

Using the First Person in Philosophy Papers

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In one sense, we philosophers write about ourselves all the time: most philosophy papers are packed full of first-personal pronouns like “I” and “my” and “me.”¹ While using first-personal pronouns is not required, it is the norm: such pronouns appear in a full 92% of published philosophy papers.² In another sense, however, philosophy papers tend to be reticent about the personal. We write ourselves into our papers, but the way we do it tends to be quite thin. Here are a few typical examples:

This paper presents a partial analysis of perceptual knowledge, an analysis that will, I hope, lay a foundation for a general theory of knowing. Like an earlier theory I proposed, the envisaged theory would seek to explicate the concept of knowledge by reference to the causal processes that produce (or sustain) belief.³

I grant that I have no proof that Mary acquires on her release, as well as abilities, factual knowledge about the experiences of others – and not just because I have no disproof of skepticism. My claim is that the knowledge argument is a valid argument from highly plausible, though admittedly not demonstrable, premises to the conclusion that physicalism is false.⁴

In this paper I want to address one important aspect of this complex problem... My aim will be to explore the idea that there is a distinctively deontic style of normativity that moral considerations might be said to exhibit.⁵

Such writing is formally first-personal, so to speak, but not substantively first-personal.

But not all philosophers follow this convention. A small but growing minority, especially feminist philosophers and critical race theorists, have started writing openly about how their experiences – their particular, contingent, embodied, socially located experiences – inform their work. They have embraced substantively first-personal philosophy. Some write about their experiences as an exercise in epistemic humility, a way of being transparent about what they don’t know. Consider for example the disclaimer Sarah Ruddick gives in the beginning of her paper “Maternal Thinking.”

I will be drawing upon my knowledge of the institutions of motherhood in middle-class, white, Protestant, capitalist, patriarchal America as these have expressed themselves in the heterosexual nuclear family in which I mother and was mothered. Although I have tried to compensate for the limits of my particular social and sexual history, I principally depend on others to correct my interpretations and to translate across cultures.⁶

Others treat their experiences as a positive epistemic resource, a source of what they do know. Consider how Eva Feder Kittay locates herself in a paper on the philosophy of disability:

In casting doubt on some central tenets of disability theory, it is important to situate myself in this discussion. It is first as a parent that I have encountered the issue of disability. My daughter, a sparkling young woman, with a lovely disposition is very significantly incapacitated, incapable of uttering speech, of reading or writing, of walking without assistance, or, in fact, doing anything for herself without assistance. She has mild cerebral palsy, severe intellectual disability, and seizure disorders... I have been learning about disability from the perspective of one who is unable to speak for herself; and it is from her and her caregivers that I have come to have a profound appreciation of care as a practice and an ethic.⁷

Or how Lori Watson locates herself in a paper on the metaphysics of gender:

[M]ore often than not, I am identified by others, who do not know me, as a man; I would conjecture that in everyday interactions with strangers, I am taken to be a man over 90 percent of the time. This identification started happening regularly about sixteen years ago when I cut my hair very short. (I had always dressed in “men’s clothing” since my teenage years. Add to this that I am nearly six feet tall and have broad shoulders and a “healthy” frame. This is the body I was given.) Perhaps having experienced my gender/sex so uniformly and routinely confused has allowed me to “see” things, to understand the experience of living in a world in which your body is interpreted one way and your authentic self entirely rejects that other imposed identification.⁸

I think more philosophers should embrace substantively first-personal writing. Why? That’s a big question – bigger than I can answer here. (In fact, I’m writing a whole paper on it, tentatively titled “Getting Personal: A Feminist Perspective on Philosophical Methodology.” Coming soon!) But I hope this handout offers a vision of what substantively first-personal philosophy might look like.