

## Case Study in Plagiarism

The following case is based on a paper that was turned in by a student as an assignment for an introductory philosophy class.

The paper assignment asked the students to focus on Plato's account on how a just society is formed, as it is described in books 1-4 of the *Republic*. The students were required to identify strengths and weaknesses in the argument, and provide an analysis of them.

Upon reading the paper, several anomalies – red flags, if you prefer – could be spotted. These are analyzed below; the material enclosed in boxes is excerpted from the student's essay.

1. The paper failed to meet the requirements of the assignment. The assignment explicitly asked the students to critically engage the argument as presented in the text, and to assess its strengths and weaknesses. The students were also admonished against turning in a book report, which is what this paper amounted to. The arguments were merely presented, and they were not analyzed in any way.

In Book I, Socrates entertains two distinct definitions of justice [...]

The philosophers continue the debate in Book II [...]

The arts in education are primarily dealt with in Book III [...]

2. More problematic was the material discussed in the paper. Large sections of the student's paper were devoted to material that was deliberately omitted from class discussions. The assigned readings included books 1-4 and book 9 of the *Republic*, for these alone were pertinent to the concept of justice. The paper went beyond this by concisely summarizing books 6-7 and book 10. Moreover, the fact that the allegory of the cave (in book 7) is a central image in the history of western philosophy was not explicitly mentioned in the class discussions.

**Book VII is dominated by the Allegory of the Cave.** One of the most enduring images perhaps in the history of western philosophy, the dim cave plays host to a group of prisoners, chained in such a way that they cannot move their heads, stare at a wall all day.

**The final book of The Republic, "The Recompense of Life," telescopes into two main points. First is the issue of imitative poetry.** Here Socrates offers his conclusive assessment of the poetic arts. Homer, he apologizes, must, except for those parts portraying nobility and right behavior in famous men and gods, be left out of the State. He may even have to be translated from verse to prose, in order that the musicality of the language not seduce any citizens. **Second comes the true recompense of life,** which actually occurs in the afterlife.

Although an advanced student could easily have worked this material in the paper – especially if they had background knowledge in philosophy – in this particular case it stood out, as such a student would likely have fulfilled the actual assignment first and then broadened the discussion.

3. The paper contained the following claim (in bold) in the opening paragraph:

The Republic itself is nothing at the start of Plato's most famous and influential book. It does not exist. Not only does it not exist in actuality, but it does not exist in theory either. It must be built. **It [sic] architect will be Socrates, the fictional persona Plato creates for himself.**

The exact role of Socrates in Plato's works is still subject to debate. The consensus is that Socrates was used as a character by Plato to express his own views. In the early dialogues, Socrates expressed claims that could likely be attributed to the historical Socrates. Later on in his career, as Plato develops his own views, the character of Socrates begins expressing views inconsistent with his early ones. However, the character development of Socrates was left out from the class discussions for purposes of clarity. So even if this claim could be taken as common knowledge in a course on ancient philosophy, it was peculiar to find this claim in a student's paper for an introductory course.

4. The language of the paper was substantially better than that of the student's in-class writing assignments. The student's previous writings were rife with idiosyncrasies, which confused the expressions; these were absent from the paper, and the prose of the essay flowed more smoothly, and it contained far fewer syntactical errors.

Adeimantus' mentioning of the State seems fortuitous, but it is as if Socrates has been waiting for it all along. Uncertain whether they can arrive at an acceptable definition of justice any other way, Socrates proposes they construct a State of which they approve, and see if they might not find justice lurking in it somewhere

In and of itself, this fact alone would not have raised suspicions but, rather, it would have indicated improvement as far as the student's writing is concerned. After all, the student could have taken advantage of the writing center, or hired a tutor to improve his writing.

5. The paper contained direct quotations in the text, but their sources were not cited.

[...] justice is "doing good to your friends and harm to your enemies."

[...] That "justice is the excellence of the soul" is Socrates' main conclusion.

[...] This State is arises [sic.], Socrates says, "out of the needs of mankind."

6. There were some odd characters in the text that appeared out of place. These characters seemed to replace other punctuation. These are underlined in the following excerpt:

Instead the citizens of the state, at this early stage they are generically named guardians, are to be nourished only on literature\_broadly termed Emusic' by Socrates\_ clearly illustrating courage, wisdom, temperance, and virtue (just behavior)

#### Conclusions:

Even if one (or two) of these peculiarities could have had an alternate explanation, finding all of these in one paper was more than sufficient for establishing reasonable doubt about its authenticity. In verifying the authenticity of the paper, the opening sentence was entered in Google search engine. Entering the string "The Republic itself is nothing at the start of Plato's most famous and influential book" returned a match to <http://www.gradesaver.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/republic/shortsumm.html>

Comparing the student's paper with the paper on the above site showed that the text of the essay was taken from the site verbatim. Some sections of the 'original' (or: source) essay were left out; this severed the connections between different paragraphs, interrupting the flow of the paper.

The authenticity of this paper was subsequently tested using Turnitin.com, which identified 100 per cent of the text as having been copied from the above site.