenty One through a bitter former contestant, Herbert Stemple, who was forced to lose on the show because of decreasing ratings. When Charles was repeatedly approached by Goodwin about the deception on the show, he either avoided answering the question, or answered the question with another question. Stephanie Ericsson

confirms that this type of deceptions is lying in her essay The Way We Lie when she wrote, "Any good liar knows that the way to perpetuate an untruth is to deflect attention from it," (page 473). If he did not feel that receiving the answers ahead on time was wrong, he would have

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Ultimately Charles admits to the investigating committee that Dick Goodwin started that he lied to the American audience and discloses his regrets in a speech. Some of his reasons for cheating were almost noble and included the opportunity to bring more attention to the values of education, some stemmed from basic greed like the temptation of so much money, but ultimately he focused on his desire to be recognized and be bathed in the spotlight. He is commended by some committee members for his soul searched honesty, but many on the committee and the majority of the public felt that just because he was truthful in the end did not justify his deceitful

actions and that he should have received punishment beyond the humiliation. When Charles admitted to the scandal he lost his job, his reputation was destroyed and his integrity was scrutinized.

Some supporters may say that Charles VanDoren was innocent, claiming that he was merely a character that NBC hired to play a role on their scripted show. They might argue that because there were no written laws or rules about cheating on game shows that Charles Van Doren actually did nothing wrong. A different supporter may point out that it was NBC on trial in the end, and that Charles Van Doren was only giving his testimony as a witness to prove the quiz show's guilt. These supporters may make a good argument; however, fundamentally the ethics of their argument are wrong. When a person is offered money and fame they do not have to accept the offer, especially if the wealth is in exchange for their honesty. In the 1950s television was new and exciting; families became absorbed into popular shows and often would adjust their daily lives around television programming. Marie Winn illustrates the new family dynamic television created; "The early articles about television were almost invariably accompanied by a photograph or illustration showing a family cozily sitting together before the television set, Sis on Mom's lap, Buddy perched on the arm of Dad's chair, Dad with his arm around Mom's shoulder," (326). The American public trusted industries, the government and in general, their fellow Americans. When the scandal on Twenty One was exposed, viewers felt angered by the deception. Charles Van Doren knew that lying was wrong because viewers, like his father, and at one point himself, thought that the display of intelligence on the show was legitimate. Morally he had an obligation to the public to uphold a vision of integrity, but instead he chose money and fame.

The guilt Charles Van Doren felt for his actions on Twenty One proved throughout the film

that he knew he was doing wrong. What makes him even guiltier than other participants, including Herbert Stemple, is the fact that he knew from the very beginning that he should not cheat. There is more guilt to someone's actions if they know what they are doing is wrong versus a person that doesn't realize the adverse effects of their actions on other people. Herbert Stemple did not believe what he did was wrong. When Herbert's wife, Toby, realized that he was given the answers in advance he explained, "Let them believe whatever they want, what do I care? What do I care if a bunch of saps," about to imply that the general public was ignorant so it did not matter that he deceived them. Herbert never realized how despicable his participation in the deception was until Toby replied, "I was one of those saps, Herbert." Twenty One diminished society's basic, good natured trust in its fellow man which makes the lying participants co-conspirators. Although Charles was not formally prosecuted or held accountable for his deceptions, the public made its fury known by expressing their outrage at the committee hearing and forcing him out of main stream society. It was unfortunate that a whole nation of viewers suffered because a few people were not able to choose their ethics over temptation. Ironically, it was Charles' desire for money and fame that destroyed all of the intangible wealth that he had worked his whole life to build.