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Plagiarism.

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Plagiarism is defined as appropriating someone else's words or ideas without acknowledgment. To understand plagiarism we must consider two questions: 1. How is plagiarism like or unlike theft. 2. Why is plagiarism considered wrong; why *should* we acknowledge the originator of an idea?

Is Plagiarism Like Theft?

First, plagiarism can easily be distinguished from piracy. Piracy is the sale of attributed but unauthorized copies of a work, an act depriving the author of profit but not credit. Depriving authors of profit that is rightfully theirs is theft, but here we focus on credit rather than profit. Depriving authors of credit might also be a form of theft. We often think that ideas and their expression belong to the author as if they were private property, the author's intellectual property. On this view, plagiarists steal the work of others, taking for themselves the credit of ownership and thereby depriving the original authors of this benefit. If intellectual property is like physical property the analogy helps explain subtler forms of plagiarism. For example, most people know that taking the exact wording of another person without attribution is plagiarism, but believe that paraphrasing the original is acceptable. Yet taking someone else's idea and changing the wording is like stealing a car and changing its color.

However, literary works that are stolen differ in important ways from physical objects that are the targets of ordinary theft. Ideas are less tangible and identifiable than physical objects. Objects that are stolen remain stolen even if they are taken apart and recombined. Not so with ideas. Building new ideas from old ideas, using existing components and combining them in new ways, might be creativity, not plagiarism. There is often no way to determine what counts as a new idea and what requires acknowledgment as a variation on an old idea. Conventions for giving credit vary from field to field. For example, much has been written about ill-fated love or

problems with parent-child relations without giving credit to Shakespeare or Aeschylus. In literature the *form* of the expression is more important than the basic plot idea. In fact some critics claim that there is only a small number of basic plots in all of literature. To count as plagiarism in literature a description must steal the form of the original, not just the structure. However, in the sciences, reporting the research results of another without attribution is plagiarism, even if the words and style of the report are very different. In order to know what should be credited to others, one has to know the practices of that field. And even then it may not be clear. In areas such as computer programming and musical composition, what counts as plagiarism is still being argued in the courts.

Unlike physical objects that belong to someone else, we are expected to pick up the ideas of others and take them with us. We remember ideas without remembering where they came from because recalling the source of an idea is often more difficult than recalling the idea itself. Therefore it is possible to commit plagiarism without realizing that one is doing so. Learning to avoid plagiarism requires careful training in a system of conventions particular to a field, unlike learning to avoid theft. This may explain why several great thinkers of the past have recently been accused of plagiarism. Under today's conventions of attribution, what they did constitutes plagiarism. But the conventions of today are not the same as in the past when writers usually cited another person's work only to invoke authority.

Plagiarism differs from theft in a more profound way. Taking an object that has been abandoned or given away is not considered stealing. But copying the ideas of an anonymous author, or claiming credit for an idea given to you by a friend who does not wish to claim authorship, is considered plagiarism.

If words and ideas were merely property, and plagiarism merely a form of theft, then there would be nothing wrong with buying the rights to authorship from another, as in the case of commercial term-paper services. The original authors sell their claim to authorship for money. The plagiarist who uses these services is not *stealing* the credit from another person because the original author does not want the credit. But credit for authorship is not something that can be sold or given away. Credit for authorship is so undetachable that even the reverse of stealing, falsely attributing one's own work to another, is also wrong; it constitutes forgery.

In the realm of ideas and their expression, one is evaluated not for owning the rights to a work but for having been its originator. Ideas and forms of expression are, in this sense, closer to moral actions than to property. The credit due the originator cannot be transferred to someone else, even if both parties agree to the transfer. As with a moral action, responsibility, whether creditworthy or blameworthy, inheres in the agent.

Why attribute at all?

There are commonly accepted violations of the rule that works must be attributed to their true authors. Books “by” celebrities are routinely ghost-written. Highly successful authors use pseudonyms. Books written by committees are published under a famous author’s name. Politicians give speeches without crediting their speechwriters. Congressional bills bear the name of legislators who introduce them, not the assistants who write them. Researchers routinely use the assistance of librarians without acknowledgment. People tell jokes without crediting the originators.

Perhaps these failures to give credit are wrong. Some argue that credit should always be given to the originator; that proper attribution is essential to evaluate the contributions of individuals and to reward creativity. Certainly when evaluation is focal, it is wrong to take credit for the work of others. And certainly it is important to identify and reward people who do original work in order to encourage that work.

On the other hand, it is possible that emphasis on evaluation and credit discourages collaboration and fosters destructive competition and cheating. When the result is more important than the process, collaboration and teamwork might be encouraged even at the cost of sacrificing accurate attribution of credit. Under these conditions the reprehensibility of plagiarism might diminish.

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For a longer list, look for “plagiarism” at <http://www.google.com>