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Author and Audience

It may seem obvious who the author and audience of a student's essay are. The student is the author, and the professor is the audience; that is true. However, a student is not a normal author, and a student's professor is not a normal audience. I expand on these two points in this chapter. I begin with the conceptually simpler topic: the abnormality of the professor as the audience.

1.1 The Professor as Audience

It's indispensable for an author to know who the audience is because different audiences require different ways of explaining. An author should not use the technical language of an electrical engineer to describe how electrons move through wires to electrical outlets. Section 1.3 says more about this matter, and chapter 10 discusses it in detail.

A student is not in the typical position of an author for several 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. But the student's audience, her professor, does not choose his author; it is his student. Both the author and the audience should make the best of necessity. And necessity often is the motivator for innovation. (The science of soil management developed to meet increased demand for food. Radar was invented to defend against enemy aircraft.)

Unless the student is exceptional, she is not writing to inform or convince her audience of the truth of the position she takes in her essay. So her purpose is not persuasion. Further, unless the topic is exceptional or the professor is unusually ignorant, the student's purpose is not straightforward

exposition or explanation either. Presumably, the professor already understands the material that the student is struggling to present clearly and correctly. Nonetheless, the student should not presuppose that the professor is knowledgeable about the topic being discussed for this reason. In the professor's role, he should not assume that the student understands the material about which she is writing. It's her job to show her professor that she understands what the professor already knows. A student may find this paradoxical situation perverse. But this is the existential situation into which the student as author is thrown. (An important part of understanding human beings is understanding that much of a person's life is not chosen but imposed on her. No one chooses their parents, even to be born.)

Notwithstanding the student's unusual position, the structure and style of her essay should be the same as an essay of straightforward exposition and explanation. As just mentioned, the student's goal is to show her professor that she knows some philosophical argument or position by giving an accurate rendering of it; that usually includes showing that she knows why the philosopher holds it. Doing so usually requires laying out the structure of the philosopher's arguments, the meanings of his technical terms, and the reasons or evidence for his 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.) These matters are explained in chapter 2. The student needs to assume (for the sake of adopting an appropriate authorial stance) that the audience is (1) intelligent but (2) 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 use 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 less than a nanosecond. In theory, it is not objectionable to use a technical term to explain a new technical term, but this is acceptable only if the prior technical term has already been explained in ordinary language. The term *semi-ideator* is

a neologism and is unintelligible to the reader until its meaning is explained. In addition to neologisms, some ordinary words have technical meanings in philosophy, so their particular meaning may need to be made clear. Here are some examples:

ego
matter
pragmatic
realized
reflection
universal

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

It is no good to protest that your professor should allow 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 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! That is what the student has to show.

There is an exception. For advanced courses, a professor may allow the student to assume that the audience knows what a beginning student should know about philosophy, perhaps some logic, parts of Plato's *Republic*, 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 is in him, certainly not in his stars, and you can find comfort in the knowledge that in asking, you did the right thing. That is the least that acting on principle gives us.

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 the 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.

1.2 The Student as Author

The author should not intrude in her essay. This does not mean that she has to be invisible. Whether the author refers to herself or not should be determined by what is appropriate and idiomatic. 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 will argue" is preferable for another reason. Although physical courage is widely admired and discussed in contemporary society, intellectual courage is not. Too few rational people have the courage of their convictions, yet convictions 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 almost never autobiographical 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 you should expose your personal life or feelings in your philosophical writing, at least in those terms. No reader should care how you *feel* about the existence of God, freedom, abortion, or anything else,

presented merely as your feelings. Thus, the use of the phrase, *I feel*, is forbidden in essays because 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 events in your life also have no place in your essay, considered as *your* events. Considered simply as *events*, they may have both relevance and force. Contrast the way the following two paragraphs make 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 \$4.00 an hour doing various jobs I hated, like cutting lawns, washing windows, and even baby-sitting. It took three months, but I finally had enough money to buy the bicycle. What I came to realize, often as I was sweating during my labors, was that money is not just metal or paper, it is control over other human beings. The people who hired me were controlling my life. I came to realize 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. She may hire out her services for money, perhaps at \$4.00 an hour cutting lawns, washing windows, or baby-sitting. By hiring herself out, she is putting herself within the control of the person paying her. 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, she will avoid hiring people for demeaning and alienating labor.

Although the first passage is livelier and more appropriate in nonphilosophical contexts, for example, a newspaper or magazine article, its philosophical point is made more obliquely than in the second, in which the author's view of money is directly related to every human being and not just to the author. Thus, the second passage is preferable for a 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 the stage in theater productions. 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.

Author and Audience

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; she is outside it 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 a second persona, that of a character who is in the example she is constructing. She is simultaneously the creator and the creature, an incoherent situation. The presence of two personas may confuse the reader. Consider 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 creature in the scenario* and 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 the bodies of Smith and Jones have their brains interchanged. The body that had Jones’s brain now has Smith’s brain, and vice versa. The body that originally had Smith’s brain now, with Jones’s brain, says that it is Jones. And the body that originally had Jones’s brain now, with Smith’s brain, says it is Smith. I shall argue that the identity of the person is determined by the brain it has and not by the identity of the rest of the body.

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

White, Black, Brown, and Green, and Lee and Kee are versatile philosophical character actors.

What the characters in scenarios believe and do are determined by the authors who create them. If their beliefs are mistaken or their actions objectionable, it is because the author has made them so. 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.

An author's will in constructing an example cannot be thwarted as long as what she says is coherent and has no doubts about what she is supposing. She transcends the situation she describes. In this way, the author's situation 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 might 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 fiction tries to undermine the privileged position of an author through the use of an "unreliable narrator.") However, the power of the author 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 each interior angle is 90° . Further suppose that each point of its perimeter is equidistant from a point inside of it. 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?

1.3 Three Attitudes About Philosophical Method

A difficult issue for the student as an 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 her ordinary beliefs. They can be contrasted with the judgments the person makes after having considered the issue extensively. Often these reflective judgments are the result of adopting some theory. A theory is an explanation or description of a large class of things, events, or 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 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, but both can be false. (In chapter 4, *contraries* are defined as two things that cannot both be true but both may be false.)

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.

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, is a paradigmatic case of an intuitionist in the sense specified above.

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. 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 BCE Athens and is named “Socrates,” and for all y , if y philosophizes in fifth-century BCE 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.

Privileging only intuition or only theory is an extreme position. The middle ground 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; and 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 the 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 does by paying attention to how he introduces a philosophical problem, and when you cannot figure that out, ask him.