

Initiating the Debate

Reflecting on a doctoral supervision: From scepticism to friendship

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Abstract

In this article two colleagues are in conversation regarding doctoral supervision: The first author acted as a doctoral supervisor, while the collaborative author was a doctoral candidate during three years of study. The first author offers a narrative account of his sceptical encounter with the candidate while the candidate offers an account of her experiences during her doctoral studies. Drawing on the seminal thoughts of Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell (1997), particularly on his ideas on 'living with scepticism', the first author argues that postgraduate student supervision ought to be an encounter framed by scepticism. He points out that supervising students sceptically might engender moments of acknowledging humanity within the Other (autonomous action); attachment to the Other's points of view with a readiness for departure (deliberative engagement); and showing responsibility to the Other (recognition of the other). Not necessarily in response, but certainly in conversation, the candidate presents her own experiences of encountering two unknowns, namely, the writing process demanded by a doctoral dissertation, and the unknown Other of a doctoral supervisor. She journeys her shift from naïve attachment to a writing that she thought she owned to one of mature detachment, strong enough to stand on its own. In exploring the necessary sense of completion and arrival that ought to accompany the doctoral process, the candidate singles out elements of trust, belief and the knowledge that the doctoral supervisor ought to attach the same value to a student's work as he/she does. Finally, in recognition of the unexpected of the doctoral journey, the candidate reflects on the flourishing of a friendship, which emerged from an encounter of scepticism.

Keywords: doctoral supervision; scepticism; autonomous action; deliberative engagement; friendship

THE FIRST AUTHOR'S VIEW

Acknowledging humanity within the Other

It seems quite apposite to use Cavell's (1979) depiction of one's relationship with the Other to attend to postgraduate student supervision; in this instance, some of the experiences of and my pedagogical encounters with Nuraan Davids over the past three years. Central to one's connection with the Other is the view that one has to acknowledge humanity in the Other of which the basis for such action lies in oneself: 'I have to acknowledge humanity in the other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me' (Cavell 1979, 433). Davids became a doctoral student on the basis of having been introduced to me by a colleague. Her eagerness to pursue doctoral studies, coupled with her critical acumen, astuteness and independence of mind, made an indelible impact on me, to the extent that I was persuaded to begin a doctoral journey with her. Hailing from Cape Town, she had completed her Master's degree at another South African university and subsequently applied to Stellenbosch University to pursue doctoral studies under my supervision, on the grounds that my area of educational research connected with her own interests in democracy and citizenship education. Since she is an intelligent, proud and hard-working person, we soon connected and developed a mutually respectful, trustworthy and professional relationship. The fact that our friendship developed so remarkably over the past three years is a profound testimony to how both of us recognised our humanity within ourselves and in association with one another. As further recognition of Davids' commitment and humanity, the University of Stellenbosch supported her attendance of the Annual Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Conference in Oxford – a visit that exposed her to other Philosophy of Education students and academics abroad. The conversations at Oxford further and significantly influenced her understanding of and writing on democratic citizenship and cosmopolitan education in relation to Islamic education. Thus, our friendship was consolidated further, primarily because she felt that I had acknowledged her as a fellow human being. In acknowledging others as human beings worthy of respect, one should simultaneously acknowledge oneself as a person who should exercise respect. This is what I think Cavell (*ibid.*, 435) has in mind when he claims:

Another may be owed acknowledgement simply on the ground of his humanity, acknowledgement as a human being, for which nothing will do but my revealing myself to him [her] as a human being, unrestrictedly, as his or her sheer other, his or her fellow, his or her *semblable*. – Surely this is, if anything, nothing more than half the moralists whoever wrote have said, that others count, in our moral calculations, simply as persons; or that we have duties to others of a universal kind, duties to them apart from any particular stations we occupy.

I considered myself to be Davids' '*semblable*' who would later invite her to review articles for a journal of which I am the editor. For me, she possesses the analytical

and evaluative competence and skills to write excellent reviews, and I always enjoy her caring and often uncompromising judgements of others' work. I have found her autonomous action in commenting on other people's academic work very similar to her authoring of her own doctoral text.

Attachment with a readiness for departure

Of course, as supervisors we are responsible for effecting changes in the lives of our students, so we teach them to be civil. And this I have done through exposing Davids to academic writings that aim to cultivate democratic iterations (learning to talk back), citizenship rights and cosmopolitan justice, particularly in relation to the production of theses that aim to contribute towards justice in and about (Islamic) education. But this does not mean that we ought to censure students' actions so that we determine in advance what they ought to research in order to connect their work with achieving civility, or what consequences they may face if they do not write theses that connect with issues of civility (e.g. having their work rejected by me). Teaching our students to connect with issues of civility, following Cavell (*ibid.*, 325), makes us 'open to complete surprise at what we have done'. In other words, supervisors and students can be initiated into practices concerning what is morally good for society, but with the possibility that what is perceived as good for society is always in the making, continuously subjected to modifications and adaptations. For instance, it may be morally good for society to produce work (theses) about advancing a common understanding of Islamic education – and we may decide this in advance; but when a common understanding of Islamic education is not shared by some Muslim homosexuals (some of the candidate's interviewees), interactions with them may result in moments of excluding the Other and otherness. Davids' thesis departs from making arguments for excluding otherness, and hence seems to come into conflict with a common understanding of Islamic education, that is, what seems to be desirable for the broader public good. The point I am making is that my thoughts alone did not influence her thesis; rather, her independence of mind and critical insights determined the thoughts that went into the formulation of her arguments. Thus, when I supervise students I initiate them into relevant forms of life, that is, by showing them what I say and do, and accepting what they say and do as what we say and do. To put it differently: supervisors tell themselves and others (students) how they must go about things without predicting this or that performance. Cavell (*ibid.*, 179) makes the point that 'the authority one has, or assumes, in expressing statements of initiation ... is related to the authority one has in expressing or declaring one's promises or intentions'. So, when students are supervised they are initiated into a form of life intended by the supervisor. This also implies that students can subvert these forms of life as they wish. They may be transformed by the practice of supervision, and also subvert this practice in order to give themselves other opportunities – such as those unintended actions of the practice. I often found that Davids produced revised chapters in which the intended, agreed upon outcomes had not been attained at all.

Responsibility to the Other

Cavell's remark, (*ibid.*, 384) 'we are alone, and we are never alone', is a clear indication that one does belong to a particular group (being alone with others, that is, 'we') and that, by virtue of being human, one bears an internal relation to all other human beings – especially those who might not belong to the same group as one. This internal relation with my fellow human beings does not ignore my answerability to/responsibility for what happens to them, although I do not belong to the same group as they do. As a member of a particular cultural group in society I cannot just impose my views (albeit religious or political) on others, for that in itself would deny that there are others in different positions (with different cultural orientations) to mine. Doing so would be doing an injustice to others. But being answerable to/responsible for what happens to them means that their views are acknowledged, although I might not be in agreement with them. Rather, one conceives the Other from the Other's point of view, with which one has to engage afresh (*ibid.*, 441). Initially, I challenged Davids' singular understanding of normative Islamic education. Yet I acknowledged her views, although I might have been in stark disagreement with them. In so doing, I did not compromise my relations with her, for that would have meant a complete breakdown of our professional friendship. From my own vantage point I might find another person's views repugnant (what Cavell would refer to as living my scepticism), but this does not mean that I view this person as being unworthy of any form of engagement. That would be an abdication of my responsibility. The point I am making is that, as a human being, I can distinguish firmly between my understandings of a practice and the understandings others have of the same practice. But this does not mean that I compromise my humanitarianism to others – a matter of exercising my responsibility to them. For instance, Davids queried my understanding of a normative conception of Islamic education. I was obliged to find ways to engage with her with the intention of making her understand what I consider to be a justifiable conception of the practice; or, if I found her lack of seeing my viewpoint to be untenable, I should have responsibly made known to her what was seemingly unknown.

In demonstrating one's responsibility towards others, one immediately acknowledges one's capacity for intimacy with others – thus limiting one's idiosyncratic privacy. It is for this reason that Cavell (*ibid.*, 463) claims that 'human beings do not necessarily desire isolation and incomprehension, but union or reunion, call it community'. If my privacy remains restricted to me with the intention not to exercise my responsibility to others, my practices would remain unshared and separated from the people with whom I happen to engage. So, my privacy opens a door through which someone else can tap into my thoughts – which might be of benefit either to the person concerned or to society at large. But if my privacy is prompted by narcissism, the possibility that others might gain something valuable for the good of society might be stunted. If I were to reflect more on my academic encounters with Davids, then I would be able to refer to two articles I co-authored

with her. These works grew out of our doctoral engagement and she is recognised as the first (primary) author. My responsibility towards her as a supervisor was also to contribute towards creating conditions for her self-empowerment – and, when she saw her name linked to mine as the primary author of peer-reviewed journal articles, she smiled. I knew then that my responsibility towards her had taken on a new dimension. Subsequently, I asked her to co-author two more articles and two book chapters. Again, my responsibility towards her took another turn.

In a Cavellian fashion I have learnt that supervisors ought to be responsible human beings with regard to their students. Responsibility towards our students implies that they have to create opportunities for them to think, argue and write their texts at a doctoral level. Writing is a truly laborious, yet imaginative, exercise. I have taught students to continue writing even though the comments they receive would at times not be as encouraging as they might have expected. Finally, I have realised that student supervision is about building a friendly relationship between the supervisor and the student – one that can bring forth the articulations of both in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and responsibility. My three years of working with Davids can be considered as a sceptical encounter with the Other. This implies that one needs to experience the Other as a culturally situated being; one needs to engage deliberately – and at times belligerently so – with the Other through reading, authoring and presenting; and one needs to establish opportunities for the Other to be present in his or her becoming. Of course, my pedagogical encounters with Davids have not been without complexities and contradictions, that is, without scepticism. She usually became annoyed with me for sometimes commenting on her work over-zealously. Yet, my at times rigorous feedback did not discourage her (I think) from completing her work. In a way, her doctoral work has taken seriously the work of argumentation – what a thesis should actually be doing. Many South African doctoral studies (and I have examined a few) focus too much on techniques of educational research instead of applying the techniques while doing research. That is to say, generally too many studies are concerned with letting the reader know what procedures of research have been applied in education, yet these studies do not always develop consistent argumentation. My connection with Davids has always privileged the argumentative route, with the result that her study has been often lauded as theoretically rigorous. However, her study did not and should not ignore the technical and professional use of procedures of educational research, but I would advocate that less emphasis should be placed on these techniques and more on the arguments that should emanate as a result of using the techniques. Often, too many students write a chapter on techniques that seem to be unrelated to the arguments that ensue in their theses. In a way, students should work (like Davids has done) on the techniques with a readiness to depart from their often pedantic use – a matter of becoming sceptical.

THE SECOND AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

The decision to pursue my doctoral studies was not an easy one. I knew that it would require much of my time and energy – two assets that were already over-extended by three children and full-time employment. But I knew that I was beginning to lose my passion for the project and developmental work I was doing in schools, and was looking for something to fill the void. It was the persistent encouragement from a mutual colleague that finally led to my first meeting with my doctoral supervisor, Prof. Yusef Waghid. I had entered that meeting with a vague, but uncompromising idea of what I wanted to do, namely, to write about something that would change me. It needed to be something that I could pour myself into, and that would push me in another direction in my life – which meant that it had to be something close to my heart. The decision to focus my research on whether commensurability exists between the lived experiences of Muslim women and cosmopolitanism was to a large extent about making sense of my own space and place in a pluralist society. In many respects my research topic was a peculiar one. I had never consciously explored any aspects of my identity as a Muslim woman – pretty much embodying Wadud's (2006, 19) description: 'Since they are Muslim, they do Islam'. Secondly, other than attending *madrasah* (Muslim school), and sporadic classes as they aroused my interest, I had never seriously studied Islamic education, which, I would later begin to understand as education in Islam. It is within this context that I need to explain my initial feelings of intimidation and ineptness on meeting a supervisor, who was known to be a renowned scholar in, among other areas, philosophy, Islamic education and democratic citizenship education. Our initial discussions were dominated by my supervisor's voice, giving direction in terms of who and what I needed to read and read and read, what my proposal needed to look like, and then a flurry of due dates to chapters, which were beyond my wildest comprehension. These discussions came at such a speed – not in terms of rate, but in terms of expectation – that I consciously refused to take any notes, lest I forgot to actually listen and absorb all that was said. It was at once overwhelming and deeply challenging – my biggest fear and realisation centring on the fact that if I were to write this dissertation it would mean making myself known to my supervisor, to those who read it, and to myself. By our second meeting, it was a sense of great dis-ease and alarm that I realised that if I were going to spend the next few years writing what I hoped to write about, I needed to learn and believe two things, respectively: learn to trust Waghid, and believe that he cared as much about my dissertation as I did.

Detachment with a readiness for arrival

The decision to include my own story as one of the case study stories was never part of my initial plan, and when Waghid first suggested it, I met the idea with both scorn and trepidation. I felt that I was being pushed into revealing a part of myself that I did not wish to reveal, but I also knew that beneath the protests lurked an insecurity to write about myself. By not including myself, I was safe from being seen, from

being heard. Strangely, I thought nothing of writing about the lives of other Muslim women – of laying bare their thoughts, their joys, their angst – in fact, I struggled to understand why Muslim women were reluctant to participate in my research. And yet, I had the audacity to balk at my supervisor's suggestion to include my own voice – not as the narrator, but as an actor and participant. Later, I would learn through reading the work of Charles Taylor (1994, 25), that growing up and living under the conditions of an apartheid-established society had left me with a distorted or reduced mode of being. Taylor (1989, 49) maintains that in order to have a sense of who we are, there have to be notions of how we have become, and of where we are going. Our sense or way of being, therefore, cannot develop in isolation from either the spaces we inhabited or from those who participated in our lives. Our identity, says Taylor (1994, 25), is partly shaped by how we have been seen and recognised by others in our lives, but by equal measure it is partly shaped by how we are not seen and recognised by others:

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.

It was wonderfully liberating to encounter the works of Taylor – in attaching meaning to my identity, to how it had been shaped, recognised and misrecognised, I could detach myself from the fear of making myself known. Making myself known meant that I could finally release myself from a distorted way of being; it allowed me to become who I needed to be in order to be free from the myths and perceptions which had previously been mediated onto my identity. But this realisation came later – after a particular encounter with my supervisor.

Knowing my unwillingness, and sensing my fear, Waghid shared his own story with me – a story of democratic citizenship education vis-à-vis his upbringing. I distinctly remember the afternoon when it happened. I had arrived with a list of questions to his latest comments – determined to re-assert what I felt was my loss of control over of my research. I felt that he had been pushing me too hard, and wary of other students' complaints that promoters often imposed their own ideas or ways of doing things onto their students, I was determined to re-articulate that the ownership of this dissertation was mine, and not his – a position I would later learn, was not only ridiculously selfish, but in direct contradiction to my expectation that my supervisor ought to attach as much value to my dissertation as I did. Sensing my combative mood, he ignored my questions (and my tone), and started telling his story. I was baffled. Up to this point I had only encountered Waghid, the Professor. Now I was encountering the Other. I must have sat in numbed silence for an hour – taken aback by his willingness to share – then got up and left. His willingness to share with me probably had a greater impact on me than he could have imagined. I think in that moment two things had happened – in one sense I no longer saw myself

as just his student. Somehow, by revealing his story, he had conceptually levelled the playing fields, and had erased what I perceived to be the power structure of supervisor-student relationship – the one constructed on the basis of one knowing much, and the other not knowing enough. I do not think Waghid simply chose to share his story in order to convince me to write about mine. I think he really wanted me to see and recognise him, so that I could see and recognise myself.

Later, after I had finally discarded my masks of play and pretence, I would begin to ask who I was afraid of being seen by, and what I was afraid of – what others might see, or what they might not see, or perhaps, that I would finally see myself. Cavell (1979, 382) asks:

How can I fail to believe in my expression of myself, my capacity to be able to present myself for acknowledgement? I have this pain, I am proud or ashamed of this deed, humiliated by this thought. But if I fail to believe in the other's acknowledgement of me, must I be failing to believe in the other's capacity to accept these facts, to measure their reality for me, perhaps to share them?

My initial unwillingness to insert my own life into the story I was narrating was my unwillingness to confront who I was and who I was about to become. While I absolutely needed affirmation and acknowledgement that what I was presenting was in fact that which was being read and experienced, I was deeply suspicious of my supervisor's responses – any criticism of my writing (of which there were many) would now become a criticism of me, but, upon reflection now, I was also deeply sceptical of myself. To Cavell (*ibid.*, 388), these scepticisms are borne out of an ill-fated need to silence the self and to live in ignorance:

So saying that I cannot just not know myself amounts to saying that I am the one who is fated to have, or to begin with, an average knowledge of myself. And doesn't this amount to saying that I am the one who is fated to keep myself in a certain (average) ignorance of myself? What is the form of this ignorance, an ignorance of something I cannot just not know? Is it to be thought of as keeping a secret? But in what form can I keep a secret from myself, keep silent?

And so, my dissertation was no longer a research study of six diverse Muslim women in a diverse society; my research no longer existed outside of my life, my knowledge and my secrets – I had become the main protagonist in my own research. And the deep irony was that while I had bewailed to Waghid that my insertion and inclusion would attach and reveal me too much in my research, what evolved was a detachment from my writing (to which I had held so tightly, and so fiercely), which allowed me to take Cavell's (*ibid.*, 383) advice:

To let yourself matter is to acknowledge that you want the other to care, at least to care to know. It is equally to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them.

And yet, because we cannot, in the Cavellian sense, ‘produce in others the responses you imagine would satisfy you’ – my supervisor, after reading the first draft of my story, did not acknowledge me or what I had written, instead, he asked why my story was so clean and neat. This was typical of the way Waghid supervised my work and engaged with me: he was never satisfied; he always felt that there was more to say, and that I was holding back. But that simple question to what I had thought had been the most intimate part of my writing, was the key to my detachment from whom I thought I ought to be. And, perhaps, more profoundly, I would learn that in writing there was always more to say, more to reveal, more to expect, and to be ever watchful for the unexpected.

The Other’s responsibility to the Other

If our discussions up to this point had been defined by intense debates, disagreements – me refusing to relent on what I thought I needed to say, and him continuously questioning if not what I was saying, then how I was saying it – then the weeks that followed the afore-mentioned development were ones of amity and calm. It was as if a storm had passed, and the muddy waters needed to clear. The turmoil I had experienced in my writing – often instigated by my supervisor’s persistent (almost relentless) questioning of my work – had certainly become a part of the way we interacted with each other. Waghid seldom accepted any of my first drafts – even when I felt convinced that it was the best that I could do. When his critical feedback came barely an hour after I had sent my work to him, I would read his comments with resentment and irritation – irritated, because his immediate responses invariably meant that he was waiting for an amended version, which meant more work and more writing. I was writing at every opportunity – and was writing a new chapter while revising earlier ones – often bemused by what I had written before. It seems that the more I wrote, the more I needed to re-write – everything was changing – I was being exposed to a myriad different texts, ideas, theories, and arguments that needed to be re-filtered through my own context and writing. While there were nights when I could not stop writing, there were nights when I simply could not think of one more word. It was wonderfully exhausting, and while I had retreated from most of my social interactions, and pretty much parented in distraction, life had not retreated from me. In the midst of working and writing a doctoral dissertation, my mother suffered a stroke and my father-in-law passed away. On both occasions, while Waghid acknowledged my concern, my despair and my grief, he ended each conversation with a reminder of due dates, of agreed upon time-lines. I considered his behaviour bizarre. What I expected was to be told to take some time off, and to spend some time with my family, but that was not forthcoming. And yet, even under circumstances of what can only be described as his lacking a certain level of empathy, he was in fact extending compassion – not to the woman in his presence, but to the student in his care. And so while Cavell (*ibid.*, 384) contends that ‘we are alone, and we are never alone’, there are indeed times, even in our internal relations with all other human beings, even those whom we think we know well, when we are

indeed alone. The acknowledgement that I received from my supervisor was neither what I expected nor what I would necessarily agree upon, but ultimately his justice towards me was enacted through being answerable to me as a student and what I needed to do.

In many respects I had embarked on a road not only less travelled (as Robert Frost would encourage us to do), but often wondered whether indeed I had the right to be on the road I had chosen. I had deliberately chosen as case studies Muslim women who came from diverse backgrounds, whose understanding of, and relationship with, Islam might not sit too comfortably in a conception of normative Islam, and indeed, might cause, as it did, offence to certain readers. I expected some criticism, a few raised eyebrows – which is not to say that I wrote the dissertation with the intention to disturb and disrupt. Whatever disruption there proved to be, would be only as a jarring that conceptions of homogeneity and uniformity are as fluid and mercurial as trying to explain to a non-believer what it means to believe in the grace of God. My contribution would be to acknowledge the humanity of not only Muslim women, but others of all faiths and even of no faith at all, of those who were steadfast and of those who lived in doubt – that ultimately we are all connected by the singular virtue of our humanity.

My decision to include the exploration of a Muslim, gay woman, for example, was twofold: to recognise her, and therefore take responsibility for the respect due to her as a human being; and to make known that as in other faith-based communities, women are different and assume varied roles and identities, which ought not to preclude them from participating in their faith. Was I prepared, then, for what, even now, feels like an onslaught on my character? Was I prepared for the accusations of the undermining of my own faith? No, and I doubt anything could have prepared me for it. It came as a bolt out of nowhere. I was shattered – not by the black words on the white paper, but for yet again being mis-recognised, for being distorted into someone else's myth, and being contorted into justifying someone else's version of the truth.

When the voice of comfort and reassurance came, it was from Waghid – not in the form of defending his student or what she had written, but in the form of whether I still believed in what I had written. It was a deeply emotional time for me – a time when I found myself temporarily stepping outside of my community. Benhabib (1992) asserts that the situated self cannot be de-linked from the community in which it has been shaped and in which it lives, and I had no desire to either de-link myself or to offend it. My presentation of the multiplicities of identities amongst Muslim women, while provocative in a community of conservative silences, was not written to provoke the outrage of others. But the person, who had started this dissertation, was not the person, who had completed it. And the supervisor whom I first encountered in 2009 was no longer the intimidating professor. I had become known to him, and he had become what he describes as my fellow, or *semblable*. He inundated me with the writing of reviews, reading proposals for dissertations, authoring new articles, co-authoring with him – pushing me from one text to another, until the one threaded into

the other, and the writing simply could not, and has not stopped. Three years later I find myself absorbed and submerged in the writing and reading of texts I could never have imagined. My journey has been profoundly rewarding, and most of all, I have found a friendship in one whom I might never have encountered had I not allowed me to acknowledge myself.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (350 B.C./2004) discerns between three types of friendships, namely: (1) friendship based on utility, where affection is motivated by people's own good, and pleasure is derived from how much advantage one can gain from it; (2) friendship based on pleasure, which is motivated by people's own pleasure, which is why these friendships seldom last; and (3) friendship based on goodness, in which each person alike wishes good for the other, and they are good in themselves. To Aristotle, friendships based on goodness are perfect, because this type of friendship is permanent, because it possesses the attributes friends ought to possess. I do not know whether I am a good person, and I am equally sceptical that I possess all the attributes to which Aristotle alludes. But I do know that in my supervisor I have encountered a good person, a good friend, who has seen the good in me, and who has inspired me to be the best possible good that I can be in my writing. This friendship was neither quick to be made, nor was it, or is it, one of ongoing agreement and peace. It has been fraught with dissension and opposing viewpoints, but never short of deep respect. Through Waghid's willingness to let himself be known by me, and through allowing me to articulate and express viewpoints, with which he often disagreed, but never dismissed, I have been privy to an incredible journey to getting to know myself and others. I listen to other students, when they bemoan the writing process – and they have full right to do that. Writing a doctoral dissertation can be just the writing of a very thick document, supplemented by a brief encounter between two people, who might never see each other again. But it can and does hold the potential for so much more, and so much of that depends, on the one hand, on how much a supervisor is prepared to invest of him- or herself in the student. And this has so much more to do with an investment of the self, of reflections, of engagement, and of moments of wrongness, than it does to do with having time or being right. And perhaps, as has been my experience, it is for the student to detach him- or herself enough from his or her own writing so that he or she, too, can see the supervisor as one who needs to be connected with, as one who ought to, and can be trusted, as an Other, who, in fact, has more to offer than he or she stands to gain.

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