

The Professional Epistemology of Library Instruction

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Here's my story. An undergraduate student emails the reference desk, requesting research help. On the form, she indicates that she is writing a paper about Cartesian epistemology, and that she is "having trouble sorting through the various arguments" about Descartes. My colleague, sharing her request with me, sees a familiar situation with a straightforward response: most likely, the student hasn't tried the library catalog; let's send her some tips on searching by subject heading. About her "trouble sorting through the various arguments" - what arguments? by whom? - my colleague observes that we can't help her with *that*.

Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know. What I want to call, for the nonce, professional epistemology would be the guiding assumptions we as professionals make about the scope and conditions of our knowledge. It would be, to borrow a term from John Guillory, a "spontaneous epistemology": that is, not one articulated and made explicit in theoretical discussions, but one kept implicit in the discourses of our profession and in the practices that we communicate to one another. What I am trying to say is that my colleague's response to this student's request - about what we could and could not help her with - far from being a reaction borne of laziness or indifference, conveyed in fact an honest assessment of the librarian's epistemology. And as I describe below, my own response was guided by similar assumptions. For the epistemology at work in the work we do hinges on the idea of expertise, and it is our sense of expertise that tells us what we can and cannot know. But in the case of reference and instruction, this arrangement puts us in a rather curious relation to the people we want to help.

Having read Descartes, once upon a time, and being tired of research questions about nuclear proliferation and gross national product, I volunteered to sit down with this student who was having trouble sorting through the various arguments about Cartesian epistemology. She was not an indifferent student; I'd say she had a genuine interest in the subject and in what I had to offer. And what did I do? Sitting beside her at a computer, I kept doing the good and proper librarian-thing, which is to offer sources. I adverted to the annotated bibliography on Descartes in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I directed her toward scholarly surveys: *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*. I showed her how to use the relevant subject headings in the library catalog, of course - and I introduced her to Philosopher's Index.

Is that all? Well, no. What did she find most interesting in Descartes, I asked. How could he make such a circular argument, she wanted to know, placing God at the beginning and at the end of the certainty of the cogito? When I suggested she add keywords like *god*, *circular*, *reason*, and *epistemology* to her searches, she began to find sources that seemed to her apposite and promising. She had with her an article from JSTOR, originally from *The Philosophical Review*, and she wanted to know if it was scholarly. In her words, it was more like a story. Glancing at it - but only glancing at it - I guessed that its author might be using narrative as a heuristic device, so I shared my guess, and I explained that JSTOR, unlike some other library databases, includes only academic journals. We talked a bit about what *peer review* means. I do believe I helped her out; she left a little more confident about her paper.

But back at my desk, I had to wonder, did we really address her problem? On one view, we did, if by “sorting through various arguments” one means having a good search strategy - if one means reducing the cognitive load on the user of information retrieval - if one means filtering out sources so that one has less of them to read and reckon with. But this student was not looking for *information* on Descartes or his theories. She never used the word. From square one she was aware that her task in writing a research paper for a philosophy class was to “sort through...arguments” made about him by other scholars. In other words, the challenge facing her was a discursive one: confronted with an unfamiliar and frankly overwhelming discourse - with the weight of so many generations of well-educated men and women thinking themselves into being in relation to Descartes’ texts – her challenge was, as David Bartholomae puts it, to “invent” this discourse for herself. The challenge was to approximate, in her own prose, the sound and texture of a scholar proficient in the discourse of Cartesian studies. Hers was a mimetic labor - a rhetorical one. Even if the professor himself, in designing the assignment, did not recognize it, this is the challenge implicit in the work that students do, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

I like to think that I see this challenge for what it is. And yet throughout our meeting, I felt the pull inside of a strange sense of restraint - a sense of insufficiency - of, how should I put it, an open field in the conversation into which I should not cross. I think this field is always there; in this case, I became aware of it because I *have* read Descartes, and because reading philosophy is for me a rewarding habit, albeit one unbuttressed by any academic work. Looking back on it, I would have liked to talk to this person, this fellow reader, *about Descartes*. But something told and still tells me that to do so would be unprofessional. After all, this student’s paper on Descartes would be evaluated by her professor, a legitimate expert, a true authority. (As the student said, “He doesn’t want to hear what *we* think about this stuff. He wrote the book we’re using.”) There was no way for me to approximate his knowledge far enough to gauge his expectations; in no sense am I his peer in the study of Descartes.

The relation of knowing traces a triangle between student, teacher, and the object of study; relative to this figure, the librarian is a detour, a kink in the regular geometry of knowledge. As a librarian, I help people locate texts. My professional epistemology tells me that the content of these texts is the distinct purview of the patron, whether the latter is a novice or an expert. I, on the other hand, am supposed to be an expert in the organization of these texts - or of their containers (books, articles, other documents). To the extent that I am familiar with the social and institutional conditions of knowledge production, I help people choose among texts, teaching them about peer-review, disciplinary boundaries, etc. What librarians do not do, or what they are not supposed to do, is to help people interpret the actual texts that they find. For us, texts populate a material universe under our stewardship; for the reader, in the privacy of her study or in conversation with another, more expert reader, the single text returns her to the immaterial web of knowledge and ideas. To put it another way, we lead people to the gate, but we do not accompany them down the avenues of rhetorical invention or critical understanding. Experts in a particular academic discourse - speaking from a position of authority or apprenticeship inside it - we are not. And even when we are, how often do we let ourselves play that role with students?

But is a different figure possible? This student I’ve been talking about, she was not a professional philosopher; as a first-year undergraduate in a survey course, she was a novice. Her trajectory, vis-à-vis these discourses, ran in some sense parallel to mine. Why not encourage her

to think further about any article that she had in front of her? Why not ask her, “What part of this text did you find most interesting or confusing?” Why not read part of it together, and ask her to relate what she had read to her own thinking about Descartes? Why not try to figure out what sources the author had used, and to what ends he’d used them? Why not try to isolate sentences that seemed most significant - or curious - or exciting - or recalcitrant to common sense?

Reading, and talking about what one has read, along with writing: these are the *material practices* of research. By engaging with the linguistic materiality of the text - by skimming it, by reading passages carefully, by turning over its words and phrases, by repeating them to oneself in new sentences of one’s own devising - by virtue of these activities, one gains a better grasp of the contours of a discourse, of its dips and swerves. A portion of the web of one’s knowledge — incorporated in the human brain as a constellation of activation-potentials - becomes thereby a little brighter, a little more articulated.

Are these activities beyond the ken of someone who is not a Descartes scholar? Presumably, they are not beyond the ken of an eighteen-year old in a survey course - and if they are, then the professor’s assignment was an exercise in futility. Are they beyond the ken of someone who has never read Descartes? Why should they be? The student, presumably, had read Descartes. Why shouldn’t I have let her teach me what she knew? Let her teach me, instead of rushing to cram her arms with sources that, as she herself was only too ready to acknowledge, knew so much more than she did. Such sources are the fruits of others' expertise - and I fulfill my expert calling in passing them along to those as yet still ignorant in these matters. In doing so, I provide "professional" help - or as we like to call it now, good customer service. But don't I also commit a subtle betrayal?

Not to worry, I tell myself - it is a betrayal repeated countless times a day, in virtually every room of the vast edifice we call formal education. Where we are gathered, in these cramped rooms, to hear experts pronounce the sentences that they are authorized to pronounce. This is the vicious logic of *explication*, which Jacques Ranciere describes thus:

Consider, for example, a book in the hands of a student. The book is made up a series of reasonings designed to make a student understand some material. But now the schoolmaster opens his mouth to explain the book. He makes a series of reasonings in order to explain the series of reasonings that constitute the book. But why should the book need such help? Instead of paying for an explicator, couldn’t a father simply give the book to his son and the child understand directly the reasonings of the book? And if he doesn’t understand them, why would he be any more likely to understand the reasonings that would explain to him what he hasn’t understood? Are those reasonings of a different nature? And if so, wouldn’t it be necessary to explain the way in which to understand them?

So the logic of explication calls for the principle of a regression ad infinitum: there is no reason for the redoubling of reasonings ever to stop. What brings an end to the regression and gives the system its foundation is simply that the explicator is sole judge of the point when the explication is itself explicated. (4)

Thinking may be enough to know that one exists, but it does not suffice - according to the logic of explication - to know anything else, unless that thinking is ratified by those whose thinking has been ratified in turn by the very institution that continues to exist on account of their thinking. Expertise, which speaks through explications, estranges human intelligence from its own powers. As Ranciere says, "At each stage the abyss of ignorance is dug again; the professor fills it in before digging another" (21). This ideology of expertise, by maintaining a rupture between those who already know and those who don't yet know, perpetuates the "fiction of inequality": the fiction that puts each person in his or her place, superior to some, inferior to others.

Recounting the true story of Jacques Jacotot, a Frenchman in the 19th Century who taught some Flemish students French without knowing any Flemish himself, Ranciere wants to dislodge the idea that one must be an expert in something in order to teach it to someone else. To the vicious circle of expertise and ignorance, he proposes an alternative - a "circle of power":

the master...encloses an intelligence in the arbitrary circle from which it can only break out by becoming necessary to itself. To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn't know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity...." (15)

Jacotot, Ranciere's "ignorant schoolmaster," had his Flemish-speaking students work with a single text, a piece of French literature printed with a parallel Flemish translation. Without using any of Jacotot's "expertise" in French literature, the students learned the language fluently by working closely with the text imposed on them - through memorization, recitation, and imitation. And Jacotot brought his students only this text - the choice of which was incidental to his project - and the belief, which was essential, that they could accomplish the task he set them, using only what they knew already how to do (i.e., read and write). Using this approach, Jacotot apparently went on to teach subjects about which he knew nothing at all: law and painting. At the center of Jacotot's pedagogy, as Ranciere presents it, is a task - here, do this; look closely at this and tell me what you see - and a text, which serves only as occasion and material constraint with regard to the task prescribed. Absent from this picture is the *immaterial body of knowledge* that academic disciplines take as their anchor and their goal.

Although Jacotot's students took his course because they wanted to learn French, there is for Ranciere a very different aim of this pedagogy: "intellectual emancipation." Its aim is "to reveal an intelligence to itself" (28). In fact, we may no longer be under the regime of pedagogy at all. Jacotot's approach, Ranciere says, "was not that of a better pedagogy. It was another route, that of liberty" (14). Truly, the experimental disposition that Ranciere proposes - which is really a disposition, not a method, much less a program - can guarantee no other outcome. It does not guarantee mastery of a subject matter, nor does it guarantee success at a given task - at least not as long as those things are measured by comparing the performances of different individuals according to an idea of aptitude assumed to vary across a population. The experimental disposition is, rather, a way of taking seriously the "equality of intelligence" (56). As such, it is a

moral disposition. If the educational institution inclines us to see everywhere differences of intelligence, Ranciere's ignorant master sees only differences in will, in effort. And it this difference alone that the master is called upon to judge.

"The virtue of our intelligence," says Ranciere, "lies less in knowing than in doing" (65). Apart from its discrete acts, apart from what it writes, says, or makes, there is no point in talking about - or trying to judge - intelligence. The amateur is she who dares to do something before being sure that she will do it competently. Competence is pure potential, and potential is the state in which the multiple repressive apparatuses of society prefer to keep us - waiting in the allotted place for the allotted time to perform our assigned duties.

"Man thinks because he exists." (62). Ranciere wants to reverse Descartes' famous dictum democratizes the ego of Western epistemology. No longer is thinking - by which I mean the "correct," methodical thinking that, ever since the Enlightenment, has been posited as the outcome of a "universal" education that never quite dissolves the boundaries of class, race, gender, or nationality - no longer is such thinking the requirement for being, for the transparent certainty of one's own existence. Such a requirement all too clearly justifies certain kinds of privilege. In other words, Descartes' "sum" is not being in general, but social being, cultural being, or even institutional being - a particular mode of being that recognizes itself as legitimate in light of an intellectual tradition and by virtue of its own place in that tradition. The tradition, and more importantly its mastery - as conferred by the educational institution - authorizes the philosopher to know that he is thinking, and therefore to know that he exists. Even now, today, when we talk about "critical thinking" as a "learning outcome," do we not reproduce the structure of this authority? Do we not assume that students, before they come to us as students, can't think critically, or can't think critically enough, and that we have to teach them how?

What if we start from the fact that humans are thinking animals? Students think not because they are students, but because they are alive; they have no choice in the matter. As Paolo Freire says, "The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them" (p. 110). There is, moreover, no transcendent form of intuition, nor any Kantian transcendental critique, that can supersede the lived constraints that make human thinking what it is. Students do not come to school to learn to think. They do not come to learn to do. They come to do. They come to do what we tell them, just as in telling them, we do what we are told. If there is freedom to be had in this arrangement, each person brings it with her; no one can confer freedom on anyone else. Most of the time when we try to do so, we just change one set of constraints for another.

But the curious thing about freedom - or the experience of freedom - is that it begets itself. If, in a given situation, you happen to experience freedom, not as a necessary property or state of being, owned by right or conferred as a privilege, but rather as something of your own doing, as an act, an active and open and contingent disposition, those around you are more likely to experience something similar. Freedom appears, between two or more people, as the testing of shared constraints. Social constraints - which I will here define as the presence to us of other people, whether real or imagined - set parameters to the field of action, delimiting what counts as appropriate. They also provide motivation, through the threat of sanction or the promise of reward. But we act on these constraints - we test them, we change them, and we are changed by them in turn - only through the mediation of the body in its material environment.¹

The student in my story had a relation to her professor, mediated by the paper she was writing, and by the various texts this act gathered to itself, on its way to becoming one more text

among others. The student had also, in a different way, a relation to the long-dead person called Descartes. Recall her feeling of - indignation, was it? - at the circularity of Descartes' supposed proof. That was the relation she was seeking a way to embody, to incorporate, to realize in her world. What I want to suggest – but only to suggest - is that students and librarians might work together in a way that escapes the asymmetry between student and professor. The latter, qua relation, denies its own mediation and makes one party the judge of the other's intelligence - as if our human worth, or our worth as philosophers, were written down in words, as if we bore our brains in glass jars for the inspection of some higher beings. Why should it turn out any differently for librarians? Perhaps because librarians, by and large, escape the position in which any professor finds himself by virtue of having to evaluate his students. As Ranciere says, "Every institution is an *explication* in social act, a dramatization of inequality" (119). Librarians belong to institutions, but not in the same way - relative to what students come to us wanting to do, ours is not the position of the expertise that explicates itself. Students come to us wanting or needing to do research, which means, at heart, working one's way into a relation with some as yet incompletely discovered aspects of the world. This task requires attention, it requires careful thought, and it requires curiosity, which we could call the desire for wonder, or an open disposition willing to encounter the unknown. How can one be an expert in a disposition, in a desire?

Whoever looks always finds. He doesn't necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he was supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the *thing* that he already knows. What is essential is the continuous vigilance, the attention that never subsides without irrationality setting in...The master is he who keeps the researcher on his own route, the one that he alone is following and keeps following. (33)

What Ranciere here calls "mastery," I want to call accompaniment. I want to suggest that one fills this role when she is willing to step outside the circle in which she inscribes herself - the circle that declares that she knows this much, and no more. The mistake lies not in thinking that one doesn't know what lies outside the circle - that may be true. The mistake lies in seeking the circle's protection, whether out of pride, or meekness, or that pusillanimity called common sense. How one might learn to resist these passions, which I take to be pretty universal, I'm sure I don't know. On that score I can't pretend to advise anyone, since I don't know how to do it myself. I can only declare my desire to be accompanied, and my hope that others might have the same desire.

Notes

1 Let's take the example of a basketball game. Players play within the "rules" (both implicit and explicit) in order to avoid sanction by the social group, and they play to "win" in order to receive some status benefit within that group. But in the act of play, the constraints they act on are those created by those rules *in conjunction with the presence of bodies* - the bodies of the players themselves, and the material supports of the game: court, ball, basket, shot-clock, etc. Playing basketball, one exhibits one's force only as a function of the constraints imposed upon one by the

limitations of one's own body, and by the forces of one's opponents and teammates. Or let's take the act of writing a conference paper. Sitting down to write, the writer may dream of the warmest fame or the coldest reception imaginable, but no promise of fame, no threat of notoriety, however urgent to the writer, will produce words on the page. Discourse is produced by the force of the imagination working on the rules of language - rules incorporated by the speaking, writing body. And while the writer collaborates with the writers she has already read, and while the achievements of these other writers do serve as another set of constraints to be tested, she encounters them as patterns of language-in-use available to her for her partial, and for the most part unconscious, appropriation.