

Writing for the Reader: A Defense of Philosophy and Popular Culture Books

William Irwin

Published online: 31 January 2014

© William Irwin 2014

Abstract

There are some risks in producing public philosophy. We don't want to misrepresent the work of philosophy or mislead readers into thinking they have learned all they need to know from a single, short book or article. The potential benefits, though, outweigh the risks. Public philosophy can disseminate important ideas and enhance appreciation for the difficult and complex work of philosophers. Popular writing is often less precise, lacking in fine detail and elaboration, but it can still be accurate (in the sense of being "on target"). People often need a simplified account to get an initial understanding. Whatever one thinks of the role of jargon in scholarly writing, its place should be minimal in popular writing. If physicists can write books of popular science with virtually no equations, philosophers can write books for a general audience with limited jargon.

Public philosophy, such as the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series that I edit, has its share of critics. Elsewhere I have explained and defended the interpretation of pop culture as a vehicle for disseminating philosophy.¹ On this occasion I would like to take the opportunity to defend the style of presentation and the simplification of ideas and arguments that is common to my series and other works of public philosophy.

Public philosophy takes a hit from some academic critics who disparage its style of writing as attention-seeking simplification. Many critics don't regard it as philosophy at all.² Maybe it's not. Maybe it's more like reporting on philosophy. But does Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* count as science? Even if it doesn't, it certainly serves the worthwhile purpose of explaining the cosmos in a way that is accessible and interesting to the general public. Hawking's book is remarkable not just for its success but for its surprising lack of

Corresponding Author: William Irwin
King's College
williamirwin@kings.edu

mathematics. If Hawking can explain physics without equations, then certainly philosophers can explain metaphysics without symbolic logic. It's a challenge, though, in ways that critics may not realize. It is easier to explain physics using mathematics because much of the work has already been done by the reader in coming to understand the mathematics. The physics in *A Brief History of Time* may be simplified, shorn as it is of mathematical apparatus, but only a pedant would complain that it is inaccurate as a result. The average reader gets a valid sense of the subject matter and many have been inspired to learn more.

So if physics can be simplified appropriately for a general audience, then why not philosophy? Popular writing is often less precise, lacking in fine detail and elaboration, but it can still be accurate (in the sense of being "on target"). People often need a simplified account to get an initial understanding. Later, with their interest prompted, they can learn the more complex version. So, for example, a work of public philosophy may not consider every possible way in which utilitarianism can be refined to meet the objections of its critics, but to demand that it do so is to miss the point. The point is to make it accessible so that ideas can spread beyond the ivory tower.

One of the aims of writing for the Blackwell series is to teach without being "teachy." That is, we don't want to be pedantic or preachy. We are not aiming for the scholarly innovation of academic journal articles, nor are we producing classroom lectures. Rather, we are aiming to create a sense of discovery. The best popular writing often makes the reader feel like a collaborator in figuring things out, which, of course, is often true of the best classroom teaching as well. None of this is easy. Consider the plight of Plato's escaped prisoner who returns to the cave from the world outside and is not able to make out the shapes of the shadows on the wall. His eyes must readjust to see the shadows; he must speak in terms of them if he is to communicate effectively. This is the task of philosophers in writing for the public. Having learned the jargon and rules of discourse for academic philosophy, they must take what they have learned in that form and translate it into the language of everyday life. This is the only way they can hope to both teach and be taught by their non-academic readers and interlocutors.

Some critics may complain, though, that we should not speak in terms of the shadows. Philosophy is difficult by its very nature and any attempt to simplify it or make it easy just distorts the subject matter. Of course it is true that, for example, the mind-body problem is complex and that no easy answers suggest themselves. But that does not mean that public philosophy should avoid an elementary discussion of the mind-body problem in which some attempted solutions are presented in their most basic form. We all need to start somewhere in developing our understanding of the problem. Some people might like the experience of

being thrown into the deep end of the pool and being forced to swim, but most prefer to begin where the water is not over their heads.

Still, it may be objected, by presenting a simplified version of philosophy we risk sending the message to readers that this is “all you need to know.” Admittedly, there is some risk of this, but it is the same risk that we take in teaching Introduction to Philosophy. The clear message of the intro course and of most public philosophy is that this is *not* all you need to know, but rather that this is an introduction, one that will hopefully prompt you to want to know more. On a related note, some critics are concerned that simplified accounts of philosophy make the discipline appear frivolous and undermine the hard work of professional philosophers. Such concerns are misplaced, however. No one thinks physics is frivolous after reading popular science books. If professional philosophy is misperceived as frivolous, we need to look elsewhere for the source of the misperception.

Nonetheless, some critics will maintain that nothing worthwhile comes easy, so philosophy should be hard. Wrestling with ideas is hard enough, though. In doing public philosophy we don't need to compound the difficulty by presenting the ideas in needlessly complex forms and prose. People need to walk before they can run; they need an elementary version of philosophy before moving on to a more advanced discussion.

Lack of clarity in philosophical prose is sometimes claimed as necessary because of the nature of philosophy. But this is rarely so. Analytic and continental philosophy may seem to be divided in part on the issue of clarity where analytic philosophy strives for clarity and continental philosophy seems to revel in obscurity. But this characterization is facile, and even if it were accurate it would make little difference to the average person who finds them both impenetrable. Thus, in my capacity as editor of the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, I am open to any topic, issue, or problem addressed by either analytic or continental philosophy (or any other tradition) as long as the author can explain it in terms that are interesting and intelligible to the average reader. No philosophical topic is automatically excluded from consideration, though many topics in academic philosophy are of interest almost exclusively to other philosophers who are already interested in a particular field or issue. Just as not every topic works well in most Introduction to Philosophy courses, so too not every topic works well in most public philosophy books. Most professors do not teach Wittgenstein, Heidegger, modal logic, or deconstruction in their intro courses. But some do, and some of these have success. Likewise, such topics can be considered in public philosophy books; we simply need to be careful in doing so. Style and presentation matter.

Writing with a sense of fun or with an irreverent sense of humor is verboten in academic philosophy, but it is just the kind of thing that enlivens a work of public philosophy and elicits the good will of readers. The writing itself can be fun but it is *not easy*. Fred Astaire is often praised as making dancing look easy, but no one worked as hard as Astaire to make it look easy. Following in Astaire's footsteps, the ideal for the public philosopher is to produce a text that reads so easily that it *seems* to have been written easily. By contrast, many philosophers assume that because something is difficult to read it must have been difficult to write. Sometimes that is true, but it does not necessarily mean that the author could not have worked even harder to make the text easier to read and comprehend. It seems that the more established a philosopher becomes, the more entitled s/he feels to produce writing that will require an inordinate amount of work to read and comprehend. Indeed, s/he may even feel this is what is expected.

By contrast, in writing chapters for the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series authors are asked to be ever mindful of the reader. We want the reader to wrestle with ideas not prose. Referring to William Strunk in the introduction to *The Elements of Style*, E.B. White writes that "Will felt the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope."³ It is Strunk's sensitivity to the plight of the reader that should drive us to pay attention to "elements of style" that ordinarily do not concern philosophers in their academic writing.

In academic journal articles and books, introductions are rarely enticing. They largely take for granted that the reader is already interested in reading the text and simply provide a roadmap of what lies ahead. In public philosophy, by contrast, we cannot take the reader's interest for granted. Instead we need to give readers an intriguing introduction, the kind that leaves them feeling they must read more. Generally, this means eschewing the academic convention of the roadmap, which can be overwhelming for a reader who is unfamiliar with the terrain. Better is to give the reader an introduction that moves her enough to put her trust in the writer to take her along on a tour of mutual discovery. Moving beyond the introduction, little things matter, i.e. we need to keep things little. Short paragraphs, sections, and chapters give readers a sense of progress and accomplishment, which is helpful in encouraging them to continue reading. Finally, readers need a satisfying conclusion, the kind that leaves them feeling time has been well spent.

Newspaper editor Barney Kilgore liked to remind his writers that, "the easiest thing in the world for a reader to do is to stop reading."⁴ Unfortunately, the very idea of writing for a reader is foreign to most philosophers. Occasionally some philosophical stylists have

written partly for personal expression, but rarely has a great philosopher in recent times written to be understood by as wide an audience as possible.⁵ Alas, most philosophers would seem to be happy if they were truly understood by only the smallest possible audience as long as that audience consisted of the very brightest or most knowledgeable people. By contrast, public philosophy attempts to produce “articles that could be read—not articles that could be figured out given a sufficient investment of time and energy, but actually read.”⁶ This is how Timothy Taylor describes the mission of the journal he edits, the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, an economics journal that aims to publish “essays on cutting-edge topics, often by prominent authors, but doing so in an expository style that minimizes specialized jargon and technique and thus is accessible to a broad readership of economists.”⁷ It is challenging to write for a broad audience, such as all professional economists or all professional philosophers, but it is even more challenging to write for the broadest audience of all, the general public.

Partly because we teach to a captive audience, academics aren’t fully sensitive to readers. We are not accustomed to winning over an audience and keeping them interested. Most students are motivated mainly by grades, and when we make special efforts to connect with our students we may feel we are appealing to the lowest common denominator. I’ve heard some colleagues say they have come to accept that they must spoon feed their students, but they draw the line at moving their students’ jaws to help them chew. Fair enough. We should uphold standards in the classroom; we should not teach to the bottom. Rather, we should attempt to inspire the bottom to rise to the level of the top. Personally, I like to think of myself as teaching to the top half of the class and challenging the bottom half to rise to that level. But my gauge is probably inaccurate. More likely, at least at times, I’m teaching to the top third or quarter; sometimes, regrettably, I’m teaching only to the top two or three students—and this is when I’m trying to do otherwise. Once I realized this, though, it allowed me to factor in my tendency to overestimate how accessible my presentation is and thereby improve my teaching. Thankfully, over repeated iterations of Introduction to Philosophy I have gained a more accurate sense of my level of accessibility. But when teaching a new course for the first time gauging accessibility is always a challenge.

Of course, it is also a challenge to present ideas at the right level of accessibility in writing public philosophy such that the reader is challenged appropriately without being discouraged or turned off. In a way, writing for a popular audience is easier than teaching. Unlike students in an Introduction to Philosophy course, readers of public philosophy are not filling a requirement and are not looking for a grade. They are looking to learn and to form their own views. Such readers are the ideal audience that college instructors dream of. This makes things harder, though, because, unlike students, readers can get up and walk out

at any time with no penalty. All they stand to lose is the cost of the text—which is often zero in the case of online articles and blogs—and whatever time they have invested so far. Many readers are quite ready to cut their losses if the writer does not reach out and engage them. So, if we care about philosophy being known and appreciated on a larger scale, and if we care to have dialogue with people outside the academy, we need to make public philosophy accessible.

In writing, as well as in teaching, we academics often miss our mark when it comes to clarity and accessibility. We are perhaps encouraged in this, or at least not corrected, because our colleagues who read our journal articles are motivated to work hard to extract information. Thus, as scholars, we tend to overestimate how accessible what we say and write is. We almost always err on the side of being too complex and as a result end up being less accessible than we wish to be. In general, what we think should be accessible to any professional philosopher is often accessible only to specialists in our field. What we think should be accessible to advanced students is really accessible only to professional philosophers. And what we think should be accessible to anyone is really accessible only to advanced students.

Jargon is the number one offender. Jargon use in any profession becomes so natural that people forget they are doing it; the task of the popular writer is to become hyper-aware of jargon and curtail it whenever possible. My experience in editing has been that often, though not always, more prominent scholars have a more difficult time writing for a general audience. They are accustomed to expressing themselves in ways that are understood only by bright colleagues and students. When their writing is obscure their academic readers take it as their own fault for not understanding and work hard to achieve comprehension. As a result, prominent scholars often have a greater challenge in adjusting for a general audience. Taylor recounts that “A wise colleague once said to me that jargon and technical expression always have two uses: 1) to streamline and clarify the communication of concepts between specialists, and 2) for specialists to identify themselves as an in-group, while impressing and excluding outsiders. All of us are prone to the belief that we are only using jargon from the highest motives, to pursue intellectual clarity, while quietly feeling the inner glow of being within the charmed circle of jargon-users.”⁸

To get a feel for what it may be like for an average reader coming to philosophy for the first time, all a philosopher needs to do is read an article in a highly selective and highly specialized journal well outside his or her area of expertise. There is value in the writing of such articles as long as the communication is efficient and the jargon is not gratuitous. There is also the danger, though, that out of envy for the prestige and success of the

sciences, we in the humanities attempt to ape their anti-style. For a time, Denis Dutton, the late editor of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, waggishly ran a bad writing contest for the worst sentence in an academic publication. There was no shortage of submissions. In philosophy, examples leap to mind, but they tend to come from outside one's own specialization and tradition. Dutton believed that jargon was naturally at home in the sciences and even the social sciences, where it really does capture phenomena and facilitate communication, but that it should be used sparingly in the humanities. Thus we have "Dutton's Razor,' the principle that jargon that does not illuminate or elucidate but rather mystifies and obscures should be stricken from the lexicon of sincere and intelligent humanists."⁹

Whatever one thinks of the role of jargon in scholarly writing, its place should be minimal in popular writing. If physicists can write books of popular science with virtually no equations, philosophers can write books for a general audience with limited jargon. In fact, it is a common experience that being compelled to write that way can lead to a deeper understanding on the part of the writer. All good teachers report that there are concepts and ideas that they did not fully appreciate or understand until they taught them. Likewise in writing for a reader to understand and appreciate our subject matter we can often come to understand and appreciate the subject matter more deeply ourselves.¹⁰ As Taylor says, "The underlying lesson here is that knowledge and the exposition of that knowledge are not fully separable, and that lesson applies to faculty as well as to students. Lack of clarity usually reflects a less-than-full understanding."¹¹

In conclusion, then, there are some risks in producing public philosophy. We don't want to misrepresent the work of philosophy or mislead readers into thinking they have learned all they need to know from a single, short book or article. The potential benefits, though, outweigh the risks. Public philosophy can disseminate important ideas and enhance appreciation for the difficult and complex work of philosophers. Additionally, in writing for the public, philosophers can actually improve their own comprehension of their subject matter and potentially open lines of communication with unexpected dialogue partners.¹²

Notes

¹ William Irwin "Philosophy as/and/ of Popular Culture" in Irwin and Gracia eds. *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 41-63; "Fancy Taking a Pop?: A Defense of 'and Philosophy'" *The Philosophers' Magazine* 49 (2010), pp. 48-54. see also Gregory



Bassham and Michael W. Austin, "Popular Culture in the Philosophy Classroom: A Modest Defense," *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy*, Fall 2008, <http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/808CBF9D-D8E6-44A7-AE13-41A70645A525/v08n1Teaching.pdf>

² The negative comments about the pop culture and philosophy series generally take the form of those made by the Pseudonymous blogger Spiros, "Doom: Pop Culture and Philosophy." <http://philosophersanon.blogspot.com/2009/04/doom-pop-culture-and-philosophy.html>

Alain de Botton has been the most commercially successful popularizer of philosophy in recent years, and his book *The Consolations of Philosophy* received nasty reviews by academic critics that are indicative of the kinds of criticism made in general of attempts to popularize philosophy. Writing about Botton's book, Mary Margaret McCabe tells us "In the culture of the market economy, we miss the fact that philosophy is valuable in and by itself It is deeply dispiriting, then, that the latest attempt to popularize philosophy—that is to say, to make philosophy into televisual fodder—does so precisely on the basis that philosophers can provide us with useful tips.... This is not the dumbing down of philosophy, it is a dumbing out. Nothing in this travesty deserves its title; Boethius must be turning in his grave." "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 June 2000. http://www.thetls.co.uk/tls/reviews/philosophy_and_religion/article707372.ece

In similar terms, Edward Skidelsky says, "Comforting, but meaningless. In seeking to popularise philosophy, Alain de Botton has merely trivialised it, smoothing the discipline into a series of silly sound bites. ... is bad because the conception of philosophy that it promotes is a decadent one, and can only mislead readers as to the true nature of the discipline." Skidelsky, Edward "Comforting, but Meaningless." *New Statesman*, 27 March 2000. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/200003270050>

³ E.B. White, "Introduction" in William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York: MacMillan, 1979), p. xvi; quoted in Timothy Taylor, "An Editor's Life at the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*" *The American Economist* 53 (2009), p. 7.

⁴ Quoted in Timothy Taylor, "From the Desk of the Managing Editor," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26 (2012), p. 34.

⁵ Bertrand Russell is one glorious exception.

⁶ Taylor 2009, p. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁸ Taylor 2012, p. 32.

⁹ William Irwin, "Against Intertextuality," *Philosophy and Literature* 28 (2004), 240.

¹⁰ Taylor tells the story of one author who was pushed to clarify and simplify: "With his revision, he sent along a note saying as he had worked to explain the material in a way appropriate for *JEP*, he had also come to a better understanding of his original technical demonstration" (Taylor 2012, p. 37).

¹¹ Taylor 2012, p. 37.

¹² For very helpful feedback on earlier versions of this essay, I wish to thank Greg Bassham, David Boersema, Kyle Johnson, Megan Lloyd, Joel Marks, Mark White, and Jeremy Wisnewski.