

Technology and commitment

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The Internet provides new opportunities for plagiarism. At the same time, the Internet makes plagiarism easier to identify and accordingly plagiarism-detecting services are often described as the best response to misconduct. But rather than regarding Internet-technology as the solution, there seems to be an urgent need for non-technological solutions to the problem we are facing. In this article, I argue that the development of a scientific oath, as suggested by The National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology in Norway may prove useful. A main advantage with such a response is that it has the potential to raise awareness of research ethical standards and to create a sense of personal commitment from the individual researcher.

THE CHALLENGE

Plagiarism is defined here as “the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own”.¹ Plagiarism is one form of scientific misconduct and constitutes a serious breach of the norms of science.

SOLUTIONS

DETECT

A backward looking strategy is designed to detect cheaters after the deed is done. It focuses solely on what we have done and the need for reparation for harm already done. Plagiarism-detecting services fall into this category.

BUT

- One is always one step behind the cheater
- It builds on individualistic concept of moral responsibility which is insufficient
- It will be trust-undermining

PREVENT

Forward looking strategies aim to prevent something from happening; in addition they are directed at raising knowledge and fostering academic virtues. Such strategies thus have broader aims, and may include education and training, the development of codes and guidelines and a scientific oath.

Oath is defined here as “a solemn promise, often invoking a divine witness, regarding one’s future actions or behavior”²

CONS

Value free

“[It is] not the business of a chemist who invents a high explosive to be influenced in his task by considerations as to whether his product will be used to blow up cathedrals or to build tunnels through the mountains”⁵

Disagreement - Given considerable disagreement on the scope of the researchers’ responsibility, it will be impossible to agree on the content of an oath⁶

Ineffective - It will only have a symbolic value and not any actual effect on researchers’ behavior.

PROS

Awareness

“As in the medical profession, the main value of such an oath might be symbolic, but I believe it would also stimulate young scientists to reflect on the wider consequences of their intended field of work before embarking on a career in academia or industry”⁷

Commitment - It is likely to foster scientific virtues and to create a sense of personal commitment from the individual researcher

Responsibility - It takes into account that responsibility for scientific misconduct often is shared

Public trust - It is likely to sustain public trust in the scientific enterprise⁸

PROPOSAL FOR A SCIENTIFIC OATH

I will conduct my activities as a researcher with **integrity and honesty;**

I will use my scientific knowledge and skills for the **benefit of humanity and for a sustainable development;**

I will show **respect for animals and nature;**

I will act in accordance with research ethics, and I will not allow considerations based on ideology, religion, ethnicity, prejudices or material advantages to overshadow my **ethical responsibility as a researcher.**³

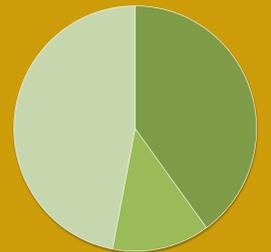
GREAT SUPPORT FOR AN OATH

Ph.d.-students from the faculty of Mathematics and nature science at the University of Oslo were given a group assignment; discuss and suggest revisions of the Oath if appropriate and vote yes, maybe or no on the suggestion. The results are based on the average results in the years 2008-2012. Total number of respondents 363⁴:

No: 12%

Maybe: 45%

Yes: 43%



“It is not likely to change how honest scientists are, but it could change public opinion of science”

“It can be seen as a reminder”

TWO CONCEPTS OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

(1) **An individualistic concept of responsibility** is one that locates the source of moral responsibility in the free will of moral agents. It focuses exclusively on the link between an agent’s intention and an act when delineating moral responsibility. In this context, one will typically ascribe the sole responsibility for plagiarism to the student or researcher. The ascription of responsibility and blame is then based on the following conditions: (A) the person did it, or her action or omission made a substantial contribution to it; (B) the act was faulty; and (C) the requisite causal connection must have been directly between the faulty aspect of her conduct and the outcome.⁹

(2) **A relational concept of responsibility**, in contrast, is one that acknowledges that our relations with others help define the content and scope our responsibilities¹⁰, and that an ascription of moral responsibility and blame (for plagiarism) may be appropriate even in the absence of (A) or (C).

400 BC. The medical’s profession’s developed and implemented a scientific oath – an ethical code of practice for scientists, similar to the Hippocratic Oath used in medicine.

1995 Joseph Rotblat’s proposal for a scientific oath in his acceptance speech for the Nobel peace Prize

2007 The National Committee for research Ethics in science and Technology proposes a scientific oath

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FORSKNINGSETISKE KOMITEER
National Committees for Research Ethics in Norway

References

^{1,2} Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com>

³ Guidelines for Research Ethics in Science and Technology, The National Committee for Research Ethics in Science and Technology, 2007

⁴ Oughton, D. and Myhr, A.L., *in progress*

⁵ Lundberg [1929], quoted by Merton, R.K. *Social theory and social*

structure, New York: Free Press 1968: 597

⁶ AAAS Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility, “Should there be an oath for scientists and engineers?”, Meeting Summary, September 27 2000, <http://www.aaas.org/spp/sfrl/projects/oath/oathsummary.htm>, retrieved 29. April 2013

⁷ Rotblat, J., “Remember your humanity”, In Abrams I (1999) *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1991–1995*, World Scientific Publishing, 1995

⁸ Jones, Nancy L., “A Code of Ethics for the Life Sciences” in

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⁹ Feinberg, Joel (1970) “Collective Responsibility” in *Collective Responsibility. Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, eds. Larry May and Stacey Hoffman. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991

¹⁰ Kutz, Christopher. *Complicity. Ethics and Law for a Collective Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

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