

Author and Audience

It might seem obvious who the author and audience of a student's essay are. The student is the author and the professor is the audience. Of course that is true. But a student is not a normal author, and a student's professor is not a normal audience. I want to expand on these two points in this chapter. I will begin with the conceptually simpler topic: the abnormality of a teacher as audience.

1 The Professor as Audience

It's indispensable for an author to know who the audience is. Depending upon the audience, an author might take one or another tack in explaining her position. (See also section 3.)

A student is not in the typical position of an author for many reasons. While an author usually chooses her intended audience, the student's audience is imposed on her. (The student's predicament, however, is not unique. An audience usually chooses his author. In contrast, the professor's author is imposed on him: his students. Both should make the best of necessity.) Unless the student is exceptional, she is not writing to inform or convince her audience of the truth of the position she expostulates. So her purpose is not persuasion. Further, unless the topic is exceptional or the professor relatively ignorant, the student's purpose is not straightforwardly expository or explanatory either. Presumably, the professor already understands the material that the student is struggling to present clearly and correctly. Nonetheless, the student cannot presuppose that the professor is knowledgeable about the topic being discussed because the professor, in his role as judge, cannot assume that the student is knowledgeable. It is the student's

job to show her professor that she understands what the professor already knows. A student may find this not merely paradoxical but perverse. But this is the existential situation into which the student as author is thrown.

The structure and style of a student's essay should be the same as an essay of straightforward exposition and explanation. As mentioned above, the student's goal is to show the professor that she knows some philosophical doctrine by giving an accurate rendering of it; further, the student must show that she knows, not simply what propositions have been espoused by certain philosophers, but why they hold them. That is, the student must show that she knows the structure of the arguments used to prove a philosophical position, the meaning of the technical terms used and the evidence for the premises. (One difference between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas is that the former cares about the structure and cogency of the arguments.) The student needs to assume (for the sake of adopting an appropriate authorial stance) that the audience is (a) intelligent but (b) uninformed. The student must state her thesis and then explain what she means. She must prove her thesis or at least provide good evidence for it.

All technical terms have to be explained as if the audience knew little or no philosophy. This means that the student ought to explain them by using ordinary words in their ordinary senses. If the meaning of a technical term is not introduced or explained by using ordinary words in their ordinary meanings, then there is no way for the audience to know what the author means. For example, consider this essay fragment:

The purpose of this essay is to prove that human beings never perceive material objects but rather semi-ideators, by which I mean the interface of the phenomenal object and its conceptual content.

This passage should sound profound for no more than a nano-second. In theory, there is nothing objectionable to introducing the term *semi-ideator*, but anyone with the gall to invent such a neologism owes the reader a better explanation of its meaning than "the interface of the phenomenal object and its conceptual content." In addition to neologisms, words with ordinary meanings often have technical meanings in philosophy, e.g.:

determined
matter
ego
universal
reflection
pragmatic

When an author uses a word with an ordinary meaning in an unfamiliar technical sense, the word is rendered ambiguous, and the audience will be misled or confused if that technical meaning is not noted and explained in terms intelligible to the audience.

It is no good to protest that your professor should permit you to use technical terms without explanation on the grounds that the professor knows or ought to know their meaning. To repeat, it is not the professor's knowledge that is at issue, but the student's. It is her responsibility to show the professor that she knows the meaning of those terms. Do not think that the professor will think that you think that the professor does not understand a term if you define it. If you use a technical term, then it is your term and you are responsible for defining it. Further, a technical term is successfully introduced only if the explanation does not depend on the assumption that the audience already knows the meaning of the technical term! For that is precisely what the student has to show.

There is an exception. For advanced courses, the professor may allow the student to assume that the audience knows what a beginning student might know about philosophy, perhaps some logic or parts of Plato's *Republic* or Descartes's *Meditations*, or something similar. For graduate students, the professor may allow the student to assume a bit more logic, and quite a bit of the history of philosophy. It would be nice if the professor were to articulate exactly what a student is entitled to assume and what not, but he may forget to do this, and, even if he remembers, it is virtually impossible to specify all and only what may be assumed. There is just too much human knowledge and ignorance and not enough time to articulate it all. If you are in doubt about what you may assume, you should ask. Your professor will probably be happy to tell you. If he is not, then the fault lies with him; and you can rest content with the knowledge that, in asking, you did the right thing. That is the least that acting on principle gives us; and sometimes, alack, the most.

While I have talked about who your audience is and about how much or how little you should attribute to him, I have not said anything about what attitude you should take toward the audience. The attitude is respect. If you are writing for someone, then you should consider that person worthy of the truth; and if that person is worthy of the truth, then you should try to make that truth as intelligible and accessible to him as possible. Further, if you write for an audience, you are putting demands on that person's time. You are expecting him to spend time and to expend effort to understand what you have written; if you have done a slipshod job, then you have wasted his time and treated him unfairly. A trivial or sloppy essay is an insult to the audience in addition to reflecting badly on you. If

a professor is disgruntled when he returns a set of essays, it may well be because he feels slighted. A good essay is a sign of the author's respect for the audience.

2 The Student as Author

Although you are the author of your essay, you must not be intrusive. This does not mean that you cannot refer to yourself in the first person. Whether you do or not is a matter of taste. Some decades ago, students were forbidden to use "I" in an essay. A phrase like "I will argue" was supposed to be replaced with a phrase like "My argument will be" (or "The argument of this paper" or "It will be argued"). Formal writing is more informal these days. "My argument will be" is verbose and stilted. I prefer "I will argue" for an additional reason. Although physical courage is widely admired and discussed in contemporary society, and, perhaps, unwittingly caricatured in macho men, intellectual courage is not. Too few people have the courage of their convictions; yet convictions on important issues that are the result of investigation and reflection deserve the courage needed to defend them.

Ideas have consequences just as surely as physical actions do. Some are good, some are bad; some are wonderful, some are horrid. Own up to yours.

A person who writes, "It will be argued," is passive; he is exhibiting intellectual courage obliquely at best. By whom will it be argued? If it is you, say so. A person who writes, "I will argue," is active. She is committing herself to a line of reasoning and openly submitting that reasoning to rational scrutiny.

Philosophical writing is virtually never autobiography, even when it contains autobiographical elements (*The Confessions* of St Augustine and those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau are notable but rare exceptions). It is very unlikely then that your personal life or personal feelings should be exposed in your philosophical writing, at least in those terms. No philosopher should care how you *feel* about the existence of God, freedom, abortion or anything else, presented merely as your feelings. Thus, use of the phrase, *I feel*, is with rare exception forbidden in essays. Your feelings have no claim to universality and do not automatically transfer to your audience. You might feel that God exists but that is no reason why anyone else should. The phrase, *I argue*, in contrast, does transfer. The phrase implies that the author has objective rather than merely subjective grounds for her position and thus that the audience ought to argue in the very same way.

Specific incidents in your life also have no place in your essay, considered as *your* experiences. Considered simply as *experiences*, they may have both relevance and force. Contrast these two ways of making the same point.

When I was 14 I wanted a ten-speed bike but needed \$125 to buy one. The only way I could get the money legally was to work for it. I hired myself out at \$2.00 an hour doing various jobs I hated, like cutting lawns, washing windows, and even baby-sitting. It took three weeks, but I finally had enough money to buy the bicycle. What I discovered, often as I was sweating during my labors, was that money is not just paper or metal, it is control over other human beings. The people who hired me were controlling my life. I figured out something else: if I have money and also respect someone, I shouldn't force him to do crummy jobs just so they can get my money.

Suppose a young person wants to buy something, say, a ten-speed bicycle. He may hire out his services for money, perhaps at \$2.00 an hour cutting lawns, washing windows, or baby-sitting. By hiring himself out, he is putting himself within the control of the person who is paying him. Money, then, is not simply metal or paper; it is a means of controlling the behavior of other human beings. Further, if a person respects others, he will avoid hiring people for demeaning and alienating labor.

Although the first passage is livelier and more appropriate in non-philosophical contexts, for example, a newspaper or magazine article, its philosophical point is made more obliquely than in the second, where the author's view of money is directly related to every human being and not just the author. Thus, the second passage is preferable for an explicitly philosophical essay. The first passage is egocentric; the persona of the author is the student herself. In the second passage, the persona of the author is an objective observer of the human condition.

The notion of a persona is a technical one. The word *persona* comes from the Latin word for the mask that actors wore on stage. There were masks for comic and tragic characters, for gods and mortals. To have a persona is to play a role. An author plays a role and hence has a persona. The question is, What is that persona? or What should that persona be? because there are two possible roles an author can have in her essay.

An author inescapably has the role of creator, since she is responsible for the words of her essay. As the creator, the author has a transcendent perspective on her essay insofar as she is making it and is not made by it. If an author makes herself a character in one of her examples, then she takes on two personas, that of author and that of character (or creator and

creature). These opposed personas may confuse the reader. Consider the very different roles that the author plays in the following passage:

Suppose that Smith and I have our brains interchanged. And I think that I am Smith and he thinks that he is I. However, I think I remain myself because I am identical with my body at any given time.

It is difficult to understand this passage because the reference of “I” shifts between the author *as a character in the scenario* to the author *as the creator of the scenario*. Contrast the original with this revision in which references to the author as a character are replaced with references to a purely created character:

Suppose that Smith and Jones have their brains interchanged. Jones believes that he is Smith and Smith believes that he is Jones. Nonetheless, I argue that Jones remains Jones and Smith remains Smith, because a person is identical with his body at any given time.

Even this passage can be improved. There is something tendentious about saying “Jones remains Jones and Smith remains Smith” that was not obvious in the first passage. The following version is better:

Suppose that Smith and Jones have their brains interchanged. And the body that Jones had before the brain interchange believes that it is Smith, and the body of Smith that it is Jones. Nonetheless, I argue that the body of Jones remains Jones and Smith’s body remains Smith because a person is identical with his body at any given time.

The point is that the more objective the author’s standpoint the better. (Recall that I am speaking about the above passages rhetorically and am not passing judgment on their cogency.) There is never any need for an author to cast herself in her own examples: Smith and Jones, and White, Black, Brown, and Green are versatile philosophical character actors. (It is a substantive issue whether the duality of personas has philosophical consequences; see Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.)

Characters in scenarios have an immanent, not a transcendent, perspective. What they know and do is whatever the author has them know and do. This means that what they know is often very limited, and their beliefs are sometimes mistaken.

To change the figure of speech, the author of an essay acts like God. All the characters in the examples are like creatures. When God said, “Let

there be light,” there was light; and when God said, “Let the earth produce every kind of living creature,” there was every kind of living creature. Similarly, when an author says, “Suppose Smith and Jones have their brains interchanged,” Smith and Jones have their brains interchanged. And if an author says that a brain in a vat thinks that he is a scientist, the brain in the vat thinks that he is a scientist. Neither God’s will nor the author’s will (within the limits of logic) can be thwarted; whatever God wants to happen happens.

Like God, an author’s will in constructing an example cannot be thwarted if what she says is coherent and if she has no doubts about what she is supposing. The transcendent position of an author is inherently anti-skeptical. A story is told about an eighth grader who was having trouble learning algebra. The teacher said, “Suppose that x equals 2.” The student became quite anxious because she thought the teacher could have been wrong or at least overlooking a possibility: “Teacher, suppose that x does not equal 2.” The student did not realize that when a person supposes something to be true for the sake of argument, then it is true within the context of that discussion. For all intents and purposes, an author is omnipotent and omniscient. (I am speaking only of philosophical authors; some contemporary fiction tries to undermine the seemingly divine qualities of authors.) However, omnipotence is limited by logical coherence. Be on guard against thinking that you have proven a point by constructing a logically contradictory scenario, as in this essay fragment:

Suppose that there is a four-sided plane-figure, of which all the interior angles are 90° . Further suppose that each point of its perimeter is equidistant from a point inside of it. Thus it follows that there is a round square.

This scenario is defective because its supposition is contradictory.

Unlike the author, the characters in a philosophical example are subject to error and deception. This is a perfectly acceptable scenario:

Suppose that Smith, who has known Jones for 20 years, sees someone who looks exactly like Jones walking across the plaza. Further suppose that Smith does not see Jones, but Jones’s long-lost twin brother, although Jones himself is also walking across the plaza out of Smith’s sight. . . .

So far in this chapter, I have tried to explain the sense in which a student’s audience, the professor, must be considered ignorant, and the sense in which the student, a philosophical author, should maintain a transcendent perspective, from which she is omniscient and omnipotent. How is that for a Hegelian reversal?

3 Three Attitudes about Philosophical Method

A difficult issue for the student as author is knowing what her professor thinks is a good way to tackle a philosophical problem. Some professors think that a person's intuitions are the best starting point; others think that one must begin with a theory; and others think that a combination of the two is best. I will discuss each of these attitudes in this section.

Since the word "intuition" is used in various ways, I need to explain what I mean by it here.¹ Intuitions are the pre-theoretical judgments that a person makes about something. They are usually contrasted with the judgments a person makes after having considered the issue extensively. Often these reflective judgments are the result of accepting some theory. A theory is a systematic explanation or description of a large class of phenomena. The theory must consist of some general propositions that apply to all or almost all of the phenomena.

Our intuitions include the beliefs that the sun goes around the earth, that human beings act freely without being necessitated to act the way they do, and that some things are inherently morally right and others wrong. It is a matter of theory that the earth goes around the sun, that every action is causally necessitated, and that nothing is inherently morally right or wrong. To say that something is a matter of theory is not to say that it is true; it may be true or it may be false, depending upon whether the theory is true or false. Phlogiston was part of an eighteenth-century theory of combustion; but statements about phlogiston were false. In philosophy, there are typically two or more incompatible theories for any topic; so not more than one of them can be true.

Philosophers are split over the relationship between intuition and theory. Some ("intuitionists") believe that intuition is privileged and that theories are constructed in order to justify and explain intuitions. Wittgenstein, who in the later part of his life wrote that everything is all right as it is, would be a paradigmatic case of an intuitionist.

Other philosophers ("theorists") believe that the goal of philosophy is to develop a theory about a topic and that intuitions have little or no value.

¹ In one sense, an intuition is a faculty of knowing particular objects without being able to form a judgment simply on the basis of that knowledge. Think about seeing something red. This may be the result of intuition. This intuitive experience of red needs to be distinguished from a judgment that one might form on the basis of the intuition, for example, *This is red* or *Something is red*. Intuitive knowledge is knowledge known immediately, without inference, for example, that $1 + 1 = 2$. In ethics, intuitionism is the view that some ethical propositions are known without inference, for example, that pleasure is intrinsically good, and sometimes that ethical judgments are the result of a special faculty, ethical intuition.

Bertrand Russell argued that sentences like “Socrates is wise” are actually not subject-predicate in form but really complex existential assertions, meaning something like:

There exists an object x such that x philosophizes in fifth-century BC Athens and is named “Socrates,” and for all y , if y philosophizes in fifth-century BC Athens and is named “Socrates,” then y is identical with x , and x is wise.

Russell’s argument is grounded in a theory: his famous theory of definite descriptions.

Promoting only intuition or only theory are extreme positions. There is a middle ground between them that promotes what may be called reflective equilibrium. This view holds that philosophy should begin with intuitions; that theorizing should begin by trying to explain those intuitions; that when intuitions and theories conflict, there should be a compromise between them, such that intuitions sometimes are given up to accommodate theoretical statements and sometimes theoretical statements are given up (or modified) to accommodate intuitions. Roughly, intuitions should give way when there are theoretical statements that explain a very large number of intuitions, and some related but not central intuition is inconsistent with them. And theoretical statements should give way when numerous and well-attested experiences support an intuition.

It is not controversial that the intuition that the sun goes around the earth should give way to the consequences of the heliocentric theory. It is controversial that intuitions about the basic structure of a sentence like “Abraham Lincoln was a president” should give way to Russell’s theory of definite descriptions.

There is no way to predict whether your professor will prefer intuitions or theories, or reflective equilibrium. It is important that you figure out which he or she prefers and what position you want to take on this issue. The easiest way to do this is to ask.