

On Cheating and Education: The Mistaken Identity of the Easily Discernible

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“Here’s to All the Cheaters” is a timely and novel discussion of a topic, plagiarism, with which, as academics, we are all too familiar. However, authors Charles Bingham and Alma Krilic have presented us with several putative educational paradoxes that challenge our philosophical assumptions about plagiarism and its relation to education. Their arguments regarding plagiarism do not concern ethical principles or legal norms or procedural standards. Rather, they confront us with metaphysical problems of a fundamental kind that I plan to analyze and to criticize. To begin, I discuss a recent case that illustrates the timeliness of this discussion.

In spring 2011, both the academic and the political communities in Germany were shaken up by an accusation of large-scale plagiarism in a doctoral dissertation. But it was not a lowly doctoral student caught in the academic crime of copying passages without identifying their sources. The one accused was Germany’s current defense minister, a bright new star in the conservative party, and very popular with the citizenry. In 2009, Baron zu Guttenberg had submitted his doctoral dissertation to the faculty of law at the University of Bayreuth and was consequently graduated *summa cum laude*. Another academic, about to review the dissertation for republication, discovered plagiarism in it on a grand scale. Within a few days, a political and academic storm erupted. The result: the likely future Chancellor of Germany had to resign from all his political posts. Before a commission from Bayreuth University could charge him officially with plagiarism, Minister zu Guttenberg renounced his PhD.

The current Chancellor defended her minister, maintaining that she did not hire zu Guttenberg as a research assistant, and that his admission of plagiarism did not disqualify him as a minister. The Chancellor’s statement set off a firestorm of protest among German academics. A petition against zu Guttenberg, circulated on webservers, gathered 63,700 signatures. On March 15, German citizens (both academics and others) submitted an open letter of protest to the Chancellor, voicing outrage at her trivialization of academic standards in a vain effort to save her minister’s political career.¹ The letter underscored the damage to the reputation of German science, were such fraudulence in obtaining a doctoral degree to go unpunished.

This case raises all sorts of moral and academic issues: academic integrity, honor, honesty, credibility, the search for truth, and the reputation of universities. All these are at stake in cases of plagiarism. They call for a public defense to counter anti-intellectualist reactions and suspicion among the general public, suspicion of both the rigor of research and the significance of academic standards.

Bingham and Krilic approach plagiarism as a metaphysical — and not a moral — issue. Although they employ the normative terms “cheat” and “cheater” repeatedly,

they state explicitly that they are not concerned with the immorality of cheating. Instead, for them, cheating marks a fundamental space within the educational enterprise, and they assert that “cheating works as an organizing principle of education.”

In order to shore up their claims, the authors rely, first, on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s reflections concerning the necessity of education in view of the natural potential of humans, and, then, on Jacques Derrida’s reading of Rousseau, with the idea of education as metaphysical supplement, a “double gesture” of augmentation and completion.

Let us recall the main arguments:

1. Rousseau presents the initial answer to the question, “Why do we need education?” According to Rousseau, our god-given nature is perfect, and it is culture that corrupts and creates in us a lack. Education is thus the “unnatural” gift that overcomes this lack and returns us to what is “natural.”
2. Derrida glosses Rousseau’s view in terms of a “supplement.” He asks, “How can Nature ask for forces that it does not furnish?”² Education or “cultivation” has therefore to provide a necessary evil: it must supplement what is not given by nature. The deficiencies of childhood — our weakness and inability to survive by ourselves — education has to supplement.
3. As such, the supplement of education is an addition to our nature and a completion of it. Casting supplement as addition is obvious but why is it a completion? In his *On Grammatology*, Derrida offers an answer with regard to living speech versus text. The authors present this as a positive transformation: the supplement does not just add to the text but “also builds the text anew,” thus replacing it. And, crucially to their next argument, “the supplement of a text instills itself as a natural part of the text that it supplements.” I believe this is what Bingham and Krilic mean when writing that supplementing nature “adds to the student and [adds] something that makes the student whole.”
4. The authors then tie the notion of supplementarity to that of cheating. They take cheating to be an unnatural act of supplementation, by the cheating student, of the natural. They maintain that cheating is necessary and foundational for education, because “whatever is made to be natural [that is, education] can never actually be natural, and that whatever is needed to make one natural must always have been unnatural to begin with.” For them, cheating resides in a gap between a natural use of the unnatural and an unnatural use of the natural. And they think that education reside in this gap as well.

The authors’ argument regarding the necessity of cheating boils down to this. Since education is the unnatural supplement of the natural and cheating is the unnatural supplement of education, education and cheating are the same, that is, they share an important property — of unnatural supplementation of the natural — they

are therefore identical. In other words, because education and cheating reside in the same gap, they must be the same.

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This reasoning is a clear-cut and obvious fallacy. Here are just two points to show why the authors end up with such false conclusions.

By employing the broader and unspecific term “cheating” in place of more specific terms such as plagiarism, the authors pretend that cheating has its sole home in education and can thus be tied to education in significant ways. As we all know, the rubric “cheating” covers a range of acts such as forgery and fraud not unique to academia.

Most importantly, plagiarism is *intentional deception* with regard to ideas, plans, and projects that are expressible in language. By dismissing the immoral at the heart of plagiarism (or cheating more generally), Bingham and Krilic have effectively banished, together with the intention to deceive, the very notion of plagiarism. But how can they ignore the moral dimension and replace it with talk of naturalness and supplementation?

We know that in the postmodernist universe there are no stable meanings. Hence, there can be no stable thoughts. Furthermore, there can be no stable intentions in this universe. My intention is, at minimum, a thought I wish to realize. The plagiarist has to have a stable intention to deceive. Thus, in the postmodern cosmogony, there are no stable thoughts, no lasting intentions, and thus no plagiarism.

I consider the whole discussion of naturalness and unnaturalness in the authors’ discussion a red herring, vainly distracting us from what cannot be separated from plagiarism, namely, its moral and intentional character.

The authors’ conclusions that education shares a “gap” with cheating, and, hence, that cheating is foundational to education, I think deeply disturbing. Gottfried Leibniz argued successfully that any objects having *all* their properties in common must be identical. This logically true principle is called “the identity of indiscernibles.” The authors conclude, from the assumption that cheating and education share one property — that of being in the same “gap” — that they are the same. I call this blatant fallacy, pace Leibniz, “the mistaken identity of the easily discernible.” The call to educate is a high vocation that we are obliged to follow. Cheating or plagiarism cannot come under this description. It is an immoral enterprise, education a moral one.

I do grant that the authors are on to something, something of value. There is indeed an importance to education of the appropriate recognition of cheating, as the case of zu Guttenberg demonstrates. The visibility of the juridical process that leads either to a conviction of plagiarism or to a nonconviction plays an essential role in communicating and maintaining educational values. The German public could see how values work inside academic institutions, are essential and foundational to the academic enterprise, how they exemplify and reinforce what academic work is, and how virtues of openness, fairness, impartiality, and rigor are instantiated.

I fear that Bingham and Krilic are sawing off the limb on which they and we as educators are all perched. We are all in the business of moral thought. To deny it, to give cheating a nonmoral role in the educational enterprise, is to begin to saw through that limb.

1. Open letter to Chancellor Merkel, <http://offenerbrief.posterous.com/>.

2. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 146.