

As members of this Undergraduate Ethics Committee, we are charged with the mandate “Fill the seats of judgment with just people, but not so absolute in justice as to forget what human frailty is.” Thus, our goal must be to come to a just ruling, while also remembering compassion. As such, in the case of Alexandra Romanov’s plagiarism I would recommend an F on the offending paper.

Of all the information surrounding this case, the most important piece is the mandate the committee has been given. Compassionate justice must be the framework through which evidence is weighed, and as such I will give a brief outline as to what I believe the qualities of justice are. Justice is an ideal that seeks to right wrongs without seeking to be gratuitously punitive, as no punishment will change the past. Instead, a just punishment will seek to redress wrongs, instruct and correct the wrongdoer, and protect any wronged individuals. Furthermore, justice is not determined by laws or rules—rather, legislation seeks to achieve justice. We cannot look solely to regulations to determine a just punishment. In the same vein, justice is entirely independent of popular opinion, which cannot be allowed to influence a verdict. Finally, in the spirit of compassion it must also be remembered that we are all flawed by nature, and one transgression does not necessarily define a person. These guidelines will assist in both parsing the given information to determine its relevance and determining which of the given punishments is most just under the circumstances.

With a framework established, the given information must be separated into that which is relevant and that which is excess. I propose four categories: character of Ms. Romanov, circumstances of the infraction, guidelines for the UEC, and irrelevant information. Once this information has been sorted, the relevant guidelines will be applied to determine which punishments are just and which are compassionate. I would first suggest that items 2 and 5 be classified under character. She has a good GPA and this is her first infraction, which demonstrates that this is out of the norm for her. Circumstances may also speak to her character, but these items directly show that she is generally an

excellent student. Regarding circumstances of the infraction, I would classify items 1, 3, 4, 8, and 11-20 as circumstantial, as they cover her life outside of the relevant class. I would further classify 5, 22, 32, and 34 as guidelines for the UEC. These items contain the mandate, precedent for this case, and the fact of Ms. Romanov's transgression. Everything else (i.e. items 6-7, 9-10, 21, 23-31, 33, and 35) I would deem irrelevant information. How Ms. Romanov feels about the class, how she acquired the paper, Mr. Stone's feelings about the transgression or about himself, popular opinion regarding the UEC, or the composition of the UEC are outside the scope of this committee, which seeks only to find a just punishment for the transgression of Ms. Romanov.

It is undeniable that Ms. Romanov has violated the policy of her class and of the university. Nobody was directly harmed (barring, perhaps, Mr. Stone's pride), and as such her punishment need not include compensation to a wronged party. However, this wrong must still be redressed, and Ms. Romanov's transgression must be corrected. As such, a just decision by this committee will include a punishment of some sort. This eliminates no punishment from the list of just options. All of the remaining options meet the first-order qualifications of justice's intentions, in that they all redress the wrong and instruct and correct Ms. Romanov. However, by comparing past precedent on similar cases (precedent alone cannot determine what is just, but it is a valuable tool) in which the son of a regent committed a similar offense and was not punished at all, it can be concluded that a dismissal from the university for a similar infraction would be draconian based on the precedent the UEC has set thus far. This can easily be confirmed by the character of Ms. Romanov—as noted above, this transgression is a significant deviation from the norm for her. It is therefore clear that a temporary dismissal from the university does not fit the crime and would be an overly punitive reaction for a first offense, which is not what a just ruling seeks to accomplish. This leaves two just options: An F for the class, or an F for the assignment.

In addition to determining which punishments are just, per the mandate we must also determine which punishments are compassionate. We must also consider circumstances—and here, Ms. Romanov has a lot going for her. She is an excellent student with a family, pursuing an education despite opposition at home. Her transgression came during a time of great personal stress—and while that does not excuse her actions, it does help to contextualize them. This plagiarism case is not the manifestation of a lazy freshman’s lack of motivation to do the assignment—rather, it was a choice by an otherwise excellent student who was overwhelmed and made a mistake. Ms. Romanov’s circumstances, her past behavior, and what we can divine about her character all speak favorably of her, and would thus seem to tip the scales towards leniency. Let us now look towards the potential consequences of the punishments. Absolving her of punishment will not negatively impact Ms. Romanov, but may implicitly condone such behavior. Although this is not a just punishment, it is a compassionate one, taking into account the extenuating circumstances surrounding the transgression. An F on the assignment is a just punishment, as already established. Furthermore, being far less than the maximum possible punishment and giving her a chance to redeem herself within the class, this is also a compassionate punishment. With an F in the class, Ms. Romanov will be forced to retake it, straining her finances further and perhaps exacerbating difficulties at home. These difficulties will be compounded by a lack of support for her continuing education at home—meaning this punishment may negatively impact her entire education. In conjunction with a lack of chances for redemption within the class, this is a just punishment, but I would not consider it a compassionate one. The last option, dismissal from the university, is the maximum possible punishment, and is in no way compassionate.

Having determined which punishments are just and which are compassionate, it is clear which punishment best fulfills the mandate the committee has been given. The two least severe punishments are compassionate, and two middling punishments are just, and as such the most applicable punishment

is the intersection of the two. An F on the paper would redress the wrong of her cheating, as well as instruct and correct Ms. Romanov—and it would do so in a way that is neither crushingly punitive nor overly lax. In addition, if we are to look to compassion—to take into account human fallibility and the character of Ms. Romanov, as well as her circumstances surrounding the transgression—we must decide that Ms. Romanov is not the picture of an unrepentant child. Rather, she is an exemplary student who made a mistake, and though she deserves to be punished her education should not overly suffer for her first mistake. Only an F on the paper is both just and compassionate, reprimanding Ms. Romanov and redressing the mistake while accounting for her situation both in school and at home, and giving her a chance to demonstrate that she learned her lesson the first time without overly burdening her with punitive costs.

In compliance with the mandate given to this University Ethics Committee to carry out justice without forgetting compassion, I would highly recommend that Ms. Romanov receive an F on the offending paper. This punishment constitutes a consistent level of severity with precedent set by this committee while still redressing Ms. Romanov's transgressions and correcting her action—in other words, this punishment is just as described in the framework above. Of the just punishments available to us, an F on the paper is the punishment that considers compassion as well as justice—Ms. Romanov's first mistake is not the norm, and what we know of her character and situation would suggest that she is deserving of a second chance before needing to suffer increased costs from class retakes and permanent GPA drops. Her actions have consequences, and she is not exempt from those—but her mistake need not be one that follows her throughout life. Here, as in everything, understanding on all sides may go further in righting past wrongs than any punishment ever could.