

P. Aarne Vesilind's Commentary on "How Much Help Is Too Much?"

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There is no argument here that Professor Brown is guilty of moral misconduct. Society, which indirectly pays his salary and supports his cushy life-style, must hold him accountable for doing the right thing. Part of his job is to certify that graduate students have certain expected skills, and in this regard he is clearly violating the public trust. The rest of the faculty, by knuckling under to Professor Brown, are equally guilty accomplices.

But should the focus of this unfortunate situation exclude James, the student who was unfairly helped through the program? Did he not, by accepting unfair assistance in passing the cumulative exams, essentially steal his degree? Is this behavior any different from that of students who cheat on exams or plagiarizes papers in order to graduate from college? In such cases, while the students receive the degrees, they must, at some stage in their lives, reflect on what underhanded means they had to use, and that reflection must be personally painful.

Just recently the local newspaper carried a story about how term papers can be purchased; the author of the news article estimated that at least 10 percent of college students use one of these paper mills during their time in college. The author had interviewed a writer of such term papers, who understood the sleazy nature of her craft, but then rationalized it by saying; "It's a natural thing [to purchase term papers and use them as your own]. If someone tells you a joke, you tell it as your own."

Her statement is wrong on two accounts. First, it is not a natural thing to steal, or to use deception in obtaining a college degree. Most students who cheat in college do so with full knowledge that it is wrong and often agonize about it. Second, telling a joke does not imply that the joke has been created by the person telling it. Everyone knows that jokes are shared without attribution. Only when the jokes are claimed to be original when they are not is the re-telling immoral. But the purchase

and use of term papers without proper attribution is an immoral act, and the writer of such papers is guilty of immoral behavior by openly and notoriously acting as a source of such papers.

It is interesting, however, that while some 20 states have made the *sale* of such papers illegal (punishable by a civil penalty), not one state has outlawed the *purchase* of the papers, although the entire industry would collapse if there were no buyers. The students who purchase the papers are also guilty parties in this sorry business.

Similarly, James is the truly guilty person in this case. It is his responsibility to conduct himself in an honorable way, and if he perceives that he is being unfairly helped (by having Professor Brown tell him what is on the comprehensive exams, e.g.), then he should stand up and refuse such help. This requirement differs little from that of a student who is offered a term paper for sale. We all recognize that the moral thing to do is to refuse to purchase the paper. Similarly, James should refuse to accept Brown's assistance. By cheating his way through graduate school, not only does James paint himself as a scientifically incompetent person, but also as an immoral one. It might be, that, as in the scenario, James could not hold a job; the problem with the job was not that he could not perform in the laboratory, but that his co-workers soon discovered that James could not be trusted. That second conclusion is far more damning than the first. If James were simply incompetent, he could always find a job cooking French fries. If he was a cheat and liar, then no one would hire him.