

August 9, 2010, 9:00 pm

Plagiarism Is Not a Big Moral Deal

By [STANLEY FISH](#)



[Stanley Fish](#) on education, law and society.

Tags:

[Ethics](#), [Plagiarism](#)

During my tenure as the dean of a college, I determined that an underperforming program should be closed. My wife asked me if I had ever set foot on the premises, and when I answered “no,” she said that I really should do that before wielding the axe.

And so I did, in the company of my senior associate dean. We toured the offices and spoke to students and staff. In the course of a conversation, one of the program’s co-directors pressed on me his latest book. I opened it to the concluding chapter, read the first two pages, and remarked to my associate dean, “This is really good.”

It’s hard to get from the notion that you shouldn’t appropriate your neighbor’s car to the notion that you should not repeat his words without citing him.

But on the way back to the administration building, I suddenly flashed on the pages I admired and began to suspect that the reason I liked them so much was that I had written them. And sure enough, when I got back to my office and pulled one of my books off the shelf, there the pages were, practically word for word. I telephoned the co-director, and told him that I had been looking at his book, and wanted to talk about it. He replied eagerly that he would come right over, but when he came in I pointed him to the two books — his and mine — set out next to each other with the relevant passages outlined by a marker.

He turned white and said that he and his co-author had divided the responsibilities for the book’s chapters and that he had not written (perhaps “written” should be in quotes) this one. I contacted the co-author and he wrote back to me something about graduate student researchers who had given him material that was not properly identified. I made a few half-hearted efforts to contact the book’s publisher, but I didn’t persist and I pretty much forgot about it, although the memory returns whenever I read yet another piece (like one that appeared recently in The Times) about [the ubiquity of plagiarism](#), the failure of students to understand what it is, the suspicion that they know what it is but don’t care, and the outdatedness of notions like originality and single authorship on which the intelligibility of plagiarism as a concept depends.

Whenever it comes up plagiarism is a hot button topic and essays about it tend to be philosophically and morally inflated. But there are really only two points to make. (1) Plagiarism is a learned sin. (2) Plagiarism is not a philosophical issue.

Of course every sin is learned. Very young children do not distinguish between themselves and the world; they assume that everything belongs to them; only in time and through the conditioning of experience do they learn the distinction between mine and thine and so come to acquire the concept of stealing. The concept of plagiarism, however, is learned in more specialized contexts of practice entered into only by a few; it’s hard to get from the notion that you shouldn’t appropriate your neighbor’s car to the notion that you should not repeat his words without citing him.

The rule that you not use words that were first uttered or written by another without due attribution is less like the rule against stealing, which is at least culturally universal, than it is like the rules of golf. I choose golf because its rules are so much more severe and therefore so much odder than the rules of other sports. In baseball you can (and should) steal bases and hide the ball. In football you can (and should) fake a pass

or throw your opponent to the ground. In basketball you will be praised for obstructing an opposing player's view of the court by waving your hands in front of his face. In hockey ... well let's not go there. But in golf, if you so much as move the ball accidentally while breathing on it far away from anyone who might have seen what you did, you must immediately report yourself and incur the penalty. (Think of what would happen to the base-runner called safe at home-plate who said to the umpire, "Excuse me, sir, but although you missed it, I failed to touch third base.")

Golf's rules have been called arcane and it is not unusual to see play stopped while a P.G.A. official arrives with rule book in hand and pronounces in the manner of an I.R.S. official. Both fans and players are aware of how peculiar and "in-house" the rules are; knowledge of them is what links the members of a small community, and those outside the community (most people in the world) can be excused if they just don't see what the fuss is about.

Plagiarism is breach of disciplinary decorum, not a breach of the moral universe.

Plagiarism is like that; it's an insider's obsession. If you're a professional journalist, or an academic historian, or a philosopher, or a social scientist or a scientist, the game you play for a living is underwritten by the assumed value of originality and failure properly to credit the work of others is a big and obvious no-no. But if you're a musician or a novelist, the boundary lines are less clear (although there certainly are some) and if you're a politician it may not occur to you, as it did not at one time to Joe Biden, that you're doing anything wrong when you appropriate the speech of a revered statesman.

And if you're a student, plagiarism will seem to be an annoying guild imposition without a persuasive rationale (who cares?); for students, learning the rules of plagiarism is worse than learning the irregular conjugations of a foreign language. It takes years, and while a knowledge of irregular verbs might conceivably come in handy if you travel, knowledge of what is and is not plagiarism in this or that professional practice is not something that will be of very much use to you unless you end up becoming a member of the profession yourself. It follows that students who never quite get the concept right are by and large not committing a crime; they are just failing to become acclimated to the conventions of the little insular world they have, often through no choice of their own, wandered into. It's no big moral deal; which doesn't mean, I hasten to add, that plagiarism shouldn't be punished — if you're in our house, you've got to play by our rules — just that what you're punishing is a breach of disciplinary decorum, not a breach of the moral universe.

Now if plagiarism is an idea that makes sense only in the precincts of certain specialized practices and is not a normative philosophical notion, inquiries into its philosophical underpinnings are of no practical interest or import. In recent years there have been a number of assaults on the notion of originality, issuing from fields as diverse as literary theory, history, cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, Internet studies. Single authorship, we have been told, is a recent invention of a bourgeois culture obsessed with individualism, individual rights and the myth of progress. All texts are palimpsests of earlier texts; there's been nothing new under the sun since Plato and Aristotle and they weren't new either; everything belongs to everybody. In earlier periods works of art were produced in workshops by teams; the master artisan may have signed them, but they were communal products. In some cultures, even contemporary ones, the imitation of standard models is valued more than work that sets out to be path-breaking. (This was one of the positions in the famous quarrel between the ancients and the moderns in England and France in the 17th and 18th centuries.)

Arguments like these (which I am reporting, not endorsing) have been so successful in academic circles that the very word "originality" often appears in quotation marks, and it has seemed to many that there is a direct path from this line of reasoning to the conclusion that plagiarism is an incoherent, even impossible, concept and that a writer or artist accused of plagiarism is being faulted for doing something that cannot be avoided. R.M. Howard makes the point succinctly "If there is no originality and no literary property, there is no basis for the notion of plagiarism" ("College English," 1995).

That might be true or at least plausible if, in order to have a basis, plagiarism would have to stand on some philosophical ground. But the ground plagiarism stands on is more mundane and firm; it is the ground of disciplinary practices and of the histories that have conferred on those practices a strong, even undoubted (though revisable) sense of what kind of work can be appropriately done and what kind of behavior cannot be tolerated. If it is wrong to plagiarize in some context of practice, it is not because the idea of originality has been affirmed by deep philosophical reasoning but because the ensemble of activities that take place in

has been affirmed by deep philosophical reasoning, but because the ensemble of activities that take place in the practice would be unintelligible if the possibility of being original were not presupposed.

And if there should emerge a powerful philosophical argument saying there's no such thing as originality, its emergence needn't alter or even bother for a second a practice that can only get started if originality is assumed as a baseline. It may be (to offer another example), as I have argued elsewhere, that there's no such thing as free speech, but if you want to have a free speech regime because you believe that it is essential to the maintenance of democracy, just forget what Stanley Fish said — after all it's just a theoretical argument — and get down to it as lawyers and judges in fact do all the time without the benefit or hindrance of any metaphysical rap. Everyday disciplinary practices do not rest on a foundation of philosophy or theory; they rest on a foundation of themselves; no theory or philosophy can either prop them up or topple them. As long as the practice is ongoing and flourishing its conventions will command respect and allegiance and flouting them will have negative consequences.

This brings me back to the (true) story I began with. Whether there is something called originality or not, the two scholars who began their concluding chapter by reproducing two of my pages are professionally culpable. They took something from me without asking and without acknowledgment, and they profited — if only in the currency of academic reputation — from work that I had done and signed. That's the bottom line and no fancy philosophical argument can erase it.

