

Place for Ethics

Have we forgotten what the word 'ethics' means? Does it have its due in today's world? Dilip D'Souza wonders...



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Confession: I have a minor connection to the film "Swades". Its director, Ashutosh Gowariker, got some of the ideas for the film from an article I once wrote, about two young engineers who built a dam. If you watch the film, you'll see a "Thank you Dilip D'Souza" flash across the screen at the start.

That's all I'll say here about this.

But there's a reason I mention this Swades connection. One March day a few years ago, I found myself in front of a class of eager MBA students at a management institute in Rajasthan. (Not BITS, be it noted). I spoke to them about the young engineers, and my link to "Swades". Later that evening, one of the professors introduced me to another set of students. "This is the man," he said, "who wrote the script for Swades".

I quickly corrected him -- I didn't write the script, I said, I just wrote an article that the director read and thought about.

The professor waved away my objections. "You should just say it," he told me firmly. "Just say you are the scriptwriter."

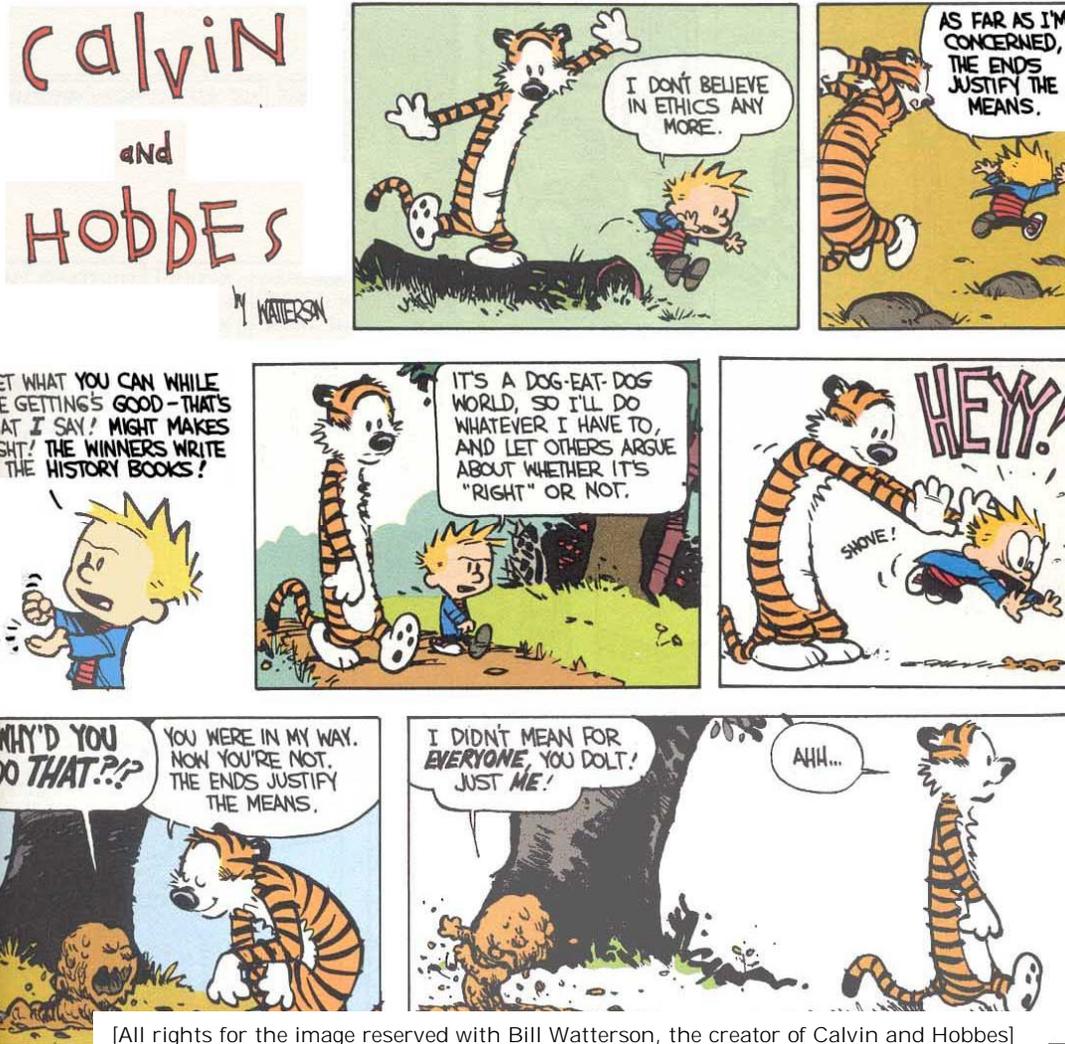
That I was stunned is an understatement. Here was a professor telling a few dozen students a complete fabrication about me, and then telling me in front of them that I should propagate it as well. A professor of business, no less. What lessons were his students taking home from this incident? What idea of ethics would they take into their careers?

Am I reading too much into this small incident? Well, then another small incident happened.

This was during an online competition I entered in not long ago. I didn't make the shortlist, so I swallowed my disappointment by following the three finalists. They were being judged by the blog posts they put up over a ten day period, the winner to walk away with a handsome sum of money. The competition between the three was intense, though genial.

One of the three was a recent graduate; I'll call him K, from one of the country's best known B-schools. Bright, keen and articulate, K wrote some vivid and easy-to-read posts, even if one of his competitors was clearly superior. Still, K was working hard, and you could tell that the contest would go down to the wire.

Then, one morning about halfway through the ten days, I clicked through to the site to read K's latest missive. Something seemed both odd and vaguely familiar about it, but I paid no attention then. Later in the day, it came to me. Someone had once drawn my attention to a two-year-old article in a publication I sometimes look at, and somehow, K's post reminded me of that essay. I brought it up again on my screen. To my amazement, K had lifted entire paragraphs from this article and reproduced them in his post, even retaining the few spelling and grammar errors, with no mention of the original or its author. In fact, it was the language and the errors that had



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seemed odd to me, because they made this post so unlike K's other smoother writing.

I remember sitting there baffled. Is this what intense competition had done to K? Why would this young man risk his chance at the prize, possibly even his reputation this early in his career, by plagiarizing so blatantly? Why would he do it, in this Web era when plagiarism is so easily uncovered?

I wrestled with myself for a while, then finally sent a note to the organizers of the competition, telling them all this. They took note of it and mentioned it on the site that hosted the blogs. That drove K to add the name of the author of the article to his post, though without any acknowledgement of or apology for the plagiarism.

But several reactions to this episode, from others following the competition, baffled and bothered me even more. They were all

variations on "what's the big deal, anyway?!" Here are some of these reactions, quoted verbatim:

- * "I don't find any harm in plagiarism until it's a great post." [Whatever that means; I suspect that "until" should have been "if"].
- * "Plagiarism can't be avoided nowadays in [an] era of information and technology because of shear [sic] number of articles."
- * "If it's unintentional and slightly modified, it will not cause harm."
- * "It was research, not plagiarism!"

Now none of us would react to a theft by saying "He was borrowing, not robbing!" Why do we treat plagiarism differently? Why do we take it less seriously?

Turned out there was no penalty for K. He carried on blogging, and finished the

competition as runner-up. Maybe it was indeed research, not plagiarism.

Again, am I reading too much into small incidents? I don't know, but if they do happen to reflect wider trends, these free and easy attitudes towards ethics trouble me. Does the urge to get ahead mean anything goes?

More learned folks than me have found evidence of sometimes "muddy" ethics among students in business schools. In particular, there's Don McCabe, a professor of management at Rutgers University. In a much discussed article on the Harvard B-school blog, "MBAs Cheat. But Why?" (<http://u.nu/54c23>), McCabe blames the "get-it-done, damn-the-torpedoes, succeed-at-all costs mentality" among today's business students in the USA. In other words, the intense competition also lasts through their careers. McCabe thinks this means students today are "more prone to ethical problems" than in the past, and that therefore, B-schools must teach ethics as part of their curricula.

This is not the place for an analysis of McCabe's arguments – for that, reading his original would be a far more useful exercise.

But he ends with some musing on how "business schools and their progeny ... lack a sense of disgrace." They think they can do anything in pursuit of a strong bottom-line - grades or stock prices. But can they really get away with it?

McCabe has a disturbing take on that: "As long as society accepts such behavior when it's associated with strong stock performance, I'm afraid they may."

In an India that sees itself as a country rising rapidly, management institutes are certainly proliferating rapidly. Only a few days before writing this, I counted dozens along a 10-km stretch of road on the outskirts of a large UP city I visited. Besides, we admire entrepreneurship and competition, and the rewards those bring. Rightly so! Some BITS alumni make impressive efforts to mentor current BITS students who want to go to B-schools.

Yet in all that, I hope there remains a place for ethics. I hope the two small incidents I mention are only aberrations.

I hope. But somewhere inside, I can't quite shake the same pessimism McCabe feels.

