

fridges, I left a plate containing six one-dollar bills. Would the money disappear faster than the Cokes?

Before I answer that question, let me ask you one. Suppose your spouse calls you at work. Your daughter needs a red pencil for school the next day. "Could you bring one home?" How comfortable would you be taking a red pencil from work for your daughter? Very uncomfortable? Somewhat uncomfortable? Completely comfortable?

Let me ask you another question. Suppose there are no red pencils at work, but you can buy one downstairs for a dime. And the petty cash box in your office has been left open, and no one is around. Would you take 10 cents from the petty cash box to buy the red pencil? Suppose you didn't have any change and needed the 10 cents. Would you feel comfortable taking it? Would that be OK?

I don't know about you, but while I'd find taking a red pencil from work relatively easy, I'd have a very hard time taking the cash. (Luckily for me, I haven't had to face this issue, since my daughter is not in school yet.)

As it turns out, the students at MIT also felt differently about taking cash. As I mentioned, the cans of Coke quickly disappeared; within 72 hours every one of them was gone. But what a different story with the money! The plates of dollar bills remained untouched for 72 hours, until I removed them from the refrigerators.

So what's going on here?

When we look at the world around us, much of the dishonesty we see involves cheating that is one step removed from cash. Companies cheat with their accounting practices; executives cheat by using backdated stock options; lobbyists cheat by underwriting parties for politicians; drug companies cheat by sending doctors and their wives off on posh