Plagiarism and the Issue of Morality Among University Students

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Abstract

"Knowledge is the food of the soul," just as the human body needs nourishment, our souls and minds thrive on education, learning, and wisdom. Yet, the smooth and easy access to countless sources of knowledge via internet and artificial intelligence (AI) tools made most university students lazy, slow-moving, and less self-reliant. Indeed, they are encouraged to adopt or favour the copy-paste process under many excuses where the time constraint is one of them along the journey of collecting information. The latter is sometimes done unintentionally but most of the time it is performed deliberately forgetting completely that such act harms their reputation as well as their academic integrity because they are robbing others' property, ideas, and creative projects when using them inappropriately. Indeed, they are committing what is called/ known as plagiarism. In this article, we are going to discuss in brief this dangerous problem, which is spreading rapidly among our undergraduate, postgraduate students, and even teacher researchers. For more clarity, this piece of research spots light on the different definitions beside the historical evolution of the term plagiarism, stating factors and reasons that feed and contribute to the expansion of this immoral operation. The researcher attempts to provide practical suggestions, ways, and strategies to reduce stealing intellectual property and detect plagiarists. This paper follows mainly a qualitative approach for data collection in which extractions from previous experiences and writings are adapted. Among the most important findings in this research is: plagiarism remains an unethical behaviour and an intellectual crime that must be fought worldwide and severely punished in order to preserve the field of scientific research.

Keywords: morality; plagiarism; property; students; university.

Introduction

As readers, teachers, or teacher-researchers, inside a university library where you decide to do reading for pleasure, look for a source book or simply a reference for your research, dozens of options stand all over and around you. Self-talk starts taking place, this book is old, no that one is better…but! Oh yes, maybe theses and dissertations satisfy my curiosity; students are devoted to research, they have much time, and work as a team, they indeed bring fresh and new information/ideas from multiple sources. Yes, it is the best choice I guess. Quickly, a doctoral thesis or a master dissertation is picked up, and you sit down to commence your journey with your promising option. Self-talk again, the title! It seems familiar, no problem; table of contents! Almost the same! The case study (few changes), and what about the collected data and the statistics! Oh, this is my dissertation, I am sure! My intellectual property was robbed.

The above situation is imagination, but a common situation that could occur to a big number of ethical researchers who spend days and nights preparing their studies. A decade ago, things were different and plagiarism in higher education was very much a minority interest to the degree that few of us paid much real attention to it. Tim Roberts (2008) shares the same belief that we used to trust our students to study fairly, and to "attribute material properly, using established academic conventions and protocols" (p. xiv). Yet, it is no longer the case today; plagiarism, based on concrete evidence, among university students is on the increase.

Stealing intellectual property has become a cursed habit at higher education level in Algeria, and the whole world as "plagiarism is truly an international problem" (Roberts, 2008, p. xvii). Students have reached a critical point in which others' works, research works, or whole publications are being -deliberately or accidentally- copied and pasted without acknowledging the real author or crediting the original source. Academically speaking, this is termed as Plagiarism, which is a non-acceptable behaviour and severely punished because it "is not only cheating, it is also a form of lying and a form of stealing" (Francis, 2015, p. 12). Indeed, plagiarists and intellectual property pirates are creating "second, false lives for pre-existing texts and, in the process, acquire (or try to acquire) fraudulent identities as the authors of that material" (McGill, 2012, p. 4).

This paper argues that the rise in plagiarism among university students, particularly in Algerian higher education, is driven by a combination of factors, including the easy availability of online sources, lack of understanding of academic integrity, and insufficient deterrents. We will also explore potential solutions to fight this growing problem among students. The motive behind choosing this category is because "University faculty are often accused of plagiarism since they have many opportunities to indulge in plagiarism through their work with graduate students or as peer reviewers for journals and grant agencies since often there is little fear of punitive action" (Bloch, 2012, p. 18). Hence, many questions jump on one's mind to inquire about the causes that led and still leading to this terrible and sudden move towards favouring short cuts (piracy) when doing research, and refusing to devote time as well as efforts for genuine and original work.

1. Historical Background

Bailey (2019) mentioned that the act of stealing others' work is undoubtedly old as time. Such process existed in the context of literature for the first time around 80 AD by the Roman poet Martial who complained that his verses had been kidnapped by another poet (Goswami et al., 2015). At that time, according to Jonathan Bailey:

Poets were expected to be able to recite key works by other authors. However, when Martial learned that another poet, Fidentinus, was reciting his works and taking credit for them, Martial chose to respond. But Martial didn't have the option of going to the courts. (2019, para. 5) Shiva (2006), Vinod et al., (2011), and Harish Kumar's investigations (2022, p. 233), indicate that plagiarism and the idea of theft can be traced back to mid-1600s, in which they were rampant in every creative discipline, including the sciences. During the Jacobean Era, the dramatist Ben Jonson was the first to introduce the term Plagiary into English in 1601 to describe a person that has a hand in literary thefts. However, the word plagiarism did not exist into English until around 1620 (Online Etymology Dictionary).

In the year 1709, Britain was ready for the first copyright legislation to defend copyrights against piracy for both publishers and authors. In 1710, Parliament passed a law called the Statute of Anne. Under this Statute "an author would own a copyright of his book for a fixed period, fourteen years, to be renewed for another fourteen years if the author was still alive" (Francis, 2015, p. 25). Here, we shall open a parenthesis to say that plagiarism and copyright infringement are not the same, but different concepts. Although both terms may apply to a particular act, it can be easy to get confused when using them (Arnold & Levin, 2021; Kumar, 2022).

By the beginning of the 19th century, the concept and law for McKay (2009) were nearly similar to today's understanding. And the same case for footnotes which were not being used differently from today's fashion. Further, the ancient use of the concept literary theft resembles significantly the modern one, thus it is reasonable "to apply the term plagiarism to it" (McGill, 2012, p. 4). Since then, the issue of enforcing copyrights across borders has been changed (Vinod et al., 2009). Most of the countries across Europe have come to agreements that ban book piracy except the United States, which had another vision; it did not accept "to provide foreign writers and publishers any protection until 1891 and signing the Berne Convention only in 1988" (Kumar, 2022, p. 233)

2. Defining Concepts

2.1. Plagiarism

The concept of plagiarism came to existence around 1590-1600 from the Latin word plagiārius, which means kidnapper, seducer, or plunderer, equivalent to plagi(um) or kidnapping (dictionary.com; Bailey, 2019). According to the Oxford Online Dictionary, plagiarism, noun [U] /ˈpleɪdʒərɪzəm/, is "the practice of copying another person's ideas, words or work and pretending that they are your own". Similarly, Cambridge Online Dictionary defines it as "the process or practice of using another person's ideas or work and pretending that it is your own." (dictionary.cambridge.org)

For Judy Anderson, the word plagiarism is "the act of using the words of another without giving the originator credit." (1998, p. 1).Whereas Joel Bloch describes it as the "inappropriate use of what is called intellectual property" (2012, p. 14). Thence, to plagiarize means to copy ideas, texts, or other creative works that are not really yours and submit them as your own, without permission or giving credit to the original source (Francis, 2015). Put it simple, those who steal intellectual properties or the so-called plagiarists are just presenting another's work under their own names (McGill, 2012).

Undoubtedly, it should be noted that the definition of the term plagiarism is murky and foggy; it is "not readily apparent even to serious scholars since what appears to be plagiarism to one person may be an act of creativity to another" (Bloch, 2012, p. 19).

2.2. Morality (noun, /məˈræləti/)

This highly philosophical concept is derived from the Latin word moralitas and moralis, which means character, manners, or morals, it is recognition of the distinction between good and evil, "perfect or imperfect, right actions or wrong ones" (Long & Sedley, 1987, p. 367). Morality, antonym of immorality, is defined as "a set of personal or social standards for good or bad behaviour and character" (dictionary.cambridge.org). According to Paul Bloomfield (2008) "Morality begins with the question of how one ought to behave toward others. It is seen as having a final authority over our lives and the interests of others play a necessary role in the decision procedures we ought to use" (p. 3). Morality then is the characteristic of behaving in a certain way or in a manner intended to produce morally good results, and be away from scandals as well as improper deeds.

One may well come across different definitions of morality among academics based usually on the lex fori, but protecting the intellectual property (IP) is a common shared goal and a priority. Indeed, Daniel Gervais (2020) when discussing topics like fairness, morality and order public, he confirms that the International Intellectual Property (IP) rules "actually reflect the fact that IP can sometimes be used unfairly or lead to unfair (or even immoral) outcomes, both in terms of allowing each person to develop his or her own potential and in terms of access" (p. 2).

3. Factors and Reasons Contributing to Plagiarism

Why do students cheat/plagiarise? A repeated question that has long been of great importance, the aim is to understand the nature of plagiarism as well as to create regulations for dealing with such accusations.

As a researcher, I had long and lengthy debates/discussions with colleagues who are experienced doctors at the Department of English. Almost 7/9 (77%) teachers confess that the majority of the students (70% to 80%), they supervised or are supervising, are never far from plagiarism, particularly in the last decade. Bailey (2020) believes that so many students keep plagiarising "even as the punishments for plagiarism get more and more strict and the tools for spotting it keep improving" (para. 2). When investigating about the factors that encourage or participate in the expansion of such illegal and immoral process, we came to the following points that are ranged from the more genuine lack of knowledge to outright dishonourable intentions:

➢ *Lack of genuine knowledge*

In many cases when students commit this act, they declare that they do not really know it is plagiarism, which is referred to the lack of study skills or knowledge about attribution rules. Besides, a lot of researchers do this accidentally because they are truly unfamiliar with the correct techniques related to paraphrasing, quoting, citing, and referencing. So, the issue of plagiarism should be "openly discussed in the classroom so that the rules surrounding it" (Francis, 2015, p. 12) are sufficiently understood by all the students.

➢ *The run after good grades and peer pressure*

A common truth among our students today is favouring grades over knowledge. We all, as teachers, know this; it is once termed as "the famous ten (10/20)" by professor Mohamed Miliani (Lecturer and Researcher at University of Oran 2, Algeria) in one of his conferences, which I have attended in 2008, in Algiers. When students feel the need to get a good grade but are not sure they can have it fairly, "cheating becomes much more tempting" (Bailey, 2020, para. 11). They, rather, decide for themselves since "they don't want to just sit there and watch" their friends getting "better grades and better GPAs, get accepted into better colleges, and have their parents happier about their academic performance" (McCabe et al. 2001, cited in Bloch, 2020, p.

26). Besides, plagiarism let slow and (un)ethical students feel alive as they managed to find a means that helps them pass without being caught.

> ➢ *Procrastination or poor time management*

Not anyone is a good time-manager, therefore, most students, especially master or doctoral, wait till the last minutes to do their research or write their dissertations/ theses because of either laziness or priorities and commitments. It is stated by Silverman (2002, cited in Kumar, 2022, p. 234) that "students' overworked lifestyles leave them so open to the temptations of cheating." This put them under ever-increasing pressure and the feeling of not catching the train becomes a nightmare since deadlines are closer. Then the only solution for them is to plagiarise, though it is seriously risky, hoping not to be detected.

> ➢ *Apathy or lack of interest*

Motivation is important, and its presence when doing an assignment or a research is highly necessary. However, for a large number of university students apathy is their first and biggest enemy. It makes them lack motivation and interest towards study and/or serious work because they do believe their education is not valuable or the assigned task is not meaningful. In such situation, and "when there is no or little interest in a subject, plagiarism could be an attractive option" (Roberts, 2008, p. 119).

Additionally, experience in the field and daily observation, as teachers, reinforce the view that our students are terribly demotivated, and only the minority are committed to do the job; most of the students might think that their teacher will not correct or take their production into consideration. But, I think if students believe "that the thing they are working for is valuable and that the process is meaningful, they will at least want to put in the work" (Bailey, 2020, para. 6).

> ➢ *Belief of not get caught*

Students nowadays are smart enough to get, skilfully, in touch with Generative artificial intelligence tools (GenAI) such as the so-called ChatGPTt. They are qualified to use different applications and "a number of Internet sites that provide fast, convenient, and customized term papers on just about any subject" (Francis, 2015, p. 19), they then only make few changes on the intended work or research and deliver it as their own. Henceforth, being able to manipulate such tools/devices offers those students a sense of security, and makes them somehow confident of not being checked. Some of them are even "convinced that the faculty member knows what is going on. They do not see the faculty member do anything about it" (Bloch, 2012, p. 26).

However, when attempting to steal other people's words from a Web site, students should bear in mind an essential reality: "If it is out there for students to find, it is out there for their teachers to find as well". Though teachers are meant to teach rather than to detect, they are also able to launch their own search engines "to catch students they suspect might be plagiarizing" (Francis, 2015, pp. 19-20).

> ➢ *Lack of resources and teacher support*

University students, including those at the master's and doctoral level, are novice researchers and not fully ready to decide which reference is the most appropriate for their pieces of research. Sometimes, there is a lack of necessary resources including the needed time, energy and focus as well as access to the internet, libraries, and computer labs (Bailey, 2020). On the other hand, many serious students are ready to work because they have time, energy, and even physical resources but the teacher's support (as a supervisor and the primary source) is almost absent. They are not often given the opportunity to share their goals or understand the objectives

their teachers have for their research. Thence, those students may well feel forced into cheating and still be tempted to plagiarise.

4. Minimising the incidence of plagiarism

Before arriving at the process of detecting plagiarism, we should have asked several important questions like: Do our students truly know that plagiarism is theft and immoral? Are we doing enough to educate them on this topic and the like? Are we providing them with the necessary support to keep them away from such dubious acts?

So, a major step that can help in reducing plagiarism and limit cheating, before working on detecting whether students are stealing others' intellectual property, is to educate about plagiarism and how it is bad.

4.1. Educate and support

The vast majority of teachers, if not all, do not favour to play detective or cyber-cop to catch plagiarists or cheaters. They rather wish to devote their lives to education and concentrate on helping students learn to learn with integrity (Karon, 2012). To prevent or at least reduce plagiarism, we need to work on developing the ethical skills of our students, our intention is "to build on the beginnings of this ethical thinking, to 'bridge the gap,' and help students see that plagiarism is cheating" (Roberts, 2008, p. 40). The first and major step is assisting students to formulate a clearer image about what composes plagiarism; it then can "be viewed as part of a wider ethical issue" (Roberts, 2008, p. 40). Our student, and before blaming them, are required to be fully aware of what plagiarism really is, specifically the non-obvious sides or the grey areas related to this complicated concept.

Therefore, the main focus should be changing students' attitudes and creating an atmosphere where students, academics, and researchers get convinced that all sorts of plagiarism are not acceptable for it is stealing others' intellectual property. Professionalism must be the aim, our students in all levels, need to learn about plagiarism in the context of professional ethics, which will, according to Roberts (2008), "develop a mature approach in students towards their own academic studies and their future behaviour and also help them to realise why plagiarism is unacceptable and indeed self-defeating," (p. 42) and how it can be avoided. Educating students to be academically ethical includes:

4.1.1. Exercises to help understanding plagiarism

Many universities/faculties keep discussing the issue of plagiarism theoretically in class, but none seems to be truly showing, practically, students how to avoid plagiarism (Lamoreaux et al., 2012). We can suggest some interesting exercises based on Florida State University:

a- Emphasis on defining plagiarism

Many students do not understand what plagiarism is, and then a thorough understanding must exist in order to protect them from intentional or even accidental academic dishonesty. So, this step permits our students to have clear ideas about the problems of plagiarism, and its consequences through a medium in which they could compose in the future. Most importantly, "it creates a sense of "ownership" of standards that they will uphold for themselves and their classmates" ("Plagiarism Exercises", n.d., para. 1).

b- Emphasis on understanding University's Honour Policy and Kinds of plagiarism

Each university has a code of ethics, that is to say rules and regulations students must respect. Besides attending classes, completing more complex assignments, they need also to adhere to more rigorous standards of academic integrity. The common belief should resemble Professor Shirley Alexander's words (Vice-President of ES at the University of Technology Sydney): "Taxpayers spend a lot of money on university education. It is absolutely incumbent on

us that when we put a stamp on their graduation certificate that says this person has met the requirements of the degree, that they actually have" ("The Importance of Plagiarism Checkers", 2023, para. 17).

If, then, any student is found guilty because of violating the academic honour policy, s/he can face severe penalties such as reducing grades, disciplinary probation, suspension of degree, etc. ("Plagiarism Exercises", n.d.).

c- *Plagiarism Signature Sheet*

Students have to learn that academic honesty is essential for their personal growth, and that ethical standards are put above all when they have been caught on cheating. On this point, Professor Michael D. Smith (former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard) comments: "We take academic integrity very seriously because it goes to the heart of our educational mission. Academic dishonesty cannot and will not be tolerated at Harvard" ("The Importance of Plagiarism Checkers", 2023, para. 17).

Thence, when finishing an assignment or a research (thesis or dissertation), students have to bear in mind that a Plagiarism Declaration is ready to sign. On this sheet, students declare that they completely understand that plagiarism in any form is a violation of the University Honor Code and the policies of its Departments, and they are conscious that it can result in a variety of academic penalties ("Plagiarism Exercises", n.d.).

4.1.2. Practice on referencing

Many students accidentally commit plagiarism because they do not know how to reference correctly. Thus, it is not enough to tell students not to plagiarise, especially the concept of plagiarism is quite difficult to be explained and digested, but to train them to quote appropriately and cite, paraphrase and give credit. Walker (2008, cited in Lamoreaux et al., 2012, p. 4) provided instructions for a different exercise to train students to paraphrase correctly and showed that this training improves paraphrasing skills. Further, after being trained in-text referencing, students need to be aware of creating a reference list, work cited, or bibliography by the end of the assignments or pieces of research.

4.1.3. Improvement of writing skills

This is one of the most important steps that the teaching staff should not leave behind. Most of our students lack the necessary writing skills and abilities, which make them look for ready-made texts, assignments, or even whole papers and present them as their own. Bloomfield (cited in Francis, 2015) advises: "If you don't understand what you're writing . . . you're not really learning anything and that should be the point" (p. 87). Therefore, as teachers, we need to work on reinforcing their writing skills/abilities to bridge the gap, help our students gain more confidence, and reduce the need to plagiarise.

In a word, more fruitful results will take place when parents, administrators, and teachers devote time and efforts to provide assistance to students; they should be given assignments accompanied with the purpose behind, and that this work has to be original because it will be evaluated. Teachers and supervisors must not need to clear up any confusion students might have about what is plagiarism and what is not. For master and doctoral students, postgraduate workshops on research ethics should be organised several times each year.

What teachers can do to help students avoid plagiarism is summarised, by Barbara Francis, as follow:

- ✓ Teach students what plagiarism is and why it is wrong;
- ✓ Encourage original thinking and the forms of good writing;
- ✓ Appeal to a student's sense of integrity;
- ✓ Warn students about the dangers of downloading papers from the Internet;
- ✓ Create lessons that discuss the proper way to conduct research and cite a source;
- ✓ Instruct students on how to summarize, paraphrase, and quote sources;

- ✓ Require students to choose the subject of their papers from a list of specific topics;
- ✓ Ask students to turn in source notes and outlines so the teacher can see how the students are developing their ideas;

(2015, p. 92)

4.2. Detect plagiarism

Reaching this sensitive step never means a lack of trust between students and the university, but it much more maintains academic honesty and integrity for both sides, though detecting plagiarism is not always an easy task to do. It is challenging indeed and not a full proof method, particularly when students rephrase, rely on sources that cannot be found on the Internet, or plagiarise from documents written in different languages (Kumar, 2022). These tools can give deceptive positive results, confusing original text with copied ones and vice versa.

However, using plagiarism detection sites, such as Turnitin.com and Scribbr, MyDropBox (http://mydropbox.com), Glatt Plagiarism (http://www.plagiarism.com), Grammarly, Viper, PlagAware http://www.plagaware.com), Plagiarism Detector, Ephorus, (https://www.ephorus.com/en/home), iThenticate, JPlag, and Quetext, remain the most common checkers adopted by lots of universities around the globe (Vinod et al., 2011; Bloch, 2012; Kumar, 2022; Drissen, 2023). The image below shows a few plagiarism checking sites that can help teachers, researchers, and students and moreover support honesty as well as ethics:

Some of the well-known Plagiarism Detection Tools
("The Importance of Plagiarism Checkers", 2023, para. 15)
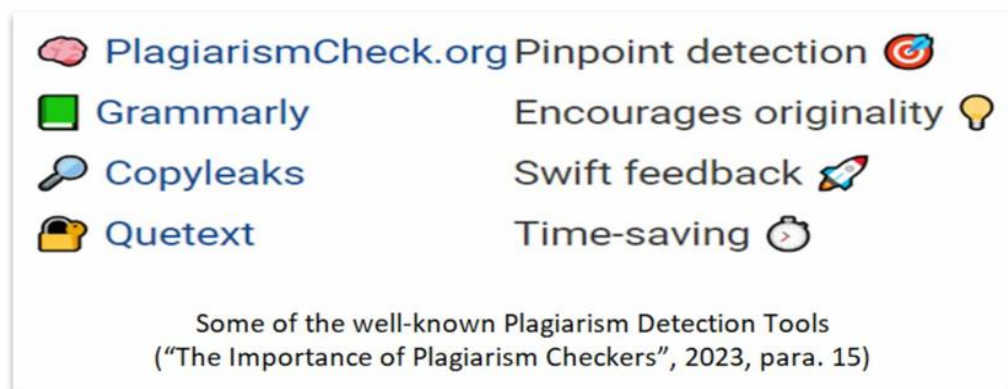
We have to remind that these plagiarism checker systems- that are gaining popularity of and have spread throughout the world- can detect copies (or part copies) of documents not plagiarism (contrary to their name), and "to copy is not always to plagiarise… Not all copies are plagiarised and not all plagiarism comes in the form of exact text copies. Thus, there is not a one-to-one relationship between copies and plagiarism" (Roberts, 2008, p. 117).

Back to plagiarism checkers, because of the big number of cheating cases all over the world, higher education authorities worldwide feel the need to promote ethical behaviours among students and maintain academic integrity as well. Volunteering attempts, in Algeria, to reduce such dubious acts are being performed but still not sufficient, official presence is highly recommended. Despite the fact that plagiarism detectors are not 100% efficient and cost money, as stated by Joel Bloch (2012) "Our university spent $70,000 a year for a license for Turnitin.com, in part from the fear among professors that plagiarism was spreading faster than they could respond to it" (P. 137), they can have multiple advantages, from a long term perspective, on both educators as well as students.

4.2.1. For Educators

✓ Facilitate academic integrity: Electronic checking tools can identify a variety of plagiarism types, including paraphrasing and self-copying. By doing so, professors are assisted to address possible cheating procedures and warn as well as remind their students about the main principles of academic honesty.

✓ Save time: As previously mentioned, teachers are meant to teach not to investigate or detect. Therefore, using plagiarism detectors help educators focus actually on their fundamental mission, rather than wasting time and effort in checking improper contents manually.

✓ Build trust: Automating plagiarism checkers and fighting all types of intellectual property theft show that educational institutions' reputation matters a lot, and that they are standing for honesty and transparency.

("The Importance of Plagiarism Checkers", 2023)

4.2.2. For Students

Develop writing skills: This view is dealt with in previously. When students use plagiarism detectors, they are (un)intentionally fostering their critical thinking and improving their writing skills. That is, through scanning and analysing similar or even copied content, these checking tools help students reinforce or even modify their writing styles and encourage them to check over the proper ways of citing, quoting, and referencing.

✓ Empower fair grading: Having the habit to utilise checkers by the student will ensure the originality and uniqueness of her/his production. Consequently, and thanks to these tools, all students are given space as well as opportunities for fair competition where the obtained marks or grades reflect their true levels.

("The Importance of Plagiarism Checkers", 2023)

Conclusion

In all cases, plagiarism keeps spreading among university students, the current research paper is meant to call for immediate actions to stop it. Whatever the factor or the reason is, it is not acceptable to plagiarize, cheat, or commit other unethical and immoral academic acts, goals never justify the means. Choosing to plagiarize or cheat is an unfair shortcut for competition and disrespects the hard work of others inside and outside the classroom. Is it legal that one sows and another reaps? Stealing intellectual property shows lack of respect not only towards teachers but toward parents also, who expect their children to grow up honest. We had better work on developing our skills and abilities for an on-going self- improvement, rather than wasting time, efforts, and may be money on scandalous tasks or acts, no pain no gain.

To prevent plagiarism, educators, teachers, training staffs, and institutions are required to begin with nourishing a culture of academic integrity. They should focus on teaching students how to cite properly, and stress the importance of genuine as well as original research. They can also look for more creative tasks that foster critical thinking and encourage self-centredness. Thus, the message is clear: we must not cheat because we might get caught, but we must not do so for it is wrong and immoral.

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