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Authorship

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Authorship

What is authorship? How are answers to that question related to ideas about the understanding, interpretation, or appreciation of literary works? In what follows I provide a selective survey of the voluminous literature on these divisive questions, offer criticisms of some influential theories, and present an alternative.

Two Conceptions of Authorship

It is often thought that creating or making a literary work is both necessary and sufficient to being that work's author. Authorship, then, amounts to performing certain kinds of actions, such as composing a song, writing the text of a poem or novel, and deciding when the work has been completed. It is generally acknowledged that such work-constitutive actions can be performed either by an individual or by two or more collaborating persons.

In many nations these basic ideas about authorship have been codified in legislation designed to protect not only intellectual property but the "moral rights" of authors, such as the right to control the conditions under which one's work is made public. German law, for example, rules that "Urheber ist der Schöpfer des Werkes" [The author is the creator of the work] (Adeney, p. 230). Many nations have similar legislation, including clauses recognizing co-authorship (for informative surveys, see Davies and Garnett 2010, and Rajan 2011).

Various philosophers and literary theorists have, however, contended that this notion of authorship is inadequate. They claim that to read a text as

authored by someone, or to identify and think of someone as an author, is to accept—usually unwittingly—various ideological assumptions. The ideology of authorship, they claim, blinds people to the fact that different social formations have different conceptions and practices related to discourse. The modern European system of authorship does not discover or refer to an essence, but is a contingent social construction. As one philosopher puts this prevalent thesis, “all authorship is constructed, assigned, and developed; there is no such thing as a given or natural, non-constructed author” (Morgan 1988, p. 354). Authorship is said, more specifically, to involve the *attribution* of authorship by readers or other representatives of the literary institution or system. Authorship is therefore not equivalent to simply writing, composing, or creating a work.

For shorthand we may refer to the two contrasting approaches evoked above as the ‘causal’ and ‘attributionist’ conceptions of authorship. According to the causal conception, authorship is reducible to the actions that proximately cause a work to be created. According to the attributionist conception, the writer’s or speaker’s contributions are insufficient to constitute authorship. Instead, something more—something on the side of the work’s reception—is required, beginning with a system of authorial attributions.

Foucault’s Attributionist Conception

The single most influential example of the attributionist approach is Michel Foucault’s oft-cited (1969) lecture, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” A thorough analysis of the published version of this lecture cannot be provided here, but aspects of Foucault’s position will be discussed in some detail since they are

crucial to an understanding of the contemporary literature on authorship (for additional remarks, see Merquior 1985, Hendricks 2002, Livingston 2005).

Foucault explicitly draws a distinction between the writer [le rédacteur] and the author or 'author-function'. He claims that in some discourses (his examples being a personal letter, graffiti on a wall, and a legal document), there is a writer but not an author, whereas various literary, philosophical, and other discourses have both a writer and an author. The motivation for this distinction becomes clear in the following passage:

Third characteristic of this author-function. We no doubt try to give a realistic status to this figment of our minds [être de raison]. This would be something within the individual, a "deep" instance, a "creative" power, a "project," the originary locus of writing. But in fact, those aspects of the individual that are designated as author (or which make an individual an author) are only our projection, in more or less psychological terms, of the treatment to which we subject texts, the comparisons we draw, the traits that we establish as pertinent, the continuities that we recognize, the exclusions that we practice. All these operations vary according to periods, and to types of discourse (1994 [1969]: 801).

The published English and German translations of Foucault's essay get one part of this passage quite wrong. Foucault's 'être de raison' is mistranslated as 'a rational being', 'ein Vernunftwesen', 'a rational entity', and even as a 'being of reason', whereas in fact the expression in French means 'a figment of thought', or more colloquially, a figment of the imagination.

In the transcription of the discussion that took place after Foucault's talk, Foucault is reported as twice denying that he had asserted that the author does not exist (p. 817). He presumably meant that he allowed that the author exists *qua* writer, or again that the author-function exists *qua* mode of reading and attribution in a given discursive formation. What does not exist, according to Foucault, is an author *tout court*. Foucault sometimes misleadingly said or wrote 'auteur' when he meant 'la fonction auteur' (e.g. when he said a personal letter has no author), but in the discussion he clearly asserted that his goal was to analyse the function within which something like an author could exist" ["J'analysais la fonction à l'intérieur de laquelle quelque chose comme un auteur pouvait exister"] (p. 818).

In the passage cited above, Foucault explicitly espouses a strong historicist thesis about authorship, declaring that the author-constitutive operations vary with regard to periods and kinds of discourse. He somewhat puzzlingly adds: "Yet one can find through time a certain invariance in the rules of the construction of the author" [Pourtant, on peut retrouver à travers le temps un certain invariant dans les règles de construction de l'auteur] (p. 801). In an attempt to flesh out this claim, Foucault turns to Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus* [On Illustrious Men] (329-3 CE) and attributes to Jerome the following four criteria of authorial attribution:

- (1) a constant level of value
- (2) conceptual or theoretical coherence
- (3) stylistic unity
- (4) a single historical location

In the literature on Foucault and authorship, these comments about Jerome are either endorsed (e.g. During 1992, p. 122), or left unmentioned. Foucault's claims in this passage are, however, highly dubious. *De Viris illustribus* is a fairly brief bibliographical catalogue of works by 135 early Christian authors. It contains no explicit generalizations about the conditions on authorial attribution. Moreover, some of Jerome's specific attributions flatly contradict the general criteria Foucault has attributed to Jerome. For example, Jerome attributes the *Epistle to the Hebrews* to Paul while remarking that its style is quite different from that of other letters that are to be attributed to Paul. This overtly contradicts criterion (3). Jerome allows that works by Plato and Philo exhibit a very great similarity of both style and substance, but he cites a Greek proverb to the effect that either Philo platonized or Plato philonized. Since Plato wrote long before Philo did, only the former option could be correct. Here Jerome's remarks could be taken to imply that a causal condition on authorship can trump Foucault's criteria (1)-(3). Jerome's actual attributions suggest that he recognized that the works firmly attributed to a single author can be written at different times and places and manifest strikingly different styles, attitudes, and levels of literary or other value. Were one to reconstruct a theory of attribution based on Jerome's particular judgements, the result would at best be that the four "criteria" listed by Foucault may be included alongside many other fallible indicators of authorship.

The History of Authorship

Many literary theorists and scholars have relied upon on Marxist assumptions in framing their claims about the historical emergence of the author-function. Economic factors are in the driver's seat, followed up by legal constructions and the other rationalizations and devices of bourgeois ideology. In some of the influential accounts that crop up in film and literary theory, a large population of critics and readers—the victims of bourgeois ideology—are said to have had astoundingly implausible beliefs about The Author. A key source here is the straw man operation provocatively undertaken by Roland Barthes in his influential (1968) essay, "La mort de l'auteur." Barthes conjures up the specter of an essentially solitary and sovereign figure, a masterful and self-conscious "Author-God" whose intention unilaterally determines the meaning of a unique and profoundly original *œuvre*. To escape from the shackles of absolute intentionalism, the reader must sever the ideological bond between text and the Author, the assumption being that it is somehow impossible for a reader operating within the modern author-functional regime to explore the unintended meanings and significance of a texts while recognizing that they were written by fallible, more or less skillful human beings.

Some literary theorists continue to applaud Barthes' critique of the Author-God. For example, Andrew Bennett writes that the Author-God conception is the apt target of "the most powerful explanatory discourses of our, of contemporary, culture," namely, Marxism and psychoanalysis, which are to be credited with having revealed the human-all-too-human author to have an unconscious and to be determined by capitalist conditions (2005, pp. 7-8). Other literary theorists (Burke 1992, Gallop 2011) have noted that Barthes himself announced a kind of "friendly" return of the author some three

years after the publication of the original French text of “The Death of the Author.”

Foucault notoriously linked the author-function’s emergence to that of a legal system of ownership that was supposedly established “towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century” (p. 799). This is a strikingly misleading claim about the complex legal history pertaining to authorship (for relevant evidence, see Ardeney 2008). Although the view has many defenders (e.g. Rose 1993, Woodmansee 1984), it is highly controversial to yoke the emergence of “the” hegemonic author-function to intellectual property legislation, such as the 1710 Statute of Anne in England. That Foucault’s historical conjectures are highly inaccurate has been argued by many commentators, including Lamarque (1990), Saunders (1992), Chartier (1992, 2003), Abrams (1995), and Kimmelman (1996). By far the most extensive source on this topic is Vickers’ (2002). Vickers amasses evidence in support of the conclusion that “The author emerged as a professional writer in the sixth century BC, and many of the attributes that we associate with authorship—a sense of individual identity, in style, attitude, literary structure; a hatred of plagiarism; a respected role in society—were already found in abundance in Greco-Roman antiquity” (2002, p. 527; for a feeble attempt to brush aside Vicker’s argument, see Maley 2010, pp. 34-35, who implausibly contends that Vickers should accept Foucault’s views because Vickers holds that Shakespeare co-authored some plays).

The idea that a radically distinct author function appeared in Europe sometime between the 17th and the 20^h century discounts longstanding and recurrent aspects of authorship. Very basic practices of authorial attribution,

starting with the identification, praising and blaming of the *artifex* or maker, had already emerged in earlier periods and so should not be identified as the unique product of a modern European economic, legal, and ideological formation. Such evidence includes the *sillyboi* identifying the names of authors and titles on ancient scrolls; records of Greek literary competitions identifying the names of the competing authors; authorial self-identifications figuring within ancient texts from a wide variety of ancient cultures, including Egyptian wisdom texts; Aristotle-inspired, author-centered models of literary explanation in the medieval period (Minnis 1988); and multiple complaints about plagiarism written in the absence of intellectual property legislation (Ziegler 1950).

Perhaps Foucault was wrong about the historical specifics but right more generally in promoting a historicist and attributionist approach to authorship. Could such an account of authorship in ancient contexts be developed? An apparent example is Alexander Beecroft's (2010) comparative study of authorship in ancient Greece and China. As far as Beecroft's explicit definition of 'authorship' is concerned, he would appear to be a thoroughgoing attributionist:

Authorship is a property ascribed to a literary text. It reflects an attempt to ground and contextualize that text by assigning its composition and/or performance to a specific individual, real or hypothetical, and the narrative representation of that composition and/or performance constitutes a major category of evidence concerning authorship (2010, p. 16).

Beecroft's attributionist definition of authorship finds a good part of its motivation in the poverty of evidence we have about the actual origins of the ancient texts he discusses. *Attributions* of authorship, especially those presented in texts, can be studied in cases where we lack other evidence about the actual writing or composition of the texts. It would appear, however, that Beecroft also works with a causal conception of authorship distinct from the attributionist one cited above. For example, in his discussion of *Liji* [*The Record of Rites*] he comments that "We cannot be certain of its dating or authorship" (2010, p. 42). This remark makes good sense as a prudent expression of uncertainty with regard to the identity of the writer and the time of writing, but cannot be charitably read as a confession of ignorance about the long history of conjectures regarding the authorship of this important source for the Confucian tradition.

I turn now to some additional reasons why a coherent and sufficiently comprehensive attributionist account of authorship is not to be had.

Objections to Attributionist Conceptions of Authorship

At first glance, some of the influential attributionist accounts would appear to correspond to the following basic schema, where the description on the right hand side of the equation is supposed to provide an explication or clarification of the left hand side:

Authorship = the authorship of work *W* is attributed to *S*

As the term 'authorship' appears on both the right and left hand sides, the explication suffers from a molièresque circularity: one must already know what 'authorship' means if one is to make sense of what is said on the right hand side. One step towards a solution of this problem is to identify two different senses of 'authorship' figuring on the two sides of the equation, as in:

Authorship_{sense one} = the authorship_{sense two} of work W is attributed to S

In literary theory, the sense of authorship figuring on the right hand side of the equation is usually the wrongheaded ideology of Authorship that the author-function theorist attributes to other attributors, as in Foucault's potted account of Jerome's attributional principles, or the Barthesian evocation of Romantic ideas about the Author-God. So we are invited to understand 'authorship' as a term that refers to the range of cases where a wrong-headed idea of authorship is applied. Such an explication purports to provide a socio-historical debunking of the author function or ideology.

A more appealing version of the attributionist scheme introduces a causal notion of authorship into the right hand side of the equation: authorship, then, is explicated as the *attribution of work creation or production*. This would appear to make the explication compatible with the tempting idea that making or creating a work does after all have something to do with its authorship. Yet anyone who is inclined to think of authorship as the making of works may still find this explication highly counterintuitive: does authorship *require* attribution? Are there no created works that remain

unpublished? Are there no works the authors of which were never identified?

How did the system of authorship ever get started?

It is especially hard to see how an attributionist conception of authorship can account for an important category of cases, namely, those where an attribution of authorship does not identify all and only those who composed or wrote the work (where writing a work can be a joint action performed by two or more persons or something done by a single agent).

More specifically, we ought to be on the lookout for:

Ghost authorship: cases where a work has been created by someone to whom authorship is not attributed; and

Gift authorship and forgeries: cases where a work is attributed to someone who did not actually create it.

It is important to espouse an account of authorship that allows us to say that such cases involve *incorrect* attributions and that these attributions are incorrect because they do not successfully track the *action of authoring* performed in the making of a given item. In a type of case that is often complained about in discussions of the social dimensions of contemporary science (e.g. Lawrence 2003, Kwok 2005), the prestigious and powerful head of a lab does not do any of the intellectual work and does not write up the results, but puts his name on the list of authors. Although he did not perform the requisite actions, he wrongly claims credit for being one of the authors. In literary contexts relevant cases include plagiarism, forgeries, and the

exploitation of unacknowledged ghost writers (for a presentation of a number of cases, see Love 2002 and Ziegler 1950; the latter documents ancient Greek and Roman complaints about plagiarism as well as 17th century treatises on the topic, such as Jacobus Thomasius Subaci's 1673 *Dissertatio philosophica de plagio literario*; for a contemporary complaint about plagiarism, see Weber 2007).

A hard-core attributionist can bite the bullet and insist that there are no cases of ghost or gift authorship. It is hard to see why such a position should be accepted, however, especially when the attributionist recognizes the actions performed by the readers, editors, and theorists who engage in the making of attributions.

Fictionalist Conceptions of Authorship

Assume that it is granted that phrases such as 'Dickens authored *Great Expectations*' are true by virtue of the writer's actions. It does not follow logically from this fact that the question of how the reader should interpret the text of this novel is thereby settled. More specifically, the reader need not search the text for evidence of the actual writer's attitudes and intentions. Instead, the reader might imagine an Author for this text along entirely different lines, developing this attribution in a fictional or 'as if' way of thinking (Nehamas 1981, 1986, 1987; Morgan 1988). The reader's concoction of a make-believe Author is based on the features of the text and does not have to correspond to what is believed about the actual writer of this text and the historical context in which the text was written. The reader may find the text more interesting when ideas that were unknown to the actual writer are

brought to bear on its interpretation. Perhaps the shift to a fictionalist approach to authorship allows the proliferation of meanings poststructuralist meanings longed for by some theorists.

There are, however, objections to this fictionalist proposal. One is that it amounts to a massive and insufficiently motivated revision of the way people generally read literature. Attributions of authorship routinely express heartfelt belief: persons believed to have authored some work are admired or criticized for having done so. Having read and admired work *W* by author *A*, the reader wants to find other works by the same author, where ‘the same author’ does not refer to a figment of the reader’s imagination. The fictionalist approach would appear to give the reader a desirable freedom, but may do so at the cost of preventing the reader from realizing the goal of discovering, or at least of trying to discover, the value and meaning of the actual writer’s works.

This objection can be supported with reference to recent work by the psychologist Eefje Classen (2012). The results of her experiments with readers indicate that readers’ understandings of texts are influenced by their beliefs about the persons responsible for writing those texts. Readers develop a mental representation that includes the author’s characteristics, communicative intentions, and moral positions or attitudes. When they are given what they take to be information about the actual author’s attitudes and background, readers’ understandings of the text take this information into account. Classen’s conclusion is that “the theoretical claim that the author is irrelevant for the interpretation of literary texts is untenable” (2012, p. 219).

The fictionalist approach recommends that an adequate response to literary works can be had by thinking only about the attitudes of the implied authors, which are the personae manifested in the texts alone. Such a recommendation is misguided if there are cases where features crucial to apt appreciation arise from divergences between the attitudes of the actual author and those expressed by the implicit authorial persona. Autobiographies are cases that would appear to belong to this category. While it would be naive to think that someone's autobiography conveys only truths about that person, it would be absurd to read it as only making assertions about an implicit author to be imagined by the reader. For example, when Jean-Paul Sartre writes in *Les mots* (1966) that he had no superego because he had his mother all to himself, this is a claim about the actual Sartre, not about some figment of the reader's imagination. If in writing about my own life I deviate from what I believe, my reports are lies, not fictions or invitations to make-believe. It can also be argued convincingly, as Alex Neil (1999) has done, that a poet's insincerity can be critically relevant, even in a case where this insincerity is not manifest in the text of the poem and would not be discernible to a reader interested only in the attitudes of the implied author.

A Causal Conception of Authorship

Causal conceptions of authorship fill in the following schema:

S authors some work, W, just in case S intentionally performs actions A_1 - A_n .

Performing an intentional action entails exercising sufficient control over one's behavior: an involuntary sneeze is not an action (Mele and Moser 1994). This requirement is compatible with the intentional use of some random process in the generation of features of a work, since such a procedure can be intentionally selected as a means of production. Yet someone who exercises no control over what is included in a text is not the author of that work. The sufficient control requirement on authorship pertains to the both the internal and external conditions under which actions and choices take place.

Authorship is vitiated by coercion. For example, when terrorists coerce someone into writing and signing a declaration, the hostage is not the author of the document. Even milder sorts of coercion are deemed relevant: some critics who claim that Mary Shelly was not really free to reject Percy Shelly's revisions of her text contend that her authorship of *Frankenstein* was thereby diminished or converted into a kind of collaboration; Bryon, on the other hand, freely allowed Mary Shelly to introduce revisions into the drafts she rewrote for him (for background, see Leader 1996).

Which kinds of intentional actions are required by authorship?

Livingston's (1997, 2005) proposal is that authorship requires expressive actions, and more specifically, the making of an utterance. And what is an utterance? According to Grice's influential proposal, 'utterance' refers to anything that is a (plausible) candidate for non-natural meaning, which means anything that is the result of a certain complex kind of communicative intention (as discussed in Grice 1989). As Grice's strictures about communicative intentions are highly problematic, it is preferable to work with the neo-Gricean account set forth by Wayne C. Davis (2002). Here the key, utterance-

constitutive intention is an *expressive* one aimed at indicating or manifesting the utterer's attitudes. According to this proposal, expression need not be sincere, veridical, or original. That an action is indicative of some attitude does not mean this attitude is actual (cf. "The clouds indicated rain, but it didn't rain'.)

Given these remarks about the sufficient-control and expressive intention conditions entailed by the making of an utterance, we arrive at the following causal account of authorship:

S authors x just in case x is S's utterance; and

S₁-S_n co-author x just in case x is their joint utterance

If this seems far too broad, remember that 'John was the author of the boring and poorly written email' is perfectly good English, as is 'Jacque's missive was a tissue of cliches'. To say that authorship requires the making of an utterance in a very broad sense leaves it open whether one wishes to make additional claims about sub-categories of authorship. One might, for example, develop some distinction between everyday utterances and works. The authorship of works, then, would be a subset of authorship more generally. This sort of thing is stipulated in many legal codes, such as the French legislation, where the problem of saying what does and does not count as *une oeuvre de l'esprit* [a work of the mind] is handled by listing "statutory examples" (Adeney 2006, pp. 174-175).

The definitions of 'author' figuring within legal codes often include a novelty or originality condition: to be an author one must not only create a work, but the work has to be original. The rationale behind this sort of definition is that only authorial achievements satisfying these conditions can earn someone the authorial rights the code was designed to protect. Such legal usage is contradicted, however, by prevalent talk that allows that someone can be identified as the author of a plagiarism. The plagiarist copies all or part of the text of a work previously authored by someone else; the plagiarist then *deceptively* categorizes or presents this copied text as the product of his or her own devising, and not as something that was merely copied. We can allow that this is a species of authorship in our broadest sense and coherently go on to criticize the plagiarist's deceptive action. Authorship is one thing, honest and valuable authorship is something more. The most viable version of a causal theory of the authorship of utterances and works is a non-honorific, value-neutral one.

To come up with a conception of *literary* authorship, it would be necessary to apply some favoured distinction between literary and non-literary utterances or works, a topic that cannot be surveyed here (see Livingston 2003 for a survey). Also, different genres, such as the Petrarchan sonnet or the philosophical paper, clearly weigh additional success conditions on authorial intentions. Finally, a detailed account of joint authorship must identify assumptions about the conditions under which a given action can be jointly performed by two or more persons, another complex topic that cannot be taken up here.

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