On the Ethics of
Reviewing the Work of Colleagues

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> *"An ethical theory may also provide criteria for evaluating action".*
> — *Julia Driver, Ethics, the Fundamentals, 2007*

From time to time, competitiveness, jealousy and envy on the one hand, and favouritism, nepotism and cronyism on the other, drive academics to review the published works of colleagues. Oftentimes, inexperienced, ambitious and fame-hungry academics willing to do whatever it takes to advance their careers rush into reviewing the work of colleagues without understanding the ethical implications or the legal ramifications of their actions. All the same, whether they are playing the game or seeking fame, or whether their review is positive or negative, their action raises serious questions about the credibility of the review, the integrity of the reviewer and the ethics of the whole exercise. That is why most respectable publishers and academic institutions do not allow academics to review the published work of their colleagues or to conduct peer reviews of work submitted for publication by colleagues who work in the same institution.

In the first instance, academic collegiality forbids colleagues to review books written by other colleagues within the same institution, or worse still, within the same faculty. The reasons may not be obvious, but whether it is a positive or negative review, one has to view it with suspicion, no matter what the declared intentions or unstated motives of the reviewer may be. More precisely, reviewing the work of a colleague who works in the same institution constitutes a **conflict of interest** and calls into question the credibility and objectivity of the review. To avoid conflict of interest, high-impact journals do not allow reviewers to review the work of authors who work in the same institution and in some cases, double-blind reviews are instituted to guard against prejudice, although the practice is not encouraged or recommended because of unavoidable familiarity with the work of peers. Most scholarly work takes place within

specific knowledge domains and in specific scholarly communities where colleagues working at close proximity become familiar with the work of their peers. For that particular reason, double-blind reviews often fail to ensure objectivity and unbiased evaluation of the work of colleagues despite the safeguards that are put in place to conceal the identity of the author.

The same concept of jury disqualification applies to open peer reviews of close collegial work, and guarding against biases, prejudices, or other influences that might affect the reviewer's impartiality has an equal objective in conducting peer reviews. Furthermore, disclosing the type of relationship between reviewer and author, and directly or indirectly announcing to the reader that both author and reviewer work in the same institution, is not enough to clear the journal or reviewer from the charge of conflict of interest, real or perceived. A reviewer that is seen or perceived to be influenced by personal considerations rather than by the merits of the work under review has in effect fallen foul of conflict of interest rules.

Within the framework of the same educational institution, the organizational relationships between author and reviewer play a critical role in the reviewer's evaluation of a colleague's work and in how the review is perceived by the readers. In this connection, the Code of Ethics of the University of Southern California for example, classifies reviewing a colleague's paper as a more insidious form of conflict of interest, alongside power differentials, insider or privileged information and student-mentor issues.[1]

Whatever the organizational relationship, divergent goals invariably give rise to conflict of interest and inevitably impair the reviewer's judgement. Conflict of interest has been defined as a set of conditions in which a reviewer's judgement concerning a primary interest may be biased by a secondary interest such as personal gain.[2] In other words, conflict of interest arises when one puts one's interests above the interest of the work itself. Consequently, reviewers are expected to determine their appropriateness as reviewers to avoid conflict of interest and eliminate bias.[3] As Boyle (2001) points out, the potential for conflict may result not only from the actions and interests of the individual but also by virtue of their relationships. Colleagues working in the same institution are more likely to fall foul of conflict of interest rules.

There are five major areas where conflict of interest occurs: when there is (1) a close association between reviewer and author, (2) indirect financial

interest, (3) conflicting duty, (4) receipt of applicable gift (for example, a promised promotion, summer teaching, grant approval, conference approval, or place on the editorial board of a journal, etc.), and (5) becoming an interested party.[4] As a profession, teaching is bound by a code of ethics that prevents self-interest from guiding the decisions of those on whom the public depends; it is designed to ensure independence, impartiality and unbiased decisions and actions[5] of those entrusted with research, reviews and teaching. As a profession, teaching has its own values and standards, and rules that govern conflict of interest are part of those standards (Davis & Stark, 2001). When an academic has divergent goals, their obligations to uphold these rules and their commitment to scholarly work are likely to be compromised since any conflict of interest is bound to undermine the credibility of the reviewer, the journal in which the review is published and the institution at which the reviewer and their colleague work. According to Amdur & Bankert (2011), a potential source of conflict of interest is loyalty to colleagues. However, conflict of interest may also arise from rivalry with colleagues, which may coexist with loyalty as two opposing conflicting poles, especially in hostile and toxic work environments, where employees take credit for others' work, assign blame, or spread rumours; co-workers and managers exclude teammates from networks[6] and uncivil behaviour is tolerated—"all of these can cut a swath of destruction that's often visible only to the immediate victims" (Porath & Pearson, 2009). On the one hand, loyalty to a colleague may compel a reviewer to review the work of another colleague with whom the other colleague may be in competition or conflict. On the other hand, absence of professional solidarity and disloyalty to the colleague whose work is being reviewed may also be a source of conflict of interest. That is why the literature on reviews emphasizes conducting "peer" reviews by independent reviewers.

Generally, bad reviews can potentially tarnish an author's reputation as an authority or serious researcher in a certain field. The law of libel can be brought to bear on reviews conducted by colleagues, which are decidedly negative or inaccurate. Sloppy reviews by inexperienced or naïve academics may result in lawsuits for libel and defamation of an author's reputation and reviewers may be held legally accountable for their opinions, especially in the presence of a clear conflict of interest. Fair representation and element of justice are the main criteria here. According to Pool (2007), a review that distorts a book, even if it praises it, is unfair to author, book and readers alike. "Unless reviewers describe as precisely as possible both the book and their assessment of it, they're bound to

misrepresent books and mislead readers" (Pool, 2007, p. 73), and be held potentially liable.

The consequences of reviewing the work of a colleague who works in the same institution do not stop there. A negative review has a negative impact on the colleague's standing among his or her peers and worse still among his or her students. This is a serious ethical situation that requires further examination with respect to the reasons, motives and intentions of the reviewer and where applicable, the review commissioner. A negative review not only has the potential to damage the colleague's standing in the eyes of colleagues and students but might also seriously damage the colleague's standing and associations in his or her community. The extent of the damage may also affect the colleague's chances of promotion or career advancement within the same institution and even his or her ability to secure research grants. No publisher or sponsor would be willing to support a negatively reviewed author.

Avoiding conflict of interest is one of several aspects of integrity (Heldman, Baca, & Jansen, 2007). Reviewing a colleague's work in a manner that is seen or perceived to be to the disadvantage of the colleague arising from a conflict of interest is an act that lacks integrity. Academic integrity is conduct consistent with a set of values that cover learning, teaching, research and service. In this light, academic integrity is defined as a commitment to five core values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility.[7] These values have been recognized as prerequisites for academic life to enable academic institutions to develop and flourish.[8] However, as King, McGuire, Longman, & Carrol-Johnson, (2007) observe, the quality and integrity of publications are often affected by peer reviews, author collaboration, and ethical conduct that, one hastens to add, does not uphold these five core values.

Finally, reviewing a colleague's book is not just a bad idea; it is also inherently unethical. To sum up, knowing the relationship that may exist between reviewer and author, their associations and affiliations enables the reader to judge the authenticity of the review and the extent of the reviewer's credibility. The ethical expectation on the part of the reader and the community of scholars is that the reviewer should have no relationship with the author. Moral knowledge is essential to a scholarly community. While there are those who believe that there can be no such thing as morally right or wrong, such propositions should not be taken seriously "as a realistic option in our approach to living" (Coady, 1992, p. 282), let alone scholarly work. Moral decisions, as Fletcher (1966) reminds

us, are informed by three approaches: the legal, the lawless and the situational, with the legal approach being by far the most common and persistent. It is also an established tenet in ethical inquiry that reason is the instrument of moral judgement.[9] Ethical reasoning raises valid questions about the morality of reviewing a colleague's published work. Faced with situations of moral conflict, professionals try to resolve them in a variety of ways. As Kultgen (1988) points out, the way they resolve them "determines the moral quality of their lives and the welfare of those affected by their actions" (Kultgen, 1988, p. 14).

In the words of Gertrude Stein as she lay on her deathbed, "it is better to ask questions than to give answers, even good answers"[10]. Considering the foregoing argument, is reviewing a colleague's work still ethical?

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About the Author

Ali Darwish PhD, MIS, MA, is a Media, Communication and Translation consultant and scholar. He has taught translation theory and practice and communication studies at Australian universities for several years and has published a number of books on media, communication and translation. He is also the founder and chief editor of Translation Watch Quarterly, Australia's premier international refereed journal of translation studies. Ali is Assistant Professor of Arabic and Translation Studies at the American University of Sharjah. Ali's research interests include professional ethics and standards, professional development and leadership, Knowledge Management and organizational behaviour change management.

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Notes

[1] http://www.usc.edu/ admin/provost/oprs/ private/docs/oprs/pnp/ Policies_and_Procedures_Draft_copy_10106.pdf.

[2] Amdur & Bankert, 2011.

[3] Weller, 2001.

[4] Adapted from Macquarie Lawyers & Strategists www.macquarielawyers.com.au/ files/ How_To_Identify_A_Conflict_Of_Interest.pdf

[5] Davis & Stark, 2001.

[6] Porath & Pearson, 2009.

[7] Center for Academic Integrity, http://www.academicintegrity.org/fundamental_values_project/index.php

[8] http://www.umuc.edu/distance/odell/cip/vail/faculty/AI_overview/ai_overview.pdf

[9] Fletcher, 1966.

[10] Reported in Fletcher, 1996.