Writing Constructs: Ethics in Plagiarism

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Plagiarism, as a concept, is widely regarded as a means to help maintain academic integrity and honesty among authors. It is defined as the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and passing them off as one's own, and is applied as a means to discredit or scrutinize information or an author. I clearly did not come up with this definition, because if I had, the efficacy it holds as a definition would be solely determined by the trustworthiness of my character as an author, in the eyes of you as a reader. Regardless, an agreed upon definition is required for constructive discourse or discussion on any topic, and that's why I chose to use Oxford dictionary's definition of plagiarism, simply because it's the first one to appear when searching "plagiarism definition" online, making it the most widely read definition any reader can reasonably be expected to use. However, with the new technology presented in the modern era and the push for a more multicultural academia, this definition is surprisingly vague and contradictory to other widespread interpretations of plagiarism, and is even harmful to many of the people who use it. In harsher words, plagiarism as we define it is outdated, classist, ill-defined, and enforces beyond what is beneficial for its purview.

Going forward with the assumption that the concept of plagiarism is helpful to maintaining integrity among academics, it's important that we (we being me, your

trustworthy author, and you, the reader) have an equal and conversational understanding of the benefits that actually come from enforceable plagiarism.

Through the lens of informational honesty (informational honesty being the measure of ease that true information can be transferred between individuals), plagiarism serves as a means to encourage “proper” citation, with the bounds of what its definition encompasses being enforced at their austerity with the goal of encouraging academic integrity, as well as providing proper attribution to the creators of ideas or the collectors of research. It emphasizes the importance of the context through which information or ideas are provided and values the trust between an author and a reader by displaying transparency to the audience. The important part of this idea being “at their austerity.” Since we could always be *more* transparent, the boundary of what is considered plagiarism needs to value both transparency as well as the ease in which providing that transparency can be achieved. For writing to be entirely transparent, authors would need to provide enough context for any reader to understand their writing regardless of language, ability, prior knowledge, or outside experience, essentially requiring omniscience from the reader. Since this level of transparency is impossible, it means that there must be some balance between transparency and simplicity that creates the boundary between originality and plagiarism.

Through the lens of academic authority (academic authority being the trust garnered between an author and their audience through academic systems), plagiarism exists as a means to enforce a system of trust within the sphere of academics. This “system of trust” uses consistent methods of citation as a way to display trustworthiness to readers, either in favor of authors, publishers, or their benefactors, without the need

to build an individual rapport due to the trust inherited from the academic sphere as a whole. So long as academic writing is considered trustworthy, then academics or authors associated with academia can inherit and uphold the trustworthiness of the entire academic sphere. But, for academic writing to gain and hold that trust, it must have a consistent and agreed upon acceptable minimum level of transparency, informing the boundaries of what is considered plagiarism.

Both of the above concepts are further discussed by Ludo Visser et al., editors of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers' (IEEE) *IEEE Robotic & Automation Magazine.* In their editorial, "Pitfalls of Publications: On the Sensitive Issue of Plagiarism," Visser et al. go further into the ramifications of plagiarism and its connection to copyright law in the technological fields. The authors write:

> Instead of literally copying text, words and phrases may be translated from another language, altered to reflect the individual's writing style, or embedded into the author's own work. Furthermore, on a more abstract level, ideas and concepts may also be plagiarized. Analogous to patent infringement, this can include taking intellectual material and wrongfully presenting it as one's own, either an idea as a whole or in parts, or building forth on someone else's work without proper referencing or licensing. (Visser et al. 85)

In other words, to Visser et al., and to the IEEE more generally, plagiarism is a serious problem not just due to the ideas of originality and proper information, but also for legal reasons. This is especially exemplified in the technological fields where papers are often published alongside inventions and patents that use research conducted

alongside a resulting product which the IEEE would likely argue ought to be protected with the same rigor as the invention itself.

Where is the line now, though? Currently, there is no general consensus. Even Oxford's definition doesn't consider self-plagiarism or define the contexts in which enforcing plagiarism would be commonly or beneficially applied. As stated by Jennifer A. Mott-Smith, in her article Bad Ideas about Writing: Plagiarism Deserves to be Punished," "it is not always easy to acknowledge sources [because] expectations for referencing vary widely, and what counts as plagiarism depends on context. If, for instance, you use a piece of historic information in a novel, you don't have to cite it, but if you use the same piece of information in a history paper, you do" (Mott-Smith, 249). In other words, the contexts that inform what is considered plagiarism vary drastically even when presenting similar information, and vary even further depending on the use of the citation. For example, Mott-Smith goes on to talk about how textbooks and journals rarely cite their sources, while academic writings cite sources in many different ways, depending on the disciplines or materials covered. It is because of this vagueness that plagiarism can be defined in many different ways to suit the needs of those trying to discredit others. This is corroborated by Liz Hamp-Lyons and her response to the strife of two Chinese professors trying to publish their findings to an English-speaking journal:

> In a recent article, two prominent Chinese applied linguists, Qiufang Wen and Yihong Gao (2007) argued that 'Instead of being forbidden, [submission of the same research findings in different languages] . . . should be encouraged so as to maximize the effectiveness of academic communication and equalize the rights of creating, distributing and

> accessing knowledge' (p. 221). They argue that when a published article is translated into languages as different as Chinese and English, submitting the translated article does not comprise multiple submission or duplicate publication, as these are understood by the conventions of academic journal publishing. (Hamp-Lyons 690).

Wen and Gao, facing claims of self-plagiarism after publishing a paper in their native Chinese as well as in English, claim that the current boundaries of plagiarism value originality over the spread of knowledge in a way that separates the knowledge bases of works published in different languages as well as in a way that discredits already marginalized communities. Hamp-Lyons goes on to support the claim made by Wen and Gao while refuting the opposition, claiming that "the status of English as the language of academic publication has become impregnable,"(690) going on to cite Salager-Meyer who states, "90% of important scientific research is published in 10% of journals, and whereas developing countries comprise 80% of the world's population, only 2% of indexed scientific publications come from these parts of the world" (qtd. in Hamp-Lyons 690).

The reason why the previous example is so important is that it explicitly shows that the boundaries of plagiarism are not only unclear, but can be taken advantage of to suppress (or even be considered to innately take advantage of) voices outside of "standard" western academia (that being the majority white, middle-class, English speakers that comprise modern eurocentrist academia). Specifically, what makes the vagueness of the boundaries of plagiarism so potentially dangerous is the fact that, like with any vaguely defined rule, the exact

boundaries of a vague guideline are defined by those who enforce the rule, not by those affected. Thus, the vagueness benefits those in power and gives further power to suppress those out of power.

As demonstrated by Aamir Raoof Memon in “Similarity and Plagiarism in Scholarly Journal Submissions: Bringing Clarity to the Concept for Authors, Reviewers and Editors,” within a sample of 1,679 writing students, “84.4% of the survey participants were unaware of the difference between similarity index and plagiarism.” With such widespread misunderstanding of the constituent parts of what defines plagiarism among academics within writing fields, it becomes clear that the current boundaries between an original paper and an academically dishonest one is blurry.

Because the actual enforcement of a vague system is defined by those who benefit from it, it now begs the question of who currently benefits from plagiarism as its boundaries are currently defined, and who should benefit from those boundaries if its stated definition does not align with its practical enforcement. Proposing a hypothetical to emphasize this point, what would the boundaries of plagiarism be in a definition that benefits the reader, the author, or the academic institution as a whole respectively?

If it serves the reader, then plagiarism would draw its boundaries in a way that values transparency and clear communication so that information can be spread effectively and with little bias. This would mean that citations would likely include information of study funding, be easily accessible, and would defer the labor of fact-checking to the author and publisher instead of to the reader.

If it serves the author, then plagiarism would draw its boundaries in a way that values originality and the merit of the author above the credibility or understandability of the information provided. This system would put author names in the citations before the titles of the articles cited, and would encourage a system where peer review was used as a method of fact checking to maintain an othering of those outside of the academic sphere. This system would use citation as a shortcut that puts the burden of further research on the reader by only citing the last place that the given information was found, allowing context to be easily removed or forgotten over time in favor of academic merit to the authors. In a more extreme example, consider an indigenous population has been practicing a tradition for hundreds of years. That tradition cannot be properly cited until it is mentioned in a research paper, at which point, our current system would make sure that the author of the paper received credit for the documentation of the tradition with their name being cited before the tradition itself. This interpretation values the author of the paper, but also allows for the "claiming" of ideas by the dominant socioeconomic class, allowing for the perpetuation of academic dishonesty through the theft of ideas outside of academia via "academization."

If it serves the institution, then plagiarism would draw its boundaries in a way that allows academics and their sponsoring institutions to claim ideas as a colonizer would, claiming ownership of the methods and systems of information acquisition to disparage those outside the system. This boundary would allow the institution to distribute funding as an overhead entity, funding informative studies

that benefit the institution over both the author and the reader. In this system, research could not be conducted without permission in the form of grants, while the review of the information gathered would be performed internally, allowing already present biases to become self-perpetuating.

While I believe it is evident that our current boundaries of plagiarism claim to be for the benefit of the spread of knowledge to the people, the purposeful vagueness of the definition seems to support the claiming of ideas by authors and institutions as well.

So, what happens when we finally throw generative AI into the mix? If plagiarism, or by extension similar laws like copyright law, can be used to (or were made to) claim ownership of ideas through writing or general creation, then is AI a creator, a tool used for creation, or an independent entity? Can a robot even have an idea to be claimed or does that require human thought? Is nuanced thought a required condition for humanity or is humanity a required condition for nuanced thought? All of these questions have been circulating with no clear answer in sight. Even experts in the field of generative AI and how it impacts human culture such as James Hutson claim that “the advent of GAI, particularly post-2022, has precipitated a complex reevaluation of these long-standing principles. The ability to generate content that is indistinguishable from human-authored text has blurred the once-clear boundaries between original creation and derivation” (21). The boundaries of what defines plagiarism are forced, now more than ever, to undergo massive changes to attempt to maintain the systems that have been in practice for the past decades. Not only is it becoming increasingly difficult to define, but it’s also becoming increasingly difficult to monitor, reprimand, or even to avoid plagiarism under our current system. With the oversaturation of AI creations, originality itself is becoming

a moving goalpost. So, with the need for change in the systems that we uphold already, it's a better time than any to evaluate and reconsider what plagiarism as a concept is even meant to achieve.

While existing in a larger system that restricts the access to education to the rich and that claims the ideas of the underrepresented, the ill-defined definitions of plagiarism must serve to further those means; with the advent of generative AI, and the continued advancement of our academic culture to push for multiculturalism, the amount of information out there just continues to grow; and with the opportunity for change to create an academic sphere that genuinely values informational honesty over profit or individual merit, it becomes clear how far we have to go to create a system that achieves the stated goals meant to be achieved by plagiarism.

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Abstract: “Ethics in Plagiarism” tries to take a closer look at our preconceived notions of plagiarism as a facet of academic honesty, and sees if they really hold up in a post-internet world. The essay tries to see how the definitions we use to describe plagiarism support some systems and discourage others and challenges that the stated goals of plagiarism’s current definitions aren't supported in practice as much as in theory.

Bio: Oliver Hays is a junior studying art at Western Oregon University after transferring from the computer science program and bouncing between colleges trying to find the right fit. Raised by educators, they've always been passionate about how educational institutions and systems are run, which inspired the deeper dive on plagiarism presented in this essay, combining their two interests in code and art. Oliver plans to take their art degree into the world combining art and writing as a concept artist if possible, combining their passion for worldbuilding with their love for creative expression. They love all things creative, such as music, painting, design, writing, and much more.

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