

## Plagiarism in Philosophy: Prevention Better than Cure

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### 1. Introduction

'Plagiarism more common than thought in student essays' would make a good headline.<sup>[2]</sup> Recent research suggests that students admit to much more plagiarism and other forms of cheating than teachers generally suspect,<sup>[3]</sup> and it is widely believed that the problem is increasing as a result of the internet. The solution is to use a range of techniques to get the thought back into student essay writing, and to take more active steps to spot when this has not happened.

### 2. Definition of plagiarism

If action is to be taken against students who plagiarise, it is essential for there to be a robust definition of plagiarism, and for it to be thoroughly understood and owned by both staff and students. Each university has its own definition of plagiarism and its own procedures for dealing with it. Since these differ to a greater or lesser extent, any advice I give must be adapted to local circumstances.<sup>[4]</sup> However, the burden of my advice is to tackle plagiarism at source, so that only an irreducible minimum number of cases need to be sent through official channels.

Most definitions of plagiarism include the following elements:

- a deliberate intention to cheat;
- copying or paraphrasing a text without acknowledgment;
- adopting someone else's ideas without acknowledgment.<sup>[5]</sup>

Before going any further, I shall comment briefly on each of these.

#### Deliberate intention

Although definitions usually include a reference to a deliberate intention to cheat, plagiarism is plagiarism whether deliberate or not, and accidental plagiarism can (in theory at least) attract the same penalty. I shall argue that deliberate and unintentional plagiarism should be kept as separate from each other as possible, since the latter is no more than poor academic practice, and it needs to be addressed in a non-punitive way.

#### Copying or paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is sometimes regarded as less of a sin than straight copying, on the grounds that it requires

independent intellectual effort to digest<sup>[6]</sup> a text, and to put it into your own words. Nevertheless, it still involves the unacknowledged use of someone else's work, and I think it is correct to treat it as hardly less objectionable than straight copying.

I therefore find it odd that students are sometimes positively encouraged to paraphrase. For example, Indiana University has a web page giving students advice on how not to plagiarise, and it provides examples of acceptable and unacceptable paraphrasing. One of the criteria it gives for unacceptable paraphrasing is that 'only a few words or phrases' have been changed.<sup>[7]</sup> However, paraphrasing without acknowledgement is still plagiarism, whether it is superficial or radical. Radical paraphrasing might be useful as an occasional exercise for testing comprehension, but it should not form the basis of essay writing, whether acknowledged or not. The ability to **summarise** what an author says in one's own words is a more useful skill; but most important of all, in the context of philosophy, is the ability to quote a passage verbatim, and to **analyse** how an interpretation can be derived from the actual wording. This way students will demonstrate that they are thinking for themselves.

## Adopting the ideas of others

It would obviously be absurd to expect students to give a source for **every** idea or fact they use in writing an essay. For example, if a student writes 'Ren  Descartes (1596-1650) was a dualist,' no-one is going to accuse them of plagiarism, even though knowledge of Descartes' name, dates, and his dualism will hardly have been the fruits of the student's own independent thought. We all accept that there is 'common knowledge', which students can use without giving a reference. But it is impossible to say precisely what is or is not common knowledge, since this will depend on the topic of the essay, and the level of the student. For example, if the essay is **about** Descartes' dualism, it would be appropriate to discuss different interpretations, duly acknowledged; and a PhD thesis might take more common knowledge for granted than a first-year essay. Even experienced scholars will disagree where the line should be drawn, and it would be unfair to take a penal approach to undergraduates who happen to overstep it.

More significantly, while we do expect philosophy undergraduates to think for themselves, we do not expect them to come up with ideas no-one has ever thought of before. Even at PhD level, most universities have abandoned or at least diluted the originality requirement, given the difficulty of finding something absolutely new to say.<sup>[8]</sup> The main difference between undergraduates and postgraduates is that we expect postgraduates to trawl the literature to find precedents for what they themselves may have thought of already. But time is too short for undergraduates to do this (and it is questionable how far it is a productive use of **anyone's** time). I don't think we would wish to penalise an undergraduate for failing to know that their ideas had already been published by others, unless the relevant texts were contained in the compulsory reading for the course. On the contrary, we would reward them for being able to come up with the same ideas as published academics, rather than unpublishably bad ideas. In short, what we are looking for is not **original**, but **independent** thinking - and this distinction needs to be made clear to students.<sup>[9]</sup>

By default, if students express ideas in their own words without an acknowledgment, they are claiming them as their own. However, it is hard to establish whether they have arrived at them through their own thinking, or have been inspired by extra-curricular reading. The ideal is that students should acknowledge all their sources of help, as junior members of an academic community in which this is standard practice. We should be pleased if some of them do more reading than is required, and use their brains to digest the material and make it their own. While falling short of complete independence of thought, breadth of reading and the ability to digest the ideas of others are academic virtues to be encouraged. The advice I give my students is that if they merely quote and paraphrase, whether acknowledging the fact or not, they are failing to demonstrate any specifically philosophical ability. If they can digest the sophisticated philosophical ideas of others, and express them succinctly in their own words, they will get some credit for philosophical understanding. But what I am really looking for is the ability to **engage** with the ideas of others, which students can demonstrate by criticising them, setting one against another, confronting a commentator's interpretation with a primary text, and so on. If students are operating at this level, they cannot possibly conceal their sources.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that, when students have borrowed ideas and thoroughly digested them, it will be

virtually impossible to establish that this is what they have done, rather than thinking up the ideas for themselves - and it is bad practice to make something illegal if it is unpoliceable. So to include the copying of ideas in a university definition of plagiarism merely complicates an issue which is difficult enough already. At Leeds, it *is* included in the definition<sup>[10]</sup>, and I asked the head of our Office of Academic Appeals and Regulation (who has had many years of experience in the role) whether there had ever been any plagiarism cases involving the copying of ideas. He said never. It always turned on copying from or paraphrasing *texts*. So why include this particular cog in the machine, if it never does any work? Indeed it can actually do harm to conscientious students, who will be worried about expressing their own ideas in case the same ideas could be found in books they haven't read, thus leaving them open to a charge of unintentional plagiarism.

### 3. Crime<sup>[11]</sup> versus bad practice

If we eliminate the copying of ideas from the definition of plagiarism, we are left with a contrast between the deliberate intention to cheat, and copying or paraphrasing the words of others without acknowledgment. Everyone will agree that the deliberate intention to cheat is criminal, whereas failure to acknowledge sources is less obviously so. It may just be an instance of bad academic practice.

The trouble is that it is often difficult to discriminate between criminal intent, and mere bad practice on the part of students who are insufficiently initiated into academic culture. When confronted with accusations of plagiarism, students usually have plausible stories to tell:

- 'I did include the book in my bibliography';
- 'I wrote the essay from my notes, and I had forgotten to include the source';
- 'This is how I was taught to write essays at school';
- 'This is what I am expected to do in my other department'.

Most cases fall within a grey area, where what the student has actually done is captured by the definition of plagiarism, but it is difficult to prove deliberate intent to commit fraud.

It is the criminal aspect which makes plagiarism such a fraught issue for academics, for a number of reasons:

- In our role as policers of academic standards and integrity, we are embarrassed if external examiners catch us out as having failed to detect plagiarism (I myself remember being caught having awarded Professor Sir Peter Strawson a 2.2 mark for an essay on Kant, many years ago).
- Confronting the student is emotionally upsetting for both parties.
- It can take a lot of time to establish that plagiarism has taken place, and to go through official university procedures; and this time fulfils no useful educational purpose.<sup>[12]</sup>
- We are often unhappy with the final verdict - whether because we think the panel has been too severe, or because it dismisses a case on the grounds that the department was at fault (and universities may have a bias in favour of the student, in order to avoid expensive and embarrassing appeals).<sup>[13]</sup>
- An obsession with the avoidance of plagiarism poisons the overall relationship between teachers and students. The learning process becomes one of enforced compliance, rather than one of co-operation between teacher and student to maximise learning.

Institutions must have policies and procedures for dealing with fraud when it does occur; but it is clearly better to find ways of minimising the occurrence of plagiarism in the first place. The focus should be on:

- making the crime of cheating unthinkable;

- positively fostering good academic practice.

## What is the crime?

Unacknowledged copying is a crime in two respects:

- First, it involves breaching the intellectual property rights of the author. Students are often unaware that copying is a form of theft, and that copyright legislation applies in all walks of life. The problem has been exacerbated by the internet, since students tend to assume that they can do what they like with material that is made available without charge.[14] It is important that they should be made aware of the legal implications of making illicit use of copyright material.
- Second, and more importantly in the academic context, it involves gaining a qualification under false pretences. A degree is a passport to a high-status and well-paid career (outside academia, at least). If we certificate students as having knowledge and abilities which they have not in fact demonstrated, then this particular function of the university system loses its *raison d'être* and its credibility.[15]

Some of what I am going to say may be interpreted as too lenient on plagiarism. So let me make it absolutely clear that, when it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that students have fraudulently passed off the work of others as their own, they should be severely punished. The punishment should not be merely a reduction in marks at the discretion of the examiners, but it should involve a quasi-judicial process, in which the ultimate sanction is the failure to award a degree.

## Causes of the crime

Sometimes the reason for plagiarism lies with the students. There are many circumstances which can interfere with their work, and tempt them to resort to a quick fix as deadlines loom. For example:

- mental problems (depression, being in love, addiction to drink or drugs, etc.);
- adverse domestic circumstances (death, illness, or divorce among family or close friends);
- illness severe enough to affect their work, but not severe enough to warrant a year out;
- spending too much time in paid employment.[16]

Alternatively, there may be some students who register for a philosophy module without the necessary motivation. For example:

- it might be a compulsory component of an entirely different programme of study (e.g. medical ethics for trainee doctors), and students fail to see its relevance for their professional qualification;
- some students might take it as a soft elective option, without appreciating that the study of philosophy involves hard work;
- other students might have accepted a place on a joint-honours programme having been rejected for a single-honours programme with higher entry requirements (e.g. English or History), intending to transfer at the end of the first year.

Apriori, one might expect philosophy students (especially single-honours students) to be more committed to the subject for its own sake than students of other disciplines, for the following reasons:

- a philosophy degree is not a specifically vocational qualification which students are desperate to obtain, even

if it means taking short cuts;

- the large majority start philosophy for the first time at university, and are therefore not just unthinkingly continuing with a subject they happened to do well at in school;
- in some cases the decision to study philosophy is a positive one made against the advice of parents or careers advisers who mistakenly doubt the value of a philosophy degree.

If we lived in an ideal world in which all our students arrived with an enthusiastic commitment to learning philosophy for its own sake, then something would have gone seriously wrong if any of them resorted to cheating when assessed. Everyone understands that if you genuinely want to learn something - such as a foreign language, or playing a musical instrument - then cheating is entirely irrelevant to the purpose.<sup>[17]</sup> Unfortunately we do not live in an ideal world, and a significant number of philosophy students arrive without a strong commitment to learning philosophy, at least as we teach it. It would be worthwhile conducting an empirical investigation into why such students opt for philosophy in the first place.

Given that students won't cheat if they want to learn, the key to preventing criminal behaviour is to foster a culture in which learning is valued for its own sake - in which those who arrive with enthusiasm don't lose it, and the others acquire it. This involves both eliminating structural factors for which we ourselves are responsible, and paying more attention to developing good practice.

## Structural causes of the crime

Common structural causes are the following:

### 1. Failure to make the rules clear

It is difficult enough for us as teachers to articulate the distinction between cheating and mere bad academic practice, and it is hardly surprising if students fail to understand it, even if they are given a definition. As I shall explain below, it is much better to focus on educating students into good academic practice, since written work which conforms to good practice cannot be plagiarised. Of course, there needs to be a clear warning about all forms of cheating, and about the penalties and procedures applied within the institution. But our primary purpose is to produce good philosophers, and it is perverse to keep harping on about one particular form of bad practice at the expense of inculcating good practice. Cheating is something students **do**, but unintentional plagiarising is something they **fail** to do, namely acknowledge their sources. So it is odd to give advice on **avoiding** plagiarism, when we should be advising students on what to do **right**. You won't train anyone to be a good footballer by concentrating on how they should avoid being off-side; and the same goes for philosophy, or any other academic discipline.

Russ Hunt makes the interesting point that when we as academics cite the work of colleagues, our primary motive is not to avoid accusations of plagiarism, but to establish our **bona fides**, advertise allegiances, bring work to the reader's attention, exemplify contending positions, and so on. These are all positive motives, and it is wrong to give students the idea that the sole purpose of referencing is the negative one of defending oneself against charges of cheating. We should give them an apprenticeship in academic culture as it actually is.<sup>[18]</sup>

### 2. Over-assessment

It is a tautology that over-assessment is a bad thing. It is bad for teachers, since more time than necessary is spent accrediting student performance rather than improving it. It is bad for students, since it creates an atmosphere in which they devote all their energies to what is assessed, at the expense of exploring more deeply or more widely than is strictly required by the syllabus. In extreme cases, the sheer volume of assessment means that weaker students simply cannot fulfil assessment requirements without taking short cuts - in particular, by plagiarising.

In most universities, the problem has become acute because of a variety of factors (none of them necessarily bad developments in themselves):

- moving from assessment only in the final year to assessment at the end of each term or semester;
- increasing reliance on coursework, and forms of assessment other than unseen sat examinations;
- modularisation, which has tended to result in a greater number of units of assessment;
- semesterisation, with flexibility as to the amount of credits to be taken in each semester (in any given semester, students may be under- or over-loaded).

A more intangible factor is a growing perception that students have become more strategic in their approach to learning. Instead of following the whole syllabus, they work only on the minimum necessary to get them a good grade; and research has shown that students who take a strategic approach perform significantly better in their assessment.[19] Given that they are accredited as having covered the whole of the syllabus, there is a natural tendency on the part of teachers to ensure that everything is assessed. Without very careful planning, this will bring about an increase in the total burden of assessment. Still worse, if students are assessed on everything, this will be at the expense of deep learning, unless they have the rare good fortune to be taught by someone who has pared the syllabus down to an amount compatible with deep learning.

There is no simple answer to the question of how much students should be assessed. It is generally agreed that there is too much summative assessment (giving grades to students without feed-back to improve future performance), and too little formative assessment (giving feed-back, whether or not with a grade which counts towards the degree classification). In some universities, philosophy departments have very little discretion over the quantity and form of summative assessment; in others, they have almost complete freedom. I would recommend keeping purely summative assessment to the absolute minimum necessary for ensuring the reliability of the degree class awarded to students,[20] and focussing on methods of assessment which help the students to improve, whether or not the assessment counts towards the degree classification. Students need regular formative feedback on their written work throughout their programme if they are to master the subtle and complicated conventions of academic writing. Only then can we be certain that plagiarism, if it still occurs, is deliberate rather than the outcome of ignorance.

### 3. Bunching of assignments

Even more important than the total quantity of assessment is the question of how it is timed. It is not uncommon for students to be taking up to six modules simultaneously, and to find that the deadlines for the submission of coursework are around the same time. It is easy for us to say that the students know the timetable well in advance, and that it is up to them to manage their time so as to work evenly on all their assignments up to the deadline. However, this is not how **we** work - if we have six things to do by a deadline, we will probably tackle them one-by-one (and probably also miss some deadlines with impunity). But these options are not open to students, however well they manage their time, since assignments presuppose the learning that will have taken place up until shortly before the assignment is due.

There are two serious problems here:

- If coursework has both a formative and a summative function, it needs to be submitted late enough to reflect what students have already learned, but early enough for feedback to be returned well before the terminal assessment. Particularly in the case of one-semester modules, this seems to imply a deadline around the middle of the semester for every module.
- In a modular system which gives students a wide range of choice, there is no way of ensuring that coursework deadlines are evenly distributed for every student.

These are not problems for departments which operate a tutorial system, in which students submit one or more formative essays each week, across the range of courses they are taking. Since such essays are only formative, they

avoid the difficulty that some students might be assessed on work submitted at the very beginning of a course, and others at a much later stage. On the other hand, the tutorial system has the disadvantage that students are assessed by a single terminal examination, and that tutors are unlikely to be experts in all the courses taken by their students.

In a modular system, one can at least mitigate the problem by setting a number of short assignments at different dates, and ensuring that the submission dates are not the same for every module. It might be objected that students will be assessed on work done very early in the module; but this problem can also be overcome by making only the best of the assignments count towards the module mark. Unless a student has done spectacularly well on the first assignment, they have a motivation to improve.

#### **4. Setting of impossible tasks**

In philosophy, we expect students to *think for themselves* about the texts they read. But sometimes they cannot understand the texts, and don't know how to set about making sense of them. And even if they do understand them, they don't know what sort of criticisms to make, given that they are mere undergraduates dealing with famous living academics, or geniuses of the past. It is hardly surprising if students faced with an incomprehensible text and a looming deadline take the short cut of reproducing the thoughts of others (whether acknowledged or not).

It is important to remember how new an experience it is for many fresh undergraduates to be assessed on their own thinking, rather than on their ability to recall what they have been told by their teacher, or what they have read in textbooks. Although academics in all disciplines stress the importance of independent thought, the reality falls short of the rhetoric, and students can often get by without it. What makes philosophy different is the centrality of autonomous thinking and argumentation, and the low premium placed on the ability to remember facts.

Later, I shall give some advice about how to ensure that students can fulfil the tasks we set them. For the present, it is enough to say that failure to prepare them adequately for what we expect of them can leave them with the feeling that there is little alternative but to cheat.

#### **5. Allowing an antagonistic culture to develop**

As I have already said, most philosophy students don't come to university primarily for the paper qualification, but because they want to become philosophers (not in the sense of *professional* philosophers). They can lose this initial motivation if the structures we impose on them turn their experience into a game in which they are rewarded for obeying the letter of the rule, and severely punished for going against it. In most universities, there are managerial pressures to be ever more explicit about criteria for success and failure; and I personally have no objection to the idea that we should be more explicit about our assessment criteria. However, an obsession with plagiarism is likely to be counter-productive, since students will perceive us as policing their work rather than facilitating it. It is difficult enough for us to maintain a co-operative relationship with our students when we are assessors as well as teachers; but if we are also perceived as trying to catch them out, the relationship is liable to collapse. The last thing we want is a culture in which staff and students vie with each other to devise ever more sophisticated means of detecting plagiarism and avoiding detection. In such a culture, only the stupidest will get caught, and the cleverer criminals will get off scot-free - and these are the very students whose cleverness we should be encouraging in a positive direction.

The existence of university-wide disciplinary procedures does at least mean that we are not both judge and prosecutor. Nevertheless, it is still up to the individual teacher to detect plagiarism and produce the evidence - the policing role will always be there, if only in the background. At my own institution, there is a commendable rule that teachers are not allowed to confront students with accusations of plagiarism. If there is evidence of plagiarism, it must be handed over to an impartial departmental committee, which will decide whether or not the student has a case to answer. All the same, it is still possible to have a dialogue with the student before that stage is reached. For example, you can ask them tactful questions about how they wrote the essay and what sources they used, provided the dreaded p-word is never mentioned, and it is clear that you are exploring rather than confirming a case.

My advice is that, while there must be a document which makes clear the penalties for cheating, much more stress should be laid on positive encouragement to adopt good practice.

## 6. Making cheating too easy

I know it is rather like saying that it is your fault for being burgled if you leave your property in full view, and your doors and windows unlocked. Nevertheless, there will be much less stealing of other people's words if it is made more difficult. I shall deal with this in the next section.

## Making cheating less easy

The general principle is to set assessment tasks which cannot be carried out satisfactorily simply by copying or paraphrasing any previously available material. Whether or not a student can be proved to have done so, they will fail anyway, because they have not satisfied the assessment criteria. Here are some tips for making cheating less easy [21]:

### 1. Set tasks which focus on process as well as on product

If you merely ask students to produce an essay, then there is no obvious means of telling *how* it was produced - it isn't like watching an art student in a studio, or a science student conducting an experiment. There are a number of ways round this:

- tell them to submit an essay plan and proposed literature search before embarking on the essay itself (but you may find this too time consuming, especially if you comment on them);
- tell them to submit a first draft (again, time consuming - but students will produce better work if they have the advantage of your comments at an early stage);
- tell them to submit a log of how they wrote the essay, and attach it to the essay itself;
- formulate the question so as to force them to reveal their working (e.g. 'How far can an analysis of Kant's wording in the Refutation of Idealism be used to establish whether he was arguing to the existence of objects within the world of experience, or to the existence of things in themselves?').

### 2. Ask very specific questions, to which there are no published answers

The more general and open-ended the question, the more likely there is to be a relevant answer to it in the published literature. For example, to ask a question like 'Is scepticism self-defeating?' is positively inviting students to go to the nearest dictionary of philosophy or textbook on epistemology. A question like 'How far does Sextus Empiricus's formulation of scepticism succeed in circumventing the charge that scepticism is self-defeating?' would be much more difficult to find an answer to. Indeed, the effort required to find a ready-made answer would almost constitute a respectable piece of philosophical research.

### 3. Relate questions to recent events, or the students' own experience

Most philosophical publications are relatively context-free. If you tie a question down to a specific context, students will not be able to use them (or at least not as they stand). A question like 'What are the strengths and weaknesses of utilitarianism?' can easily be answered from available sources. But this will not be the case if you ask 'What are the strengths and weaknesses of a utilitarian approach to a moral dilemma you have come across in the news during the past month?' or '... to a moral dilemma you yourself have faced as a student?'

### 4. Force students to be analytical and critical

One thing plagiarists are good at is finding sources to copy from. You can capitalise on this virtue by telling them to identify, say, three sources which provide an answer to a particular question, and then to compare them, and explain which they consider to be the best answer, and why. This is particularly appropriate for students who use the web, since it requires intelligent use of a search engine.

More generally, building a specific piece of analysis and criticism into an essay question, and making sure that

students know that they will be assessed on their analytic and critical skills, makes it much more difficult for them to find ready-made answers.

## 5. Don't ask the same question or set the same task twice

Students can often get hold of essays written by a previous cohort, and the word gets around if the assessment on a particular module remains much the same from one year to the next. It is important to make sure you set substantially different questions or tasks each year. This is much easier to do if your questions are highly specific (otherwise you are likely to run out of appropriate questions for a course taught over many years) [22].

## Collusion

Students sometimes copy from each other; and this can be difficult to detect in a large pile of scripts. Although copying can be by mutual consent, it occasionally involves actual theft of a script or a computer file. It is good practice to warn students to look after their work carefully, and to have robust departmental procedures for the submission of essays - telling students to place essays in an open box or pigeonhole makes life much too easy for a potential thief.

If two students have submitted substantially the same essay, and neither confesses to stealing from the other, it should be relatively easy to establish which was the author by questioning them about its contents, or comparing it with their other work. However, I have had quite heated discussions about what to do in the unlikely event of neither being proved guilty. My personal view is that, as in a court of law, both should be found innocent, and that it would be absurd to compromise by imposing a 50% penalty on each, proportional to the 50% probability of guilt.[23] But I have come across the view that both should be found fully guilty, on the grounds that it is as much of a crime to let another student see your work as it is to copy the work of others. One colleague was even surprised that there was no Leeds University regulation to this effect.[24]

Although such a case is purely hypothetical, it does raise the important question of how far students should be permitted, or even positively encouraged to collaborate. I believe that collaboration should be encouraged, for a number of reasons:

- In my experience, the students who learn most tend to be those who work with each other outside formal teaching sessions. Co-operative work includes reading and commenting on essay drafts, sharing the teacher's comments on previous work, reporting on sources read, discussing the issues, and so on.
- Students who have literacy problems or can't express themselves clearly can get much more practical help from fellow students than from hard-pressed teachers.
- Philosophy provides relatively little scope for team work (an attribute highly valued by employers), and any opportunity for co-operative rather than competitive learning, however informal, should be welcomed.
- Even if we wished to outlaw collaboration, there would be no way of policing it; and it is bad practice to enact legislation which cannot be enforced.

Nevertheless, we are still left with the problem of drawing the line beyond which honest collaboration turns into deceitful collusion. Part of the solution is to make it a plus point if students acknowledge the help they have received, with the proviso that excessively derivative work will receive a low mark. This is no different from our own practice as academics. We ask colleagues to comment on drafts of books or articles before submission for publication, and we acknowledge their contributions (as I have done in the present document).

Where students have co-operated in the preparation of an essay, but done the final writing-up independently, there will no doubt be similarities in what they say - but I do not see this as a problem. They have worked together, and learned together, and each has come up with their own, individual literary product. The problem arises only when substantial sections have more-or-less identical wording. This would indicate that one student has copied from or paraphrased the other, and it should be treated as a case of cheating.

Of course, the situation is very different if the point of the exercise is that a group of students should write a single product collaboratively. Here there need to be sticks and carrots to ensure that each student makes a solid contribution to the final result; but failure to do so is laziness rather than cheating (though it still might warrant punishment).

## Unseen examinations

It is often assumed that, provided they are properly invigilated, unseen examinations are a fool-proof method of ensuring that what students write is their own work.[25] One of the consequences of increased worries about cheating is that some institutions have expanded the quantity of unseen examinations at the expense of written coursework.[26] This tendency is to be regretted, not merely for the standard reasons against unseen examinations as the main mode of assessment, but because they actually encourage the bad study habits of which plagiarism is an extreme example.

Consider the following case:[27] a philosophy student with a photographic memory reproduces a published article in an unseen examination, and fails to acknowledge it. Is it plagiarism or not? I should say it is, because the means of storing the text (in the head rather than on paper) is irrelevant. But what if she *had* acknowledged the source? Even though it would not be plagiarism, I think we would very unhappy about giving her any marks for her work, since it was wholly derivative. To move a little further down this slippery slope, what would we say if she had memorised her **course notes**, and reproduced the relevant part in her exam script? Here, much would depend on whether her notes represented her own thinking, or were extracts or paraphrases from secondary literature, lecture notes, etc. But, even if the former, I think we philosophers would still feel uncomfortable about what she was doing, since she was treating the exam as a memory test, rather than as an opportunity to display her philosophical ability.

The upshot is that, if we are mainly assessing our students' ability to write philosophically, it is as important in unseen exams as in coursework to make sure that they understand the criteria by which they will be assessed, and that questions are asked in a way which forces them to apply their own philosophical thinking, rather than regurgitate what they have memorised. For example, they might be asked to apply a general theory to a particular case, or to comment on a passage not included in the required reading for the course.

In short, unseen exams are no panacea for plagiarism, and they encourage undesirable work habits. If properly designed, they can have a useful role to play in assessment, by forcing students to work at the whole of a course, and testing their ability to extemporise under pressure. However, it is much better that sat examinations should constitute just one element of an array of assessment methods, with suitable safeguards against cheating. Oral assessment is particularly useful for establishing whether students have really digested what they have learned, and it is largely immune to cheating.[28]

## 4. Good practice

Proper acknowledgment of sources is one of the key features of academic good practice. Indeed, it is almost definitive of **academic** practice, since it is so rare outside academia. Consider the following examples:

- **Politics.** It is common practice for political parties to steal each other's ideas, and to flatly deny that they have done so. More revealingly, in the recent case of the 'dodgy dossier' about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, the unacknowledged copying of a PhD thesis was described as 'academic' plagiarism - by implication, an act which would be condemned by academics as plagiarism, but not necessarily by others.
- **Journalism.** Newspapers are always paraphrasing stories first reported in other papers, and they are usually attributed only if the original report becomes part of the story. Indeed, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that, in journalistic circles, the word 'exclusive' means 'not plagiarised'. I once caught a student plagiarising, and at the formal hearing he was accompanied by his father, who was a journalist on a broadsheet. He said that, although he accepted that his son had plagiarised by our academic criteria, what he had done would be considered perfectly good practice in journalism. Ironically, the following week his paper carried an article on

plagiarism (by a different journalist) - and the main story had been lifted, without attribution, from an article in a different paper published a few days earlier [29].

- **Cookery books.** Although most recipes are *rechauffés* (with greater or lesser variations), sources are rarely acknowledged (Elizabeth David is a notable exception).
- **Popular non-fiction.** There is a smooth gradation from academic to non-academic writing, with one of the characteristics of the latter being lack of references to back up assertions.
- **Dictionaries.** Dictionaries are a distinct genre of academic writing, in which it is accepted practice to pillage earlier dictionaries, with at best a general acknowledgment in the preface.

Only a small minority of philosophy graduates go on to further study and then an academic career. The fact that academic practice on referencing is so out of tune with the rest of the world raises the question of whether we should continue to set such high standards for our undergraduates. Why, for example, should a student bent on a career in journalism nearly fail to get a degree at all because his practice is journalistic rather than academic? Would it not be better to set more realistic standards, such as minimum compliance with copyright law? The full rigour of academic practice is relevant only to those who are likely to become academics themselves, and this can be left to the postgraduate stage.

My response is that, while academic practice is sometimes over-fussy (especially in disciplines other than philosophy, where even common sense seems to need a supporting reference), it is nevertheless **good** practice. Rather than accommodating ourselves to the sloppiness and even downright dishonesty of the outside world, we should raise its standards by populating it with graduates who have a clear sense of the need to acknowledge debts to others. Good journalists can and do refer to their sources in ways which do not involve footnotes and bibliographies in the classic academic style.

Again, the academic essay is becoming increasingly restricted to undergraduate work. Many philosophy students have had no previous experience of writing essays (some A-levels do not require them, and an increasing proportion of entrants have had no post-compulsory education), and very few of our graduates will ever have to write an essay in the future. So why do we lay so much stress on a form of writing which is of little use, and which is most open to plagiarism?

Here I would recommend encouraging students to use different literary styles. For example, the dialogue form has a distinguished history in philosophy, because it allows an argument to be pursued in depth. One of my students submitted an imaginary dialogue between Jeremy Paxman[30] and Kant as a substitute for a traditional essay. I thought it was very good, but short of a first, because Kant should have been subjected to more penetrating criticism. Another possible style would be a report with an executive summary - just the sort of thing employers are looking for.

## **A post-modern challenge[31]**

An alternative view is that the whole idea of intellectual property has been made obsolete by the denial of the primacy of the authorial voice. A text is what its readers make of it, and different readings are potentially infinite. Ownership lies as much in the reader as in the author.

This tendency has been accelerated by increasingly open access to texts. In the old days, students were confined to a limited diet of materials, closely controlled by librarians and academics. But in the digital age, students can access almost anything they like. What matters is not ownership of material (which is freely available anyway), but the use that students make of it. Employers want graduates who can ransack the web and other resources, and apply the materials they find to the project in hand. This requires high-level skills, such as assessing the reliability of sources, selecting what is relevant, analysing what is meant, debating the pros and cons of different positions, and synthesising everything into a clearly comprehensible whole. Who said what is hardly relevant, and a requirement that students should think original thoughts will simply deflect them from cultivating these more important skills. The

world will be a better place if there are no barriers to the sharing of ideas.

My reply is that, although I agree with much of the above, I do not see why students should be relieved of the minor chore of giving proper references to their sources. Even outside academia, it matters what sources have been used, since some are more authoritative than others.

## Philosophical academic literacy

The expression 'academic literacy' has been coined to denote the family of features that distinguish academic from non-academic writing - of which the rigorous citation of sources is just one. However, different disciplines have different sets of conventions, and the expression 'academic literacies' in the plural is used to reflect these internal differences. Thus 'philosophical academic literacy' is the sum of the rules we expect philosophical writings to observe if they are to be published in a form acceptable to the philosophical community. Some of these rules are common to other disciplines, but others are not. For example, in philosophy:

- we encourage the use of ordinary language;
- we do not outlaw expressions of subjectivity (the first-person pronoun is perfectly acceptable, as are expressions such as 'I think'[32] or 'I believe');
- we prefer active to passive verbs;
- we set little store by referenced appeals to facts, particularly where the facts are common knowledge;
- we tolerate inconclusive answers;
- we take a dim view of appeals to authority;
- we lay great stress on reasoned argument and independence of thought.

Little has been published on the analysis and articulation of specifically philosophical academic literacy, and it is a topic worthy of further investigation.[33] As a preliminary, the most striking difference between analytic philosophy and just about every other discipline is the deliberate avoidance of acknowledging sources - which presents our students with very bad role models if they are to avoid accusations of plagiarism. To give just two examples, in the preface to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes:

I do not wish to judge how far my efforts coincide with those of other philosophers. Indeed, what I have written here makes no claim to novelty in detail, and the reason why I give no sources is that it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else.

I will only mention that I am indebted to Frege's great works and to the writings of my friend Mr Bertrand Russell for much of the stimulation of my thoughts. [34]

Similarly, Ryle's *Concept of Mind*[35] discusses the views of many historical philosophers, but without any bibliography or page references to the texts. There are many other examples of 20th-century classics in analytical philosophy which completely contravene the requirements we impose on our students. Going further back into the history of philosophy, there are almost no major philosophers who reference their sources properly until we get back to the scholastics (Leibniz is an exception). It is a major question how we can get our students to conform to 21st-century good practice, when earlier writings held up as a model would be failed for lack of referencing (and there were indeed problems over getting Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* accepted as a doctoral thesis, so that he would be qualified to practise as a teacher at Cambridge).

It should be immediately obvious that, since different disciplines have different literacies, students on joint degrees, or taking only a few elective modules in philosophy, are likely to have difficulty adapting to conflicting expectations. [36] For example, an engineering student might be marked down for questioning established safety standards in an

engineering course, but equally for **failing** to criticise received wisdom in a philosophy course. This can even be a problem when the disciplines are quite similar. I once caught a History/Philosophy student plagiarising in an essay on Kant. When I confronted her with what she had done, she burst into tears, and said 'But this is how we are expected to write essays in history. The trouble with you philosophers is that you expect us to **think**.' No doubt my history colleagues would reject her analysis; but it is telling that a final-year student had failed to notice that thought was required in history as well as in philosophy.

Although definitions of plagiarism are usually institution-wide, they may be applied differently in different disciplines. As I hinted earlier, students on journalism courses might be allowed to get away with what would be stamped on as plagiarism in philosophy. It is unfair on the students if we punish them severely for failing to adhere to philosophical good practice, unless we have made every effort to educate them into that good practice.

## Promoting philosophical literacy

More generally, there is the problem of initiating students into academic and specifically philosophical literacy, when they are unlikely to have had any previous experience of either. I am not in a position to generalise about how students are taught at school, or how they are assessed across the whole spectrum of A-levels. However, there are widespread complaints that, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, the emphasis is on regurgitation of pre-digested course materials. This is a criticism which has even been directed against Philosophy A-level. A-level students have little (or sometimes no) experience of working through primary texts, seeking help from secondary sources and acknowledging that help, or articulating their own thoughts and reasonings about what they have read. It is quite unrealistic to expect incoming students to know what to do with the reading lists, lectures, tutorials, and essay questions we throw at them, unless we make this a central focus of our educational programme. The situation is not helped by the fact that, in many institutions, students are given the least individual attention in their first year when they most need it, and the most in their final year when they ought to be becoming autonomous learners.

Quite apart from UK A-level entrants, we have an increasing number of international students. Many of these come from cultures where rote learning is the explicit educational aim, and where it is unthinkable to question the authority of teachers or set texts. I was once advisor to a Chinese philosophy lecturer on a study visit, who referred to me as 'father professor' (and my wife as 'mother professor'), with all the deference to authority this implies. In the light of such cultural differences, it is an uphill struggle to convince students that their traditional practices are liable to be treated as plagiarism, and that they are expected to be critical of established authorities.[\[37\]](#)

Over the past few years, it has become standard practice to issue students with handbooks including advice on how to read, take notes, write essays, avoid plagiarism, and so on. This is certainly a step in the right direction. However, handbooks in themselves are not enough, because:

- students might not read them;
- if they do read them, they might not absorb the advice;
- even if they do absorb the advice, they might not be able to apply it.

The message will get home only if the advice is fully integrated into methods of teaching and assessment. If the handbook describes what a good philosophy essay will look like, then there should be clearly formulated assessment criteria, such that essays which do not conform to them will fail, or get low marks. Comments on essays should focus at least as much on helping students to conform to the criteria next time, as on correcting errors of fact or interpretation. And teaching methods should be directed towards helping students to produce high-quality assessed work - a goal unlikely to be achieved by a narrow diet of stand-up lectures and group discussions.

In short, an integrated programme of teaching and assessment which focuses on helping students to produce work which conforms to the criteria for philosophical academic literacy should make cheating much less likely. Even if it does occur, derivative work will probably be failed anyway as not conforming to the criteria - which takes much of the

anxiety out of the issue of plagiarism.

### **Do we practise what we preach?**

As teachers, we are our students' primary role models. We tell them about the importance of giving references in their essays. But are we equally fastidious in our lectures and course hand-outs? If we lecture to them off the tops of our heads without attribution, and write hand-outs which are a pure distillation of what we have thought for ourselves and learned from others, it is hardly surprising if students do the same in their essays. It is unfair if we crack down on them for doing what we do ourselves - yet it is no mean challenge to ensure that our own teaching conforms to the standards we expect of our students. There should be a greater convergence between our actual practice, and what we tell our students to do.

Another issue which is likely to confuse students is whether their teachers' written and oral pronouncements are to be treated as a secondary source like any other, or as having a special, privileged status. After all, at school they were expected to reproduce what they were taught; and now that they are charged fees, they may feel that their teachers' knowledge and wisdom is what they have paid for. It's an old joke that students mustn't plagiarise - except from their lecturers. On the other hand, our teaching materials are as much our intellectual property as our publications;[\[38\]](#) and we are sending mixed signals to our students if we expect them to acknowledge one type of source and not the other. For some years now I have told my students to acknowledge my notes, email answers to queries, and the such like, as secondary sources like any other. Although there is still a tendency to under-acknowledge my hand-outs and notes taken in class, in general the requirement works very well, and the better students produce extremely well referenced essays.

## **5. Detection of cheating**

Prevention is better than cure. But however much we design out opportunities for cheating, we must still be on our guard.

Some forms of cheating are very difficult to detect:

- essays written for a fee by a postgraduate;
- essays bought from an essay bank;[\[39\]](#)
- essays copied from essays written in previous years, or at another institution.

The problem is made worse by the fact that few of us know our students well enough to spot an essay written in an uncharacteristic style - and even if we did, the growing pressure to anonymise all marking would make this inapplicable. Nevertheless, there are procedures which should flush out otherwise undetected cases:

- systematic checking for rogue marks for particular pieces of work (though this won't be effective if a student has paid for someone else to produce all their written work, or has commissioned an essay of a specified grade);
- in the case of electronic submissions, checking the editing time in File/Properties/Statistics (a very short editing time is a sign that most of the content has been pasted from elsewhere);
- incorporating an element of oral assessment, in which students are interrogated about what they have written.

However, when cheating is from published sources (as it usually is), it is likely that only **parts** of an essay will be plagiarised, which makes the cheating easier to spot. It can be detected by:

- the examiner's knowledge of the source;
- abrupt changes in style;[\[40\]](#)

- a sudden change to American spelling (or to correct spelling and grammar);
- terminology or knowledge beyond the likely capacity of an undergraduate;
- irrelevance to the question;
- anachronisms or other give-aways ('Wittgenstein is one of the most important philosophers of this century', 'As I said in Chapter 2', failure to delete the URL - and so on);

It need not take much time to convince yourself that a passage is plagiarised. What does take a lot of time is trying to identify the source. From a legal point of view, it is unnecessary to do so, provided you have sufficient grounds (such as the above) for the balance of probability to be that the student has copied something without acknowledgement. [41] However, some universities require the actual source to be produced, because they are scared of losing the case if the student appeals.

## Electronic detection

There are a number of software packages for detecting plagiarism electronically. [42] In the UK context, the most relevant is the plagiarism detection service currently provided free of charge by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) - though in fact the software is supplied by Turnitin.com in the USA. [43] The service cannot be accessed directly, but only through your institution (assuming it has registered). It has a number of advantages and limitations:

### Advantages

The advantages of the JISC service are that:

- it marks passages which are similar to passages in texts available on the internet, and provides links to them;
- it checks essays against all other essays world-wide that have been submitted to Turnitin.com (including essays in the same batch);
- it also holds an expanding database of published material previously only available in print;
- since essays can be quickly downloaded in batches, it can pick up plagiarism unsuspected by the marker.

### Limitations

The limitations of the JISC service are that:

- it can only indicate identical passages - it will not pick up paraphrasing, and academic judgment is still required to assess whether cheating has occurred;
- essays have to be submitted electronically, or laboriously digitised;
- since students own the copyright to their work, their permission must be obtained in advance; [44]
- it cannot search materials that are available only in hard copy (a large proportion of works readily available in a university library);
- it does not search websites for which a fee is payable - and these include most electronic journals and essay banks.

I tested the Service on a batch of about 110 essays, after I had marked and returned them. I wasn't expecting to detect any plagiarism from the internet, since I had warned the students what I was going to do, and had received a signed consent form from each of them. To my surprise, it revealed that one essay was largely copied from a single web page, and it took very little time to establish that the rest was paraphrased from the same page (I have, of

course, reported the culprit for disciplinary action). I was, however, relieved to note that I had already failed the essay for lack of referencing or reasoned argumentation, and failure to address the question. A fuller report on my experience is available at <http://www.philosophy.leeds.ac.uk/GMR/PlagDetec.doc> .

If essays have been submitted in hard copy only, and if your suspicions are aroused, you may detect plagiarism very quickly by performing an advanced Google search on distinctive words or phrases - or even better by using a number of different search engines, since none of them cover everything.

## 6. Conclusion

Improving detection techniques and issuing dire warnings of punishment will not put an end to plagiarism, any more than jails and a police force have eliminated crime. If anything, a punitive approach makes it more difficult to build an academic community in which good practice is internalised by our students. In order to reduce the occurrence of plagiarism to a minimum, the emphasis should be on positively developing and rewarding good practice, and on restructuring assessment tasks so as to eliminate the temptation and opportunity to cheat. Much of the anxiety aroused by suspicion of plagiarism will be dissipated if plagiarised work will fail anyway, as not conforming to clearly stated assessment criteria.

## 7. Sources and Resources

Plagiarism in UK higher education has become a subject of published discussion only since 1995.<sup>[45]</sup> Since then there has been a rapidly expanding literature, with a large degree of consensus about how plagiarism should be dealt with. Much of the advice I have passed on is in the realm of 'common knowledge' (at least as far as plagiarism experts are concerned), and I have not attempted to identify the first originator of each individual item.<sup>[46]</sup> My main sources are Jude Carroll of Oxford Brookes University, and to Phil Race of the University of Leeds, both for their published writings, and for workshops they have conducted at the University of Leeds - though I know they do not agree with everything I have suggested here. Anything philosophy-specific is my own, unless otherwise acknowledged.

As far as I am aware, nothing has been published specifically relating to plagiarism in philosophy, apart from advice issued to students by individual departments in handbooks and on websites. However, there are many resources which discuss the general issues in greater detail than I have here, and provide extensive bibliographies. The following is a selection, in no particular order:

Carroll, Jude, and Appleton, Jon, *Plagiarism: A Good Practice Guide*

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