Plagiarism, theft, and truth: Understanding academic integrity as a way of knowing

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Abstract
Universities have historically used moral rhetoric to describe and discourage plagiarism involving human authors, specifically by comparing or defining plagiarism as a form of theft. However, some forms of contemporary plagiarism involve artificial intelligence rather than human intelligence alone, and the absence of interpersonal moral harms in such cases arguably poses a problem for historical descriptions and definitions of plagiarism. After summarizing arguments against historical definitions of plagiarism, I suggest that new forms of plagiarism also transcend these moral comparisons and definitions. Ultimately, I propose a non-moral model of academic integrity that can better support policy decisions and academic conversations about plagiarism, especially in response to the recent emergence of generative artificial intelligence in student writing.

Keywords
academic ethics, academic integrity, artificial intelligence, Canada, code of ethics, educational policy, plagiarism, student conduct

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Introduction

The metaphor of theft is prevalent in published academic discussions of plagiarism and conversations about academic integrity in university and college classrooms. Historically, this metaphor has had some utility, but recently, Eaton (2023) has argued that in a future disrupted by artificial intelligence, these "historical definitions of plagiarism that focus on cutting-and-pasting text verbatim without attribution, may soon be obsolete" (p. 6). In what follows, I agree with both this statement, as well as Eaton's (2023) somewhat contradictory prediction that norms of attribution will nevertheless continue "as a desirable aspect of learning and scholarly engagement" (p. 5). Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that while norms of academic integrity will continue to govern scholarship, institutions must change their messaging around plagiarism and that they must reconsider whether moral terms are the best language for this messaging.

In the first half of this article, I identify some examples of the "historical definitions of plagiarism" Eaton (2023, p. 6) has in mind while I review several policy statements from codes of student behaviour, academic handbooks, and similar documents. According to many of these institutional policies and related resources, plagiarism is wrong because it is a form of stealing, and stealing is usually wrong. (Or so the argument goes.)

In response to this, I introduce two cases where apparent plagiarism is not a form of stealing. The first case comes from an author who granted permission for others to plagiarize his article, thereby allowing them to copy his ideas without stealing them. Similarly, in the second case, taking credit for a paper produced by artificial intelligence may not count as stealing, even though many such uses may qualify as plagiarism. From these two cases, I conclude that revised definitions of plagiarism are timely and necessary.

Ultimately, I propose that the duty to tell the truth as transparently as possible is *at least* an epistemic rather than a moral commitment—it is a matter of how to acquire and transmit potential knowledge, even if it is not a rule prescribing how to act and behave ethically. If this basic framework for academic integrity is correct, it follows that plagiarism is a violation of epistemic rather than analogous moral norms alone. Therefore, our conversations about academic integrity with students should reflect this reality, and we should use statements that transcend moral categories and traditional prohibitions against plagiarism.

Defining Plagiarism

In my attempt to analyze "historical definitions of plagiarism" (Eaton, 2023, p. 6), I use examples from a large language model, as well as several dictionaries and related university statements on plagiarism in Canada. I then articulate the moral reasoning implied by these statements. In the following sections, I turn next to questions about whether such reasoning will be sufficient to regulate norms of academic behaviour in an era of "post-plagiarism" (Eaton, 2023).

Querying a large language model can be instructive in the

search for a shared definition or meaning of a word (Lew et al., 2024). Since the answers from such models rely on an incredibly large volume of training data based on real world examples of how language is used, the text these models produce can approximate the typical or most probable answer to frequently asked or discussed questions about a concept. For example, if I ask OpenAI's GPT-4 for a definition of plagiarism, I may not get the single correct or expert answer to that question (at least not always, even assuming that such a definition exists), and I may not even get a dictionary definition, but what I will likely get instead is a common answer—that is, the answer a typical language user would provide in response to the same question.

For this reason, I compared the definition of plagiarism provided by a large language model with several dictionary definitions by simply asking GPT-4 "What is plagiarism?." According to GPT-4 at the time of writing, "plagiarism is the act of appropriating someone else's work, ideas, or intellectual property without proper acknowledgment, presenting them as one's own" (OpenAI, 2025). Further, in response to the prompt "What is the historical definition of plagiarism?", GPT-4 points to the Latin etymology (to take someone's children), before adding,

> the Roman poet Martial first used the term in a literary context in the 1st century CE when he accused another poet of "kidnapping" his verses — essentially stealing his work. In this early usage, plagiarism referred metaphorically to the theft of literary property, likening it to the criminal act of stealing people. (OpenAI, 2025)

This understanding of plagiarism is not dissimilar from the Merriam-Webster (2026) definition of "plagiarize" as involving an intent "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own" or "to commit literary theft." Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines plagiarism in almost identical terms as "the action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own; literary theft" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). It appears from at least these examples that plagiarism is often compared to stealing and perhaps may even be considered a form of theft colloquially.

From what I can tell, this comparison between plagiarism and stealing is also evident in several policies at Canadian institutions. In making this observation, I take inspiration from a recent article by Kaler et al. (2023), in which they argue that university policies (and by extension, the students at such institutions) rely on concepts of private property to arrive at and justify their moral judgments about plagiarism. To take one example from their article, Kaler et al. (2023, p. 2) referred to a *Code of Behaviour of Academic Matters* at the University of Toronto, according to which plagiarism is "wrongful appropriation and purloining"—which is to say, morally "wrongful" or objectionable. Much like the shared

understanding and definitions of plagiarism discussed above, according to this policy, plagiarism is a moral transgression similar in at least some ways to stealing (University of Toronto Governing Council, 2019).

The language of "theft" or "property" is likewise a common element in many other university policies. In fact, Western University explicitly relies on a dictionary definition of plagiarism in their academic handbook, according to which plagiarism means "stealing another's words or ideas" (West Group, 1999, as cited in Western University Senate, 2011, p. 2). The University of Saskatchewan Council's (1999) *Guidelines for Academic Conduct* similarly includes the statement that "plagiarism is the theft of the intellectual creation of another person" (p. 12). The definition from the Oxford English Dictionary cited earlier is repeated almost verbatim in at least two post-secondary academic integrity policies in Alberta: the first states that to plagiarize is to "to commit literary theft" (Olds College of Agriculture & Technology, 2021, sec. Definitions), while the other concludes that plagiarism "is considered fraud or theft" (Ambrose University, n.d., sec. Definitions); both define the concept as "the practice of taking someone else's work or ideas and representing them as one's own" (Ambrose University, n.d., sec. Definitions; Olds College of Agriculture & Technology, 2021, sec. Definition). It is clear from at least these examples that the dictionary definitions of plagiarism introduced above directly influence university policies.

In other cases, the influence may be less direct. Even where policies may not use words like "stealing," "purloining," or "theft," the concept of private property is still invoked in less explicit terms, such as when one university's *Code of Ethics* requires its students to practice the "scrupulous acknowledgement of all intellectual debts to other scholars" (The King's University, n.d., sec. 2.4.4). As I will argue in the next section, this view of scholarship implies that plagiarism consists of taking words that quite literally belong to another person. Conversely, legitimate scholarship is a transaction where authors owe each other some form of acknowledgement for the words they borrow. On this view, failing to appropriately acknowledge the source of these words harms others not just because it is dishonest but because it deprives them of their belongings. As one university resource puts it, plagiarism is considered "a combination of stealing and lying about it afterwards" (University of the Fraser Valley, 2010, p. 1).

By providing these examples, I do not intend to single them out for criticism. I also do not want to suggest that all policies reduce all academic misconduct or plagiarism to a form of theft. My argument in this section is very modest. I only mean to show that the common understanding or dictionary definition of plagiarism is inherent in many academic integrity policies in Canada, including many that may not explicitly mention "theft" or "stealing" in the same context as "plagiarism." At any rate, I suggest that similar language is certainly present in several institutional policies in Canada and beyond, almost to the extent that the prevalence across institutions

trivializes my choice of examples above.

I conclude that although the assumption that plagiarism is morally objectionable is not always explicit, it is present and virtually unquestioned in countless examples of university policies and resources on the topic of academic integrity. The assumption inherent in such definitions is this: even if plagiarism and stealing someone's work are not literally equivalent, they are comparable. On such views, the concept of stealing and plagiarism appear related from a moral perspective: they are equally blameworthy. Unfortunately, despite relying on this analogy, these policies do not contain a convincing demonstration of why stealing or plagiarism are morally wrong; as such, I have yet to demonstrate this as well. In the sections below, I will take up the question of whether stealing is in fact morally wrong or harmful in the same sense in which plagiarism is harmful. Since I do not make this argument at this point, I can only suggest instead that these policies state that plagiarism is wrong because it is stealing (and, as common sense would have it, stealing is wrong). I readily admit that these are significant assumptions and observe that the policies themselves do not decide these important questions or make a moral argument against either stealing or plagiarism. Nonetheless, according to the assumptions in question, plagiarism is wrong for the same reasons stealing is wrong. And since stealing should be punished, so should plagiarism.

Is Plagiarism Always Immoral?

Counter to the above, several authors have argued that some plagiarism is not morally wrong. In one such argument, Jamieson & Howard (2019) point out that plagiarism is essentially a textual error rather than a moral mistake (p. 71). On this view, determining what counts as plagiarism is often a question of textual characteristics rather than an examination of someone's character. For example, since I did not cite the last sentence, you might misunderstand the view I just described as my own. You may, for this reason, find fault with this paragraph, but it seems odd to conclude that the problem lies with me and my understanding of morality rather than with the textual characteristics of specific sentences or my intellectual understanding of how this text should look to others. At most, it is merely evidence of my clumsiness. As a result, instead of concluding that the solution to plagiarism is a moral one, it seems that the solution is merely intellectual: it is a matter that can be isolated and solved within texts rather than outside of them. From this, Jamieson & Howard (2019) suggest that at least some cases of plagiarism are not necessarily evidence of a morally flawed character (p. 78).

Frye (2020) has a different and almost decisive argument for a similar distinction between plagiarism and immoral conduct, including some forms of academic misconduct and theft. From his view, people do not and should not have exclusive ownership of their words and ideas in the way they own material possessions (Frye, 2020, p. 314). For instance, when I repeat your words, I do not take them from you in the same sense that I take your money when I use your credit card. Firstly, your words do not go missing in the way your money does. And even in cases when I take something else from you by using your words (e.g., the scholarly and financial benefits from having me cite your words), it is actually your *right* to these other things *rather than your right to the words themselves* that make plagiarism wrong. Therefore, whether plagiarism is morally wrong depends on a human author's intentions and their personal interest in the potential benefits of their work.

In support of this, Frye (2020) also describes specific cases where plagiarism does not necessarily result in material loss or harm to others (p. 316). For example, if an author explicitly authorizes the use of their work without attribution, they are seemingly unharmed if the work is plagiarized (Frye, 2020, p. 317). Cases like this suggest that even if some forms of plagiarism are immoral (presumably because they constitute theft), other forms may be at least relatively less wrong than cases of outright theft and perhaps not wrong at all, especially if they are not comparable to theft. So, it's at least possible according to this example that both plagiarism is not necessarily theft and therefore plagiarism is not an absolute, universal wrong.

Plagiarism and Artificial Intelligence

I suspect that moral perspectives may be similarly incomplete when it comes to determining which uses of artificial intelligence are objectionable or permissible. To see why, imagine the following example. Let's say GPT-4 produced this paragraph exactly as you see it here, and the peer reviewers and eventual readers of this article are therefore led to believe that I am the source of these words. They believe this because this paragraph does not contain a citation for this text or otherwise indicate GPT-4's role in generating this text.

If the above paragraph was in fact produced entirely by GPT-4, I think you would be right to accuse me of plagiarism. But it is not clear in this hypothetical case that I have violated or disregarded anyone's rights to their words. At least, by representing the output of an artificial intelligence program as my own work, I did not harm the program in precisely the same way that I harm people when I take their possessions. Although my action may be wrong for other reasons, it seems that what I have done only amounts to stealing something if we think that non-persons are entitled to "own" something.

In response to this, it is tempting to think that perhaps personhood is not a requirement for ownership or that perhaps the harm here is indirect. Perhaps the credit for GPT-4's work belongs to OpenAI's employees or shareholders. By pretending I am the writer of GPT-4's work, I am therefore guilty of taking something that belongs to one or more persons at OpenAI. Perhaps I violate their (indirect) ownership or intellectual property rights.

This is a compelling answer, but I think a definition of plagia-

rism based on this answer is still missing something important. To start with, it is unlikely that any single person (or a small number of people) within a large organization can claim the relevant intellectual property rights for GPT-4's output as their own. But even if we grant the assumption that humans can own the products of artificial intelligence, we appear to thereby grant them permission to do what most humans generally are not allowed to do, since they do not steal from ChatGPT when they claim credit for its output. Evidently, on this view, although I do something wrong by fooling others into believing GPT-4's output to be my own, others do nothing wrong when they do the same thing. This case is analogous, perhaps, to the ways in which authors who self-plagiarize may thereby violate norms of academic integrity without stealing. If we insist that plagiarism is a form of stealing, we at least commit ourselves to allowing authors to self-plagiarize since they cannot steal from themselves.

This cannot be right. There seems to be something incomplete about the idea that the morality of plagiarism depends only on whether I harm someone by taking their possessions. At the very least, any definition of plagiarism should explain our intuitions about plagiarism involving ChatGPT or even cases where we plagiarize ourselves. It should also explain why we object to lying or at least why we want to know whether others are telling us the truth. Current comparisons between plagiarism and stealing do not offer this explanation. They do not explain why we might find some cases of "stealing" morally objectionable and not others nor do they explain why other forms of plagiarism, such as self-plagiarism, AI plagiarism, and so on, are all examples of stealing. Without such explanations, it is no longer clear that plagiarism is wrong in the same way and for the same kinds of moral reasons that stealing is wrong.

Academic Integrity as a Way of Knowing

There is, however, another alternative to the views I've outlined so far. In what follows, I argue that there are at least epistemic reasons against all forms of plagiarism in addition to moral reasons. By "epistemic," I mean to evaluate the kinds of beliefs I bring about in myself and others when I plagiarize. By "moral," I mean to evaluate whether I am right or wrong to cause these kinds of beliefs in others. To explain this distinction, I turn first to examples where our efforts to seek out or share new knowledge or beliefs diverge from our efforts to behave morally.

Perhaps the most extreme example is the hypothetical case of lying to protect a friend. Here's an extreme version of the case: a potential murderer asks you to tell them the truth about the location of a friend you are hiding from them. From an epistemic point of view, it is dishonest to tell the murderer that you don't know where your friend is. From a moral perspective, honesty seems unethical: you should not help the murderer obtain more knowledge in this case. A similar but less convincing case is this: your friend asks if you like their

shirt. Do you maximize knowledge and tell them honestly that you think the shirt looks ridiculous? Or do you forgo these epistemic aims and lie to your friend out of a moral concern for your friend's wellbeing and happiness?

One final example. If I am going to a friend's house and don't know the way, I could ask for directions or use a mobile application to figure out the way. But suppose that instead of doing this, I simply knock on every door in town until I arrive at my friend's house (assume that I do not harm or inconvenience my friend or others by doing this). This is an unreliable way to find where my friend is located. There is an obvious sense that other methods would serve me better if I hope to reach my destination. But in this case, it is not clear that forgoing these methods is immoral even if it is abnormal. If I have the goal of finding my friend and if following directions is the most reliable way to meet that goal, forgoing those directions is considered the wrong way to go about meeting that goal.

The first examples suggest that rules about how to acquire and share knowledge, including the duty to "tell the truth," are not absolute moral prescriptions. We sometimes break these rules without harming anyone. But most of the time, our commitment to honesty and our consideration for truth explains much of our intellectual behavior, to the extent that the unusual exception described in the third example strike us as going against common sense. All other things being equal, in the absence of moral considerations to the contrary, the imperatives that govern how we acquire and communicate knowledge with each other are extremely important and almost impossible to ignore.

Multiple authors argue that our cooperative efforts to share truth with each other are one of the most fundamental aspects of human society (Miller 2001; Bowles & Gintis 2003; Pettit 1990, as cited in Graham, 2015). As noted above, it is possible for us to deliberately disobey these prescriptions, but it is uncommon. Graham (2015), for example, observes that we comply with harmless, well-intended requests for information ("What's your name?" or "Where is the nearest ATM?"). According to Graham's (2015) analysis, this practice of truth-telling consists of interrelated prescriptions such as "(i) when someone needs information whether P, provide it, (ii) when someone needs information whether P, and you have it, provide it, and (iii) when communicating, don't communicate false or misleading information" (p. 274).

Furthermore, Graham (2015) argues these prescriptions involve norms of source monitoring (p. 275). These norms involve analyzing, retaining, and including information about the sources of our beliefs where relevant (Graham, 2015, p. 275-277), such as when the source may be important for others to consider when deciding whether to trust the information you provide. There is a difference for example, between guessing where the nearest ATM is, hearing about it from someone you can't trust, and seeing it with your own eyes. When you

can't be sure the directions you are providing are correct, you say so.

From this, Graham (2015) argues that our tendency to tell the truth, respond to requests for information, or look for evidence for our beliefs are explained by shared social standards for such practices (pp. 255-260). He explains that things generally go better for each of us if we outsource much of the work required to produce the knowledge we each benefit from individually (Graham, 2015, p. 265). Simply put, for humans to achieve the majority of our goals in both academic and non-academic cases, we not only need to care about the truth ourselves, we need others to care, as well. Therefore, such practices are likely in any situation where humans share goals related to creating new knowledge and improving upon our shared knowledge (Graham, 2015, p. 272). At the very least, if such rules exist, we should follow them in cases where we want to be right about what to believe (Hannon & Woodard, in press).

I think it is uncontroversial both that there are such rules and that these rules are conducive to our shared epistemic goals in an academic environment with a high degree of specialized intellectual labour. As Eaton (2023) has predicted, the conventions surrounding academic integrity may yet evolve and are by no means perfect, but they have in fact been passed down through generations of experts as a reliable way of generating and communicating new knowledge within a social community. We are more likely to succeed as writers and academics both when we formalize the ways we have produced knowledge in the past and when we follow the shared conventions that have worked well in the past. Beyond the moral considerations involved in such conventions, the norms that govern academic integrity also constitute a powerful and reliable way of knowing, such that there are genuinely better or worse ways for members of an academic community to create and share their knowledge with each other.

On the view that I suggest, plagiarizing and other forms of intellectual or academic misconduct are a bit like searching for my friend's house at random: they are an inadequate way to get to the goals I should share as an academic writer, even when I am not guilty of moral wrongdoing. Beyond the moral considerations for or against looking for directions or citing a source, such practices are successful to the degree to which they respond to and represent the truth to the best of our ability. Even when moral considerations are not directly relevant to an intellectual pursuit of knowledge, there are still things I should and should not do when I think about what to believe (Flores & Woodard, 2023, p. 2556).

I think this *epistemic* account of plagiarism is more constructive and coherent than an account that focuses on moral transgressions alone, especially if such an account relies on a faulty analogy between theft and plagiarism. In the case of artificial intelligence, for example, we can explain why plagiarism is a violation of academic norms even if it is not theft. When I do

not tell my readers that GPT-4 produced the text in this article, they will believe the content is a direct representation of my own work and ideas, and if they trust me, they may choose to take this content to be accurate. But unlike reputable people, GPT-4 cannot take responsibility for or attempt to increase the accuracy of its work. A machine cannot guarantee its work in the way academics might stand behind the claims they make, especially in a journal submission.

In this way, concealing the contributions of an artificial intelligence program increases the false beliefs that readers have about us, as well as the content of our work. Truth-telling norms are arguably even more important when we replace human sources of information with artificial intelligence precisely because of GPT's inability to intentionally tell the truth, for example (Hicks et al., 2024). Withholding critical information from readers in any other case of plagiarism also provides them with a distorted picture of reality. To put it in more technical terms, when readers base their beliefs on the distortions in these cases, they are at an epistemic disadvantage through no fault of their own. Even in cases where these distortions do not harm the specific readers in question, these actions still violate the trust necessary for productive scholarship over the long term.

When we use epistemic or intellectual norms to explain expectations to students, we can point out that knowing the truth about the world and avoiding mistakes is an important aim for most of us (or at least, that we want this to be their aim on our behalf) because we care about truth. After all, our interactions with other authors has the potential to change the way we think about the world. And we want these changes to be for the better. We want to know the truth about what we read, including how and by whom these texts were created. Ultimately, we count on others to tell us the truth to the best of their ability so we can understand the world better, too.

This is why we can continue to insist that students should not plagiarize. At least, this is part of the explanation for why plagiarism is not consistent with intellectual norms, regardless of whether particular rules against stealing were violated. According to this explanation, the intellectual norms in question are not based in moral prohibitions against theft per se, but they are concerned more generally with the role honesty plays in producing knowledge and true belief in our interactions with others.

Conclusion

Instead of insisting plagiarism is always immoral, I conclude it is better to use analogous language about belief instead. By describing academic integrity as a way of knowing, we can preserve the standards we each rely on without blaming each other of moral wrongdoing. Going forward, I also think university policies and more general discussions about academic integrity in the context of post-plagiarism should be similarly grounded in the epistemic rights of our readers rather than

just the intellectual property rights of writers. Such policies could argue that we owe readers the truth about our work, not just because failure to do so violates the rights of writers, and certainly not because it always steals something that is theirs, but also because our readers must make up their own minds about what to believe, and we owe them the truth.

The argument in this article is neither novel nor radical, and in many ways, it is at least similar to what Frye (2020) noticed, as well. After all, the apparent wrongs involved in plagiarizing historical authors have been similarly based on our obligations to readers or members of the academic community rather than authors who are no longer around to be harmed. But I think this insight is especially relevant when discussing plagiarism and artificial intelligence. Specifically, when our texts are created or co-created with artificial intelligence, we owe it to our readers to detail the contributions from such programs. This academic honesty allows readers to either trust or doubt the truth of our claims in ways similar to those in which citing a reputable author allows readers to evaluate the truth and credibility of our scholarly discourse. Crucially, this norm remains epistemically necessary even in cases where we are not stealing from artificial intelligence programs or from other people.

There are of course independent reasons why *some* plagiarism is immoral, not least of all because people who plagiarize may be at an unfair advantage in a system based on scholarly merit. But I think these wrongs are related in important ways to other obligations we describe in our policies, most specifically the language of honesty and trust, rather than language about theft and ownership.

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