Chapter 18. The Ethical Poetry of Academic Writing

A long time ago, when I was in my doctoral program, I wrote poetry.[1] I wrote a poem a day. As an ambitious young writer with a large ego, I aspired to the power captured by some lines in the opening of John Keats' (1856/1982) "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream":

> For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,
> With the fine spell of words alone can save
> Imagination from the sable charm
> And dumb enchantment. (p. 361, lines 8–11)

As I started to write my dissertation it occurred to me that I was writing a special kind of poem, a truth poem. I wanted my scholarship to have the kind of power I sought in my own poetry—a power to articulate meanings important to me; a power from aesthetic form that gave inevitability, conclusiveness, and authority to the message; a power to touch other people's minds and emotions as it gave shape to unarticulated experiences and feelings.

But the dissertation, I also realized, was not the same as the usual poem, where I could follow wherever my imagination, feelings, and aesthetic judgment led me. No, truth poems had special ethical responsibilities—responsibilities that came from the work to be accomplished by scholarship also captured in Keats' lines—to "save / imagination from the sable charm / and dumb enchantment." To violate these ethical responsibilities would not only be a personal failure on my part but would undermine the work I hoped to accomplish by the scholarship. To violate these responsibilities would diminish the work, even if others never caught my ethical violations. The ethics were actually guidelines to produce good work, strong work, work that might last a while to add to human knowledge.

I want to address several of the domains of these ethical responsibilities, but I also want to address the poetry that good science and scholarship can accomplish. Our work as scholars can transform the knowledge and vision of individuals and societies to live with a deeper understanding of who we are as people and the world we live in, so we can live more successfully with each other and the world, with greater appreciation of both. That is the ultimate ethical calling our work appeals to.

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1. This chapter was originally delivered as a Visiting Fulbright Faculty Lecture at the University of Porto in May 2016 and then appeared as "The Ethical Poetry of Academic Writing," by C. Bazerman (2021), *Educação, Sociedade e Culturas*, (58), 185–188 (https://doi.org/10.24840/esc.vi58.152).

There are many dimensions to the ethical responsibilities as well as opportunities to carry out ethical actions. Every responsibility is an opportunity. And every responsibility or opportunity is about forming relations. There are ethical relations to the object of study, whether human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate. There are ethical relations for the kind of knowledge we produce for society and how it will further our lives and the life of the planet. There are ethical relations to our colleagues and our disciplines and the institutions we work with and for. There are ethical relations to the authors who have come before and contributed work that has made ours possible. There are ethical relations to our contemporary colleagues and the researchers to come after—and to the body of knowledge we are contributing to. There is even an ethical relation to ourselves as individuals. Ultimately, if we fulfil all these opportunities and relations, our work has the possibility to live, to enter the network of human knowledge and life. Tapping into this power of ethical action even helps us mobilize the power of language in the way we usually attribute to poets. Words gain their beauty and power from their ability to mobilize emotions, reactions, meaning, and actions with condensed efficiency, moving us rapidly to where we want to go, even if we did not know where that was until we encountered the words that have the force of rightness.

Do No Harm to the Bodies of Our Subjects

These days before we can begin any research at my university and most universities around the world, we need to file plans and gain approval from our ethics boards that assure we meet ethical responsibilities to the subjects of our studies. Since I study the human practice of writing, this means I must show that my inquiries will not do medical, physical, or psychological harm to the people I study. Also, I must protect against any social harms that would come from disclosures of any information I might gather about subjects that might be traced back to them as individuals. If there is the potential of even minor harms, I must demonstrate that the benefits to the subjects and society outweigh those potentials. The benefits and harms must be fully disclosed to the subjects or their guardians, and the subjects or guardians must provide full informed consent for any procedures. Further the subjects must be notified that they can withdraw from the research at any point without penalty.

If we study nonhuman animals, we must also show that our research meets ethical guidelines; there are also guidelines for research on stem cells. And if the research might have impacts on the environment, there are further protocols we must follow. These review procedures are the result of the disclosure of unethical behavior in the past, such as the notorious Tuskegee syphilis study, which have led to government regulation and legal liability for research sponsors. Other regulation also might require prior approval or after-the-fact liability for such things as harm to items of cultural heritage or to unique artifacts, destruction of

monuments, removal from their region of provenance or proper ownership, and so on. In short, we can't inflict harm on the things we study.

Do No Harm to the Representation of Our Subjects

But there is a deeper ethical responsibility to report accurately the nature, processes, and consequences of the things we study—if just to honor their integrity, life experience, and life choices. In a number of social sciences, it is becoming an increasing ethical practice to share the results of research with the people and communities we study so they know what is being said about them, so we can gain their evaluation and response, and so that they can use that knowledge for their own benefit and reflective action.

In studying an historical figure long dead, we have a responsibility to look as fully as we can into the evidence and not just intentionally select a one-sided view, whether a critical case about their failings or a laudatory case for their heroic virtue. To distort the historical or documentary or literary record to support a current ideological position does a disservice to the lives people led, the struggles they had, the accomplishments they made, or the failures and harm they caused. Their reputations are in the hands of those who come after. Distorting the record or not digging as deeply into it as we can also means we cannot learn as much from their lives as we might, and the lessons and accomplishments of their lives will not carry forward as richly to future generations as they might. Of course, in humanities and social sciences we have a dilemma, as we are often rewarded for re-evaluating the meanings and actions of past individuals and societies. We hope that our opening of new archives, adopting fresh theoretical perspectives, posing new questions will deepen our understanding, but in re-evaluating, we cannot forgo our ethical responsibilities to the fullness of lives, if only because later scholars may remind people of all we have forgotten.

There are similar concerns if we consider nonhuman life, where our partial studies or the metaphors we adopt may have limiting and perhaps negative consequences for the species we examine (think of the consequences of the term "invasive species" that has driven much environmental research) or lead to the overvaluation of one species over another. This equally goes for understanding constantly changing inanimate nature. Mistakes and limitations are inevitable, metaphors are inevitable, but our ethical commitment to the natural world asks us to keep digging deeper to understand better each component out of respect to the being and integrity of each component, and ultimately to understand how all works together to form our world.

But each of these responsibilities is an opportunity—to help us connect to and appreciate the things we study. If we study someone just to make a hero or a villain out of them, we become distant from their lives, and we see their accomplishments as beyond human or beneath human rather than as the actions of a human at a particular moment of time. In examining the writing of major

scientists, thinkers, and inventors such as Isaac Newton, Joseph Priestly, Adam Smith, and Thomas Edison in the contexts of their life and times, I have found that I understand their choices as writers more deeply—deepening my understanding of how writing and writers work and expanding the repertoire of writing choices I have available and can share with my students. I also feel closer to these major figures, seeing my writing dilemmas as not so different from theirs—including those instances when I see them making decisions we would not currently consider ethically precise or admirable.

Although I do not study biology, geology, or physics, I have certainly heard from people who do study them a similar admiration for and connection with the material they study, because they have insight into the wonder of the operations of the world. Even if they find the particular microbe or infectious agent they study repulsive and harmful, the processes they study fill them with wonder.

Do No Harm to Our Colleagues and Our Fields

The ethical responsibility to represent the phenomena or objects of study as fully, accurately, and nonmanipulatively as possible is connected to the ethical responsibility to one's colleagues who are engaged in related endeavors. Any distortion or lack of transparency has the potential to mislead, confuse, or waste the time of other researchers who are trying to carry on their work. If those faulted findings contradict their work, they may need to step back and figure out why, or they may feel compelled to add new investigations to check out the discrepancies. Or these faulted findings may lead to complications in the analysis of their results. Once colleagues begin to suspect reported results as not complete or intentionally partial or manipulative, that may lead to then ignoring or discounting the work, even the parts that may be more solid, so the ethical failure will lead to a stigmatizing of large parts of accomplished work. The cost will not only be theirs, but yours. Their work, your work, and your communal collaborative work all are disrupted. The ethical lack is a social disruption that distances you from your investigative community. But enacting ethical behavior draws you closer to the community, even if you are in conflict over some ideas and interpretation, because you share the evidentiary struggle in working out the knowledge of your field, and eventually the chance for mutual respect remains, even if there may be competitive bad blood in the short term. Again, we can view the ethical choices as dilemmas, because caught up in competitive struggles with peers we want to make the best case for our position, yet we must bound the force of our statements by the limits of ethical argument if we are to maintain long term engagement with our fields.

This brings us to the ethical responsibilities to our disciplines and fields. This also contains dilemmas. Whatever field we are trained in or carry out work in has ways of working, of gathering data, of framing ideas in particular theories, of attending to particular kinds of articles in journals. There are good historical reasons that have led smart people to the choices embodied in disciplinary

practices and to the regulatory mechanisms that attempt to hold researchers to these standards and practices (through graduate education, disciplinary manuals, journal requirements, reviewing procedures, etc.). So, these practices are worth respecting, and we often have some loyalty to the ethical goals of the field.

Do No Harm to Knowledge

At the same time that we respect the past, each discipline has had some historical exclusions, focusing on some things and not others, and thus the disciplinary accounts of phenomena may be partial. In studying our phenomena, however, we may find that in its complexity and richness its study requires moving beyond our training or disciplinary procedures to new procedures and ideas. Sometimes this may involve invention of new tools or new theories or new analytical procedures that call into question earlier disciplinary procedures. Sometimes this may mean we may call on the theories, procedures, and methods of other fields, which we also have a responsibility to respect, taking their knowledge and way of reasoning, not distorting it. In either case our ethical responsibility becomes complex as we need in some sense to violate normal good behavior of our field, or what Thomas S. Kuhn (2012) would call "normal science" (pp. 10–42). If we continue to believe in the value and project of our field, this then requires careful thought of how we bring new resources into our field as useful and even necessary to move the field forward towards its higher goals, even as we may be violating some norms. Particularly if we draw on resources of other neighboring fields, we may be violating distinctions between lines of work, methods, and phenomena that were drawn long ago. Sometimes ethical attachment to the phenomenon or application in the world may even push us to abandon the past to claim a new field and a new project in alliance with similarly minded colleagues. Or we could be attracted to the problems and practices of another established field we are drawing on—though integrating the resources and perspectives into your new home may also present problems in how you can respect and contribute to the problems of your adopted field. But at some point, you will need to recognize where your fundamental programmatic commitments are and where your primary contributions are aimed—and then make the work meaningful, important, and persuasive to that field.

Let me give some examples from my career. My doctorate was in literary studies, but I then discovered literacy education where I felt I could contribute more to the lives of young people entering society. In making that transition I found many of my fundamental values changed, and I no longer held so dear the practices and aims I had learned in my literary training, even though I brought with me many skills of text analysis and literary text production. In a sense I betrayed the work and goals of some of my teachers. To carry me across this divide I had to work through a worldview that changed my own ethical commitments and revalued the work of many of my former colleagues and mentors. As I entered more deeply into understanding academic and particularly scientific writing, I found I needed

the resources of sociological thinking, historical thinking, and science studies. I began attending different conferences and reading different journals, and I found their problems and commitments intriguing. But ultimately, I found that their problems were not mine. I found myself getting into too many arguments where I held views that strayed from the projects of the fields I encountered. I needed to realize that literacy education was my ongoing commitment, even as I used resources of various fields. Nonetheless, I needed to understand the expectations and purposes of sociological and historical inquiry and reasoning so I could understand and evaluate the work accurately. Using these resources to understand writing in its historical and social contexts to advance current practice then led me to reframe my studies and the arguments to be made from them.

Respect for the Contributions of Others

Respect for disciplines brings us to those who have previously contributed, building the literature we draw on and framing current issues for discussion. The most obvious aspect of encountering past literature is not stealing others' works to present as one's own, whether by intentional thievery, oversight, hazy memories, or sloppy record keeping. This of course is the notorious issue of plagiarism. More fundamentally, we have an ethical obligation to other authors to recognize we are part of a communal endeavor, building on each other's work, drawing strength from each other, evaluating as accurately as we can, and finding in it what is useful. While we should be appropriately critical of the limits of each other's work, we also should not be unduly dismissive or unnecessarily harsh. This obligation to communal knowledge and communal knowledge building puts a further affirmative obligation on us to be comprehensive in our search for all resources that might be useful to us, not ignoring other research programs or other subspecialties that we might dismiss too readily.

A further complicating dilemma is that over our lifetimes and careers we will have read and heard many things that will have influenced our thinking and approach to any research question. Any citations we provide in an article are necessarily selective, limited by criteria of immediate relevance mixed with strategic value in helping others understand and respond positively to our argument. Each of these decisions of strategy and relevance has ethical dimensions.

Responsibilities to Contribute and Learn

We also have an ethical obligation to contribute. This makes us ask what is the value-added work expected in each task. In research articles this usually means some new specific finding or theoretical perspective or research method which is the highlighted news of each publication. But not always. If, for example, we are doing bibliographic work, the value-added work we do is the collection and organization of the material. In this instance very few words would be original, and we would not

be guilty of plagiarism for reproducing the citations we would get from the original. What would be plagiarism is if we took the full list of citations from another bibliographic list. So plagiarism really has to do with the expected work added for each task and attempting to present someone else's work for those tasks as one's own.

This issue of the expected work added puts the issue of student plagiarism in a different light, as well as our obligations as teachers to frame our tasks and evaluations more precisely.

Most student tasks don't really have the goal of adding to communal knowledge. Student tasks are usually designed to foster student learning so that they learn prior knowledge, learn to synthesize it, learn to think in ways consonant with it, learn to think critically about it, and sometimes learn to carry out investigative procedures. The ethical obligation of the students is to do the work of learning. The work or value added we expect as teachers should be targeted precisely at what we want the students to learn, what we want them to be working on, solving the problems we think will help them develop.

Many student tasks simply involve reproduction of received information. On an exam, students often only have to reproduce material from their textbooks and lectures. Further if there is only one textbook and one set of lectures, the students may not be expected to give citations, because there is only one authoritative source of correct knowledge. Even use of exact wording is allowed. So the expected value added is only in the memorization of the material and reproduction of the material under exam conditions. Plagiarism would be copying from a nearby student who has done the memorization. In fact, if the student asked a friend about a question five minutes before the exam while waiting to enter the room or checked an answer after leaving the exam, it would still not be cheating. It would only be cheating if they had entered the exam room and the exam had begun. In summary writing, similarly, the expected work added is in the selection and condensed representation of material (all of which is from the original source); what would be plagiarism and cheating is if the student took someone else's selection and condensation and presented it as his or her own. If we provide students a data set for analysis, the work added is the analysis and not the collecting or even checking of the data (and even the citation of the data source is entirely dependent on the bibliographic information we provide them in the assignment).

If students do not do the expected value-added work and substitute the work of others for their own, they short-circuit the learning process. They are not solving the problems we think will teach them what they need to learn. They not only harm themselves, they undermine the cooperative environment that ought to pervade the classroom, and they undermine the value of the credential they have earned under false pretenses. They are keeping themselves at a distance from the material, the learning, and the discipline, as well as from the educational institution, losing the connections that can add to their strengths.

For ourselves as scholars, clear recognition and demarcation of the work of others helps highlight the remainder, which is our own work, which we hope

over time will be recognized as valuable and enter into the realm of accepted knowledge. Perhaps we will even get credit and some of the personal rewards for that, but the biggest ethical reward is to see that we have provided something of use to others and something that influences understanding and practice. This is even the case if others try to steal our thunder. Perhaps in the short-term others may get some undeserved credit, but at least the ideas enter more fully into the world of knowledge. Over time, if we produce consistent and related work that is well connected with the phenomena we study, our community, and the relevant literatures, our work will have a consistency and depth that will make it more recognizable than the small fruits picked from the side of the road by others. In fact, sharing work with others and being supportive of their development extends the presence and uptake of our work and more cumulative growth. Supportive ethical behavior with colleagues in the long run redounds to the power and recognition of our own work, with generosity extending even to those who may not be so careful recognizing our work.

Responsibilities to Ethical Publication

Concerning the long-term growth of communal knowledge, I want to raise one more contemporary ethical dilemma concerning where and how we attempt to publish our work. For many years the publication system was fairly stable with commercial academic print publishers, university presses, and academic society journals sharing values with the academic world and not seeking undue profits. Academic evaluation procedures came to rely on the selections made by these publishing venues. For a number of reasons including corporate growth and the disruptions of digital publication, major academic publishers are consolidating and becoming predatory in their pricing. They are also becoming ever more clever in hyping the status of their products, even influencing academic evaluations by such devices as impact factors and listings in particular databases controlled by the publishers. At the same time the academic world is growing with wider markets (often poorly funded) for academic knowledge but without access to the publications. Fortunately, open access publication is growing and offering alternatives, although not all the new venues are legitimate or legitimated, and academic reward systems may be slow to recognize the new legitimate venues. There is a real struggle going on for the future of academic publication, and the choices we make as individuals have ethical components about which future publication systems we are supporting.

Responsibilities to Ourselves, Our Work, and Our Communities

Throughout, I have been emphasizing positive building of knowledge, community, practice, and professions. I have emphasized that ethical responsibilities

and choices are also ethical opportunities to build connections, draw strength from nature, from our disciplines, from our colleagues, from prior researchers and thinkers, even from our publication systems. For our careers are ethical careers, and ethical work makes for strong careers. Ultimately, we have an ethical obligation for ourselves, to carry out life work which we will feel proud of, that will contribute to our societies. I have cast the net of ethical choices quite broadly to indicate the many dimensions of ethical choice and opportunity before us. This includes our teaching; a large part of our work is to provide guidance and challenges for students that will help them build their strengths so they can do the proper value-added work and have the skills to make contributions and apply knowledge with judgment and responsibility.

There are intentional cheaters (even sociopathic liars) whose violations of ethical expectations deteriorate our research professions and educational climates in untold ways. Insofar as we can identify these cheaters, they should be corrected, disciplined, and even in some cases excluded because of the harm they cause to our communal endeavors. Faked data has long been a concern because of how it confuses related research. Plagiarism also has long been a major concern, especially in educational contexts, but for different reasons—because it allows students to avoid the work of learning, grants undeserved credentials and rewards, and demoralizes other students, deteriorating motivation and learning engagement. But in my experience, most students are not pathological or determined to cheat. They are often lost within assignments and do not know how to proceed, or they did not start early enough to do all the requisite work and solve all the problems, or they do not understand or value the content of the course. So they borrow work from elsewhere, whether their friends, published work, the internet, or for-profit services. Stronger guidance and mentoring, building greater motivation and engagement in the material, better-structured activities, matching assignments to challenges students can meet—all these can diminish shortcuts and fakery. Smaller classes and more interaction between instructors and students of course will help this process; even with large classes, however, well-structured assignments with opportunities for students to display their work in progress and identify trouble points can make the plagiarism problem vanishingly small. Whether with our colleagues or students, we should not focus all our ethical energy on castigating moral deviation or ethical failure of others. Rather we should devote our energy to creating paths that facilitate ethical action, building relationships that can guide writing choices along lines of strength, giving power to our words.

Words do not come out of our heads alone. They are inspired by the world around us and the struggle we have to express and connect. In trying to synthesize what we find in the literature we are pushed to identify meaningful categories and articulate the underlying ideas that connect the work that comes before us. In making sense of the literature, we also articulate the problem we are addressing and come to terms with the kind of formulation that would serve as a solution to

the problem. A boring review of the literature does not contribute much to reformulating and reconnecting the prior work or reframing that work around a new problem and new ideas. An exciting review shows us our field in a new light and opens up new possibilities for investigation. It puts fresh life and dynamism into all we thought we knew and understood. But this requires close ethical attention. Otherwise, we normalize the literature into an old and familiar story, driven by tradition, conventional thinking, or ideological preferences.

Coming to terms with problematic or confusing data and phenomena, even more, can push us to identify new variables, new processes, new observations, new investigations. Then we suddenly see how phenomena or data that seemed disorderly make sense, fall into a pattern, reveal a previously hidden process. That moment can be filled with excitement and intellectual beauty. Then we are driven to articulate what we have seen in order to share it with others. But again, this requires an ethical attention to precision and honesty about the data, not making them fit prematurely into an expected meaning or categories into which they don't quite fit.

Then we need to struggle to make our new insight visible and persuasive to our readers, to transmit the power of what we offer. As we find the words and figures and equations, we can see the beauty and power of the knowledge we have made.

Thinking through how our inquiries relate to larger social problems in a precise way and what specific wisdom the findings might have for current interventions will locate the importance and force of the work for those beyond one's specialty. Likewise, thinking through where our discipline is going and how our work carries that along or redirects it, including relations with other fields and bodies of knowledge, can tap into larger strengths and dynamics that can feed words with energy. Even recognizing the audiences and publication choices open your work to create fresh thinking about the value and purposes of the work.

All of these considerations are about connections and relations and building them through ethical choices and actions, not diminishing or losing the strengths by shortcuts or obfuscations. These ethical commitments push us to find the right words, the right formulation that connects the relations with clarity and precision. They push us to poetic strength that mobilizes the power of relations and moves our readers to share the vision we present.

Academic writing is hard. Creating new statements grounded on close observation and data collection of phenomena, located within but distinguished from large bodies of prior knowledge, speaking to the needs, interests and questions of a discipline and society more generally—this is hard. It takes commitment, and it takes courage, and it takes solving many puzzles over an extended period over multiple projects and even over a career built on recurring themes.

Many risks come with this work: whether our work can navigate all the difficulties and complexities to get good results and be judged publishable; whether others will find fault with our knowledge, our understanding of theory and methods, our procedures, our results; whether our work will be judged sufficiently

original yet disciplinarily intelligible; whether our work will show us as smart and innovative or conventional and a bit slow; whether others will discover ethical lapses that will cast us beyond the pale; whether we can fulfil our ambitions for knowledge and live up to our own high estimates of talents.

One way to avoid the hard work, commitment, and risk is just not to begin the work or follow through on it. If we don't solve the problem of getting down to work, in a sense we don't have any further problems to work on. There are no more ethical lapses to fall into nor ethical opportunities to fulfil. And there will be no relations to build and no power of knowledge to be articulated. There may also be no job. So, the first and most fundamental ethical task and ethical opportunity is to get down to work. From here all ethical opportunities flow.

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