

Essay on on inspiration and plagiarism

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



People copy each other all the time – they take bits and pieces from what they remember or like and reappropriate them to suit their needs. This happens all the time; it's called inspiration. But where do you draw the line between inspiration and plagiarism? In this paper, we will examine the differences between the two, as well as the perspective of important philosophers such as Kant and Aristotle on the subject of plagiarism and inspiration.

In the case of Dorothy Lewis in Malcolm Gladwell's article "The Picture Problem," the issue is whether the playwright of the acclaimed Broadway play *Frozen* plagiarized from Lewis' works on serial killer research, and whether her life was dramatized in the play. This issue raises an interesting perspective on whether or not it is ethical to take inspiration from others. "Plagiarism is different, and that's what's so strange about it. The ethical rules that govern when it's acceptable for one writer to copy another are even more extreme than the most extreme position of the intellectual-property crowd: when it comes to literature, we have somehow decided that copying is never acceptable" (Gladwell, p. 6).

Aristotle's imitation theory is based on a concept known as mimesis – meaning "to imitate" (Poetics, 1984). For him, mimesis tended to follow the imitation of nature, attempting to emulate a perfect form and, in so doing, capture some of that perfection. This can happen when someone is inspired by another work – they see something they like and admire, and wish to emulate it. In mimesis, the person experiencing the imitation is well aware that it is so, as they recognize what is being imitated. However, if it is

followed too closely, it can become straightforward copying – this is something that must be avoided at all costs.

Aristotle writes that “ The objects of imitation are men in action...it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are.” He leaves open the nature of a work or subject to interpretation of the author, making it easier for dramatic license to be taken. Aristotle’s take on plagiarism is much more liberal than others’; he believes that imitation allows a subject to be understood more clearly, and that it is the right of the imitator to do as they would with the subject.

Kant’s Moral Law, on the other hand, has a much more dutiful and restrictive view on plagiarism. He dictates that people must base their decisions on moral demands – these are not based on self-interest or happiness, but what is right. In the case of plagiarism, it does not fall in with anything that can be construed as moral (one is attempting to take a creative shortcut in order to profit from the work itself, whether emotionally or financially). At the same time, he acknowledges that no one would actually take a completely moral high ground, and things like this are bound to happen; “ Only a cold-blooded observer who does not at once take the liveliest wish for the good as its actuality, to become doubtful at certain moments whether any true virtue is actually to be found in the world at all” (Kant, p. 43).

However, the question remains: if plagiarism is accidental, is it still an immoral act? The act of creating is not inherently immoral, and sometimes we are legitimately inspired by a work we have encountered in the past. At the same time, there is a grey area wherein too much of a specific work is acknowledged or aped, and that is construed as plagiarism. It is the

responsibility of the one being inspired to determine whether or not their inspiration came from something, and if it is being followed too closely.

Copyrights and intellectual property law, in the end, are what need to be considered, as they are the rules that must be followed, regardless of any ethical or moral concerns. For one thing, litigation can fall upon one who has plagiarized, particularly if the source for inspiration was not consulted for permission beforehand.

There is a very fine line between inspiration and plagiarism – some people can plagiarize without even intending to. However, from a moral and ethical standpoint, those words and situations belong to the original creator; a copyright on that intellectual property makes it even more legally binding. Kant's morality theory posits that a creative property should be deserving of equal respect, though Aristotle's imitation theory helps to explain the phenomenon that human beings seek to imitate actions and reality (mimesis). In a nutshell, while inspiration is a perfectly valid artistic practice, it should not be taken to the point where something is taken wholesale from someone else.

Works Cited

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