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ESSAY

A Culture of Plagiarism?

by M.G. Piety

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Introduction

Plagiarism is a hot topic these days. Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose were recently caught *in flagrante*. It is to be on the rise among college students too. It's always been difficult for students to distinguish the myriad of views they are bombarded with in the environment of the university from views they come to on their own. My impression, however, of the cause behind the apparent increase in student plagiarism is that we have created an environment that encourages it. The question is thus not "What should we do about plagiarism?" in the sense of how we should react to it. That sort of advice abounds. The question is: "What should we do to help prevent it?"

The Definition of Plagiarism

It's often said that plagiarism is subjective—that what is plagiarism to one person is not necessarily plagiarism to another. This seems confused. Philosophers distinguish between what they identify as ontological and epistemological issues. Ontology is concerned with what is and epistemology is concerned with what *we know*. There is nearly always a fact about whether a particular passage of text was plagiarized. Regardless of whether the plagiarism was conscious or unconscious, there is a fact about whether it has been taken from another author. The difficulty is that our judgments on that score are not always correct. Plagiarism can thus appear subjective in that different people will identify it differently. That does not mean, however, that plagiarism is subjective. It is context sensitive at best, which means it is unnecessary, in certain contexts, to cite the source of an idea because the audience is familiar with the source. The absence of a citation, in such an instance would not therefore encourage a reader to take the author as the origin of the idea.

Plagiarism requires no nefarious motivation. To plagiarize is simply "to use without due credit the ideas, expressions, or productions of (another)," and this is remarkably easy to do unintentionally. Ignorance of the author, however (to paraphrase an expression from the judicial system) is no excuse. We've all done it, at some point or other, without meaning to; just as we've all lost our tempers or exercised poor judgment. We will never be able to eliminate plagiarism entirely, either our own or others. However, that does not mean we should be unconcerned with authorial integrity.

Why Students Plagiarize

Citing sources would seem precisely the practice we need in this "Atomistic Age." It would help people to feel more a part of the human community, help them appreciate that we are all grappling with the same sorts of questions and that there is accumulated human wisdom which can help us navigate the rough waters of our own existence. Citing sources can even look like a panacea for the spiritual isolation and alienation of postmodern man. So why does it appear it is becoming increasingly rare?

Here are some possible reasons I have come up with after approximately eight years of teaching: ignorance, fear and mental bankruptcy.

Ignorance

It is often difficult for students to distinguish the myriad of views they are bombarded with in the environment of the university from ones they have come to on their own. This, in any case, appears to have been the situation of the young Max Weber. When an older cousin suggested that some of Weber's views were not his own, Weber responded that, as far as he knew, he had not taken any of his views from books, but added somewhat defensively that "probably everything stem[med] from the

The young Helen Keller faced similar, graver charges when accused of plagiarizing an entire story, "The Frost King." Keller does not remember having been exposed to the latter story but admitted in her biography that much of her earliest writing included material taken from other authors.

"Those early compositions," she explains,

were mental gymnastics. I was learning, as all young and inexperienced persons learn, by assimilation and imitation, to put ideas into words. Everything I found in books that pleased me I retained in my memory, consciously or unconsciously, and adapted it. The young writer, as Stevenson has said, instinctively tries to copy whatever seems to him admirable, and he shifts his admiration with astonishing versatility.

Students are often rewarded in grade school, and some even in high school, for such "assimilation and imitation." Some do not understand that they can't appropriate text verbatim but assume this problem is addressed if they simply rephrase the text they borrow.

Ignorance is not the most serious cause of plagiarism. It is perhaps the most problematic in that when text is paraphrased out of ignorance, the original is often impossible to find. What makes ignorance fairly innocuous is that no matter how wide the net is also fairly easily corrected. Instructors can briefly explain what constitutes plagiarism in their syllabi, discuss the problem to early in the semester and distribute examples of plagiarism. If every instructor did this in every course, ignorance would

be eliminated.

Fear

Knowledge will not eliminate plagiarism, however, because there is a more serious cause — fear. This fear takes several forms:

- * Fear of doing poorly because of a poor command of English.
- * Fear of disappointing parents or teachers.
- * Fear of being exposed to peers as less smart.
- * Fear of simply not being smart enough.
- * Fear of reducing a GPA.

One can get the impression that foreign students are particularly prone to plagiarism due to poor English skills. They may be tempted to "borrow" material from native speakers. I have had at least one of my many foreign students plagiarize for this and I cannot rule out that others have done it for the same reason. The good news is that the gap between the command of English exhibited by foreign students and by American students is narrowing. The bad news is that it is narrowing in the wrong direction. Americans are increasingly tempted to plagiarize out of fear that their language skills are inadequate to the assignment.

Academics sometimes suggest that we should be "understanding" of foreign students, because they may come from cultures where plagiarism is viewed less seriously than in ours. I am suspicious that there is no culture that views plagiarism in general as morally acceptable. Different cultures do appear, however, to take a more or less lenient view of it. Yet this problem is easily addressed. We can address it in the same way we can address the domestic ignorance problem. An instructor should make clear early in the term both what constitutes plagiarism and what the penalties will be.

However, foreign students are sometimes prone to a type of fear to which American students appear less prone: fear of disappointing parents, teachers or peers. Social bonds in this country have never been so tight as they are in countries more unified or coherent cultural traditions. It is thus hard for many American educators to appreciate that a student would cheat for any reason other than personal advancement. Students may also cheat simply to save face socially, or to avoid ostracism from polite society.

But if American students are less prone than some of their foreign counterparts to the desire for approval, they are subject to another, perhaps even more insidious social influence — indifference. Americans are often indifferent to both the intellectual and economic plight of the individual. Our culture, as a whole, routinely sends the message that a person must prove his or her worthiness to our concern. We undermine the intellectual confidence of young people. Our individualistic society indulges in the cult of personality. Whatever lip service we pay to "human equality," we consistently send the message that unless you are a genius, we are not really interested in your views. Children often copy "research" papers almost verbatim from encyclopedias and they are actually encouraged in this practice every time they receive good grades for essays where the prose is so far too sophisticated to have been written by a child. This causes young people to fear that they are not smart, that their views are unimportant and that they must cull the thoughts of others for something worthwhile to say.

Even if a student does not suffer from low self esteem, there is another kind of fear, even more pressing, that accounts for many cases of plagiarism: fear of socioeconomic failure. American capitalism is becoming increasingly hostile to the individual. Real income has declined for the past twenty-five years while college tuition has risen. Students are accumulating unprecedented debt at the same time they are seeing their parents laid off or their pension funds evaporate as their employers file for bankruptcy. They see the former heads of these companies emerge economically unscathed and determine that, in order to survive, they must become part of that class.

Students pack their schedules with too many classes to get their degrees as quickly as possible and reduce the amount of money they will have to borrow. Too many classes means too little time for any one class. Add to this the fear that if one's GPA sinks below a certain level, there will be no job — or at least not the kind necessary for true economic survival. Society as a whole has put them in this bind, so why should they feel any of the traditional commitments to society such as honesty and respect for property?

Not only does society put students in what often seems to them an impossible position, society also bombards them with conspicuous examples of people who not only cheat and get away with it, but who cheat and get rewarded for it (Enron is the most notable recent example). Students fear that others are cheating and that they must cheat themselves just to avoid being left behind. Viewed from this angle, it's not surprising that increasing numbers of students resort to plagiarism. Viewed from this angle, it's surprising that they aren't all resorting to plagiarism.

Moral Bankruptcy

Most students plagiarize out of fear. They are not immoral. They simply fear they cannot afford to indulge the voice of their conscience in such a hostile environment. The most appalling product of such an environment, however, is not the person who ignores his conscience, but the person who has no conscience to ignore. By rewarding people who appear to be motivated by nothing other than personal enrichment, we encourage people to view such motivation as moral. We encourage people to

cheating, lying, stealing, or anything whatever that will advance them personally as not only economically necessary, but morally acceptable.

Charles Murray pointed to what appears to be a moral decline in contemporary American society. He argued in an essay *Wall Street Journal*, in February of 2001, that American culture was being "proletarianized." He charged that "[t]he collapse of our elite codes has left a vacuum...[that] has been filled with the 'thug code' of the underclass, which celebrates violence, cheating and vulgarity." There are two problems, however, with Murray's argument. First, the values he asserts are corrupt; the elite are criminal rather than "proletarian," or "working-class," values. Second, his account of the direction of the corruption is diametrically opposed to what I would argue is the true direction. The moral rot that I agree is infecting society appears to be coming not from the bottom up, but from the top down, from an elite that often thinks itself above the quaint moral commitments it traditionally considers appropriate to the lower classes. Enron, again, provides a handy example, but examples abound.

A Counter-Cultural Solution?

Our own culture may actually be the culture that most actively encourages plagiarism. We put students in what is sometimes an intolerable economic position and encourage them to view cheating as an acceptable method of ameliorating these conditions. We assign beleaguered adjuncts to instruct them and thereby almost guarantee that most instances of plagiarism will not be caught.

So what do we do? The web is replete with sites that list tactics teachers can use to combat plagiarism. One suggestion involves demonstrating "web savvy" to encourage students to fear they would be caught if they "borrowed" material electronically. Tactics such as this seem to me to be divisive and thus ultimately to encourage the adversarial perspective that many students have already inherited from the larger society. If, as I believe, one of the major causes of plagiarism is the erosion of the ties of morality that traditionally connect individuals, then the most important thing we can do, as teachers, is to consistently send the message to our students that we care about them. We can impress upon them that we are genuinely interested in their intellectual development, that we want to hear their views, that we understand the pressures they are under and that we will do everything we can to help them survive and even thrive in what appears to them a hostile environment. If we can make that environment less hostile, send the message that we care about them and in that way reinforce in their minds that people care about each other. Sympathy, as Adam Smith believed, is a fundamental aspect of human psychology and thus one of the strongest motivating forces behind human behavior. If we can get students, through working closely with them and sharing our experiences with them, to believe that others care about them, then it will follow of itself that they will care about others and that they will not resort to tactics such as cheating that would put these others at an unfair disadvantage.

We need to encourage students to be scrupulous in attributing ideas or texts to their original sources. I do it even in my lecture notes. Both my lecture notes and reading notes are peppered with attributions. I do this because students often ask whether a particular statement was a quotation, from what text it came and on what page it can be found. I do it because my public work is comprised largely of material that was originally in notes.

More than anything else, I do it out of respect for the individuals who first came to the insights that I am spending my life meticulously collecting in order to come to a better understanding of the human condition. I do it out of respect and gratitude for the giants on whose shoulders I'm standing. I do it because I am, in effect, in dialogue with these authors and I want to be clear, both to others and to myself. Human existence, even in civilized society, can often seem solitary. Few joys are therefore the joy of finding a like-minded person, even if that person lived two thousand years ago. I would go so far, in fact, as to argue that there is a particularly intense joy in the meeting of minds across millennia. It makes one, as Emily Dickinson once said of good poetry, cold to the bone. It makes one feel a part of something not merely larger than oneself (a maelstrom, after all, is larger than oneself), but of something greater than oneself — i.e. something larger in the sense of being meaningful, something that puts one's own existence in a context that is comforting. When I carry my books and notes on the campus, I am carrying my company. It is one of the chief delights of my existence that I am never without my company in contemplation. I can say now, without any hesitation, that I would continue to meticulously attribute words and ideas to original authors even if I were the last person on earth because it would make me feel less alone.

We need to cultivate such feelings in our students. We need to make them understand just how wonderful it is to engage in dialogue with others, how it will make them feel a part of something larger than themselves, something more meaningful. Perhaps, in this way, we can even help to soften the hard edge of American individualism so that we can form positive communities without friction threatening to destroy us. Perhaps...perhaps this citing of sources is a kind of panacea after all.

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