

Deontological ethics

Martin Luther King Jr. Authorship Issues

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January 10, 2021

1 Introduction to plagiarism

To present the concept of plagiarism we must first understand the etymology of the word. 'Plagiarism' represents a derivation of the base word 'plagiarius' (from Latin) that entered into English language around 1620, with the meaning of 'kidnapper', representing the idea of stealing the work of someone else.

A basic definition of plagiarism can be presented as the extraction and usage of another author's academic knowledge or any type of ideas or thoughts as your own original work.

Plagiarism represents an abuse of integrity and might lead to expulsion from school, work or other types of academic societies. Even that plagiarism is not considered a crime, can be punished in court as a violation of moral rights.

The information in this section was extracted from [1].

2 Case of plagiarism

Martin Luther King Jr's doctoral dissertation paper

Martin Luther King Jr. is the author of the famous speech "I have a dream.." and one of the most visible voices for civil rights with his speeches being used as motivational materials even to this day. He is considered to be "the leader in the civil rights movement from 1955 until his assassination in 1968" [2].

In the late 1980s the Stanford University organized the "Stanford University's King Papers Project". During this period, the organizers of this project observed that King's doctoral dissertation paper in systematic theology at Boston University, "A Comparison of the Conception of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman", was based on large sections from another dissertation paper written by a student (Jack Boozer) that studied three years earlier at the same University.

After this finding, the staff from Boston University started an investigation that discovered that Martin Luther King plagiarized significant parts of his thesis from various authors.

On December 3, 1989, the Sunday Telegraph paper by Frank Johnson, was the first to report the incident in an article titled "Martin Luther King—Was He a Plagiarist?".

This event was followed by the Wall Street Journal with an article under the title of "To Their Dismay, King Scholars Find a Troubling Pattern" the November 9, 1990.

After this reports and several more to come, the University of Boston, where Martin Luther King got his Ph.D., decided not to revoke his doctorate title, saying that although King acted unethically, his dissertation still "makes an intelligent contribution to scholarship".

The committee staff from Boston University, dropped the accusations that Martin Luther King plagiarized writings that were used to expand his organization.

However, the University of Boston decided to attach a letter to the dissertation paper in the university library, mentioning that "various passages were included without the appropriate quotations and citations of sources" [3].

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3 Personal Opinion

In my opinion, you can look at this event in two major ways and for a better understanding will try to analyze each standpoint with pros and cons.

From an academic standpoint, there should be no discrimination based on gender, race, social status or any other possible aspect when it comes to authorship rights. The underlying rules behind the fight against plagiarism need to be as strict as the letter of law, because from those rules we get our definition as a moral and ethic society, and from that ethic further we are able to build more complex hierarchical structures for the future and the evolution of society.

So if those two major academic centers, presented in the story, Stanford University and Boston University, established with certainty that major portions of the doctoral dissertation paper were plagiarized, there should be no excuse and the title received should be revoked.

Let's try to go behind the story presented above, still from an academic standpoint, and ask the following questions: What happens to our society if we allow ourselves to lose our moral principles? How can we, as a group, establish competence hierarchies? How can we trust the system if its ground truths are based on stolen words?

I know that those questions might seem exaggerated at first, but I am a firm believer that the society needs this kind of 'strong, but correct' mentality, because only this type of concepts will allow a brighter future to unfold before us.

Now let's try to analyze this situation from a more human standpoint, with another set of questions: 'Is it that bad to use previous knowledge from other sources to improve yours?', 'There is such thing as a linearly separable boundary for plagiarism?', 'How can you be sure that when you recall something from your memory it's actually yours and not something that you've read somewhere?', 'There is such thing as purely original knowledge or we are just the sum of previous experiences and nothing it's really ours?'.

Only the answer to the first question I know for sure, there is nothing bad about using common knowledge to improve yours, at the end of the day this is one definition of learning, but you should always give the rightful credit to the ones that contributed to your improvement.

As an old quote says, I don't recall the author, "Smart people are able to learn from their mistakes, the the smartest people are able the learn from others mistakes", the wisdom behind this quote is that there are mistakes that you won't be able to do twice in your life, like crashing a plane, so you need to use the previous experience from others to improve yours, but you should always remember those.

As far as the other questions go, I believe the answer for them it's relative and to go deeper in each one is beyond the purpose of this essay. I leave them there just as a friendly remainder that sometimes the boundary between right or wrong is not so clearly defined.

In conclusion, I think that what Martin Luther King Jr. did was wrong, you should always acknowledge the sources that are not yours and helped you to inspire. He deserved to retain his title? I don't know the answer for that, but if the Boston University considered that 'makes an intelligent contribution to scholarship', I choose not to argue their decision, but what I know for sure is that we shall not judge a person that inspired others based only on their mistakes.

References

- [1] Wikipedia. *Plagiarism* — *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 2021. URL: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarism>.
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