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Plato among the Plagiarists: The Plagiarist as Perpetrator and Victim

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When the Roman poet Martial applied the Latin term for the kidnapping of slaves and children ("plagiario") to those who stole his literary work (*Epigrams I, 52*), he became the first victim of plagiarism in its modern sense. Words are the author's children, and one can understand how the author might suffer when another claims (or kidnaps) them. But plagiarism has further victims: the reader is tricked into thinking the plagiarist clever; the words themselves are cheapened by unauthorized replication; the scholarly enterprise, the community of authorship, and the process of writing all bear the marks of injury. But the other and indeed the main victim is the plagiarist. As teachers our reactions to plagiarism should be shaped by this understanding that the perpetrator is the principal victim of the crime.

This view of crime, like plagiarism, boasts an ancient pedigree. It is better for the wrong-doer to be caught and punished than to escape and live as an unjust agent. In the *Gorgias*, Plato argues that punishment is a medicine that remedies the evil that afflicts the criminal (447e–449b). In the case of the student who plagiarizes, what purpose does punishment serve? We may hesitate to use Plato's medical analogy, or the term "evil," but the task of the professor punishing the plagiarist is also fundamentally restorative: we must make the student understand where he or she went wrong and how to work honestly.

Student writing lets the student speak to the instructor and the instructor, in turn, respond to the student. Only the professor and the student read the student essay and use it as a tool of communication. Plagiarism subverts the process and so harms the only person who stands to benefit from writing—the student. My colleagues know the emotional journey that accompanies the discovery of academic dishonesty. We move from vague suspicion through depressing confirmation and arrive at certainty in a cloud of disappointment, anger, and sadness. Plagiarism represents something defective in the student's understanding of writing or, more profoundly, the purpose of writing. This is the source of the sadness.

Three kinds of ignorance lead to plagiarism. The simplest and stupidest is forgetting to put in a reference or accidentally omitting quotation marks. Perhaps something is mistakenly pasted from a web source into the paper instead of onto a list of source information. Plagiarists may too lightly plead ignorance of the contents of their own work, attributing defects in a paper's composition to a lack of time or sleep or to one of the crises that seem to ravage some students' lives with unhappy (if sometimes convenient) regularity. If such careless ignorance of a student's own work is the cause of plagiarism, then a punishment that points out that it is unacceptable (such as an F on the paper) would seem to serve the purpose of educating the perpetrator.

The next kind of ignorance, which is also easy to confess, is ignorance of the rules of citation. A source is not cited; a source phrase is lightly reworded but not adequately paraphrased; a cited source is misidentified. Many first-year honors students have very imperfect notions of what proper citation entails. Of course there is a great deal to learn about how to paraphrase or how to adapt to conventions prescribed by different schools of citation. Add the profusion of web sources (how does one cite an online edition of a translation of Martial?), and one can see that the topic is fraught with possibilities for error. Furthermore, many instructors assume students know how to cite and do not teach them how to do so. Honors composition course syllabi often contain dire warnings about plagiarism, but the writing class schedule devotes little or no time to citation. If ignorance about citation is the source of plagiarism problems, then perhaps punishments should include remedial lessons in citation. If such ignorance is a common problem in the class, then formal lessons in citation should be added to the syllabus early in the term.

It is difficult to distinguish ignorance of one's own work or of the rules of citation from the third, most troubling, and least confessed kind of ignorance, which is ignorance of the purpose of writing. Intentional plagiarists mistake the external rituals of education for education itself. My getting an A is meaningless if the work that earned it is not mine since I have not learned and demonstrated the excellence that the grade is supposed to signify. This kind of ignorance is the most dangerous and hardest to remedy because it is a conscious rejection of education in an attempt to earn a grade. The intentional plagiarist defies honors codes and holds that the superficial end of a good grade justifies the means used to receive it. Students may cheat in this way either because they have lost their respect for the institution they are part of or because they have lost their belief in their own ability to be "good enough" for the tasks they are assigned. Whether they are betraying the university or themselves, they have lost the core belief in genuine learning that makes the relationship between the university and the student possible. The expulsion of such students is less a punishment than a simple recognition of

the fact that the intentional plagiarist has broken off an honest relationship with learning.

An emphasis on academic integrity such as that urged by Bruce Carter seems an obvious conclusion—not, however, primarily for the good of honors communities but for the individual students themselves. They must be taught how to find and use information, exhorted to honesty, and encouraged to discuss and think about academic integrity. It is well within our power as educators to go beyond grim warnings in syllabi and to take simple steps that can save some of the many students who, attracted by the ease of taking a shortcut or lulled into comfort by low expectations, are tempted to become victims and perpetrators of plagiarism. In kidnapping the words and ideas of others, they betray an ignorance that holds their own education hostage. Educators can help them see that ignorance and restore, even to the plagiarist, a functioning understanding of what it means to learn.

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