

AN EXPERIMENT IN CO-AUTHORSHIP #1

In the latest instalment of the “Philosophy In The Real World” column, Moya Mapps and Adam Ferner start their series on co-authorship by exploring the possible pitfalls of speaking/writing together, and examine strategies to bypass these problems and draw other voices into the conversation.

Adam Ferner

Hi Moya,

*I hope it's okay to get in touch – Anthony gave me your email and suggested I reach out to talk about the column in *The Philosopher*. Would you be around to have a chat over the next week or so (zoom)? I'm in London, so on GMT. Let me know when might work for you.*

Looking forward to talking :)

Cheers,

adam

Moya opens the Zoom link. “Waiting for the host to start this meeting,” the grey box says. Moya waits. “Would you like to share your pronouns (they/ them) in this meeting?” it asks. They click “Share.” Moya could make the pronoun-sharing automatic, but they haven’t done it, at least not yet.

A face appears and three elliptical dots bounce in the bottom of the picture. Adam waves and mouths something. Silence. Moya smiles and waits for the audio to start working. They don’t remember much about this initial meeting, which took place at the end of November 2021, except perhaps for that vague sense of nervous excitement, the admixture of enthusiasm and what they later describe as “disorientation”.

Over the next couple of months, they send Adam a handful of emails. They have agreed to co-author a column about co-authorship, but they worry about how this will impact an already heavy workload: a PhD, alongside teaching commitments and the development of a new course. They explain to Adam that the course proposal is one of the reasons they have been *so swamped*... They explain that the *course is essentially about feminist history of philosophy... It's about the question of how we – all of us, especially women and people of colour – should relate to figures like Kant (or Aristotle or whoever), figures who are celebrated as “great philosophers,” figures who are considered central to the philosophical canon – but who held fucked up views on gender, race, etc.*

Moya Mapps

Adam’s replies appear in their Yale email inbox. He writes long emails and begins to colour-code them. Text is balling together like pocket lint.

He sends an email on March 10th, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but there is no mention of this in his message. Is that because he thinks it is irrelevant, or inappropriate, or upsetting? The meaning of his omission is unclear. He enthuses about the course proposal.

Moya is house sitting. Or maybe “house sitting” isn’t quite the right word, they think. “House sitting” makes it sound like they are watering plants or feeding pets – doing something useful. The friend has no plants to water, no pets to feed. She left her house key as a favour: after two long, monotonous years of pandemic, she knows Moya’s downtown apartment is getting claustrophobic. Moya is grateful for the excuse to get out. They enjoy the quiet novelty of waking up in a different bed, making breakfast in a different kitchen. They sip tea at their friend’s dining room table and read Adam’s latest message.

Adam Ferner

I look forward to hearing how the proposal lands with the students – and ... I think having a course about our relationship with history is a great idea. It also ties in really nicely with the emphasis on “innovation” in humanities subjects, and Dotson’s view (to paraphrase) that there is really nothing new under the sun. When figures like Descartes are taught, they’re abstracted out of their historical context in order to justify the genius narrative (but e.g. the literary style of the Meditations is the well-worn form of the spiritual guide-book, etc. etc.). It’s making me wonder about our influences, and the people whose work we would position ourselves alongside – who are we in conversation with (apart from each other), whose works are we responding to / emulating?

Moya starts to write a response, stops, deletes it, starts again. They wonder how these exchanges will be transformed into a column. Is this innovation? So far there is no structure. This is not how they are used to working; it doesn’t feel like *work* at all. Adam and Moya have spent months exchanging ideas and building rapport, but they don’t seem to be *writing* anything. Both the process and the product feel alien.

They fiddle with the colour scheme, looking for something to complement the purple Adam picked. Colour-coding was a good call, they decide. Their back-and-forth with Adam has become complex, branching off in many directions; the colours make it easier to track how one thing relates to another. Besides, the colours are a reminder to focus on form. The project is not just about *what* to write: it’s about *how* to write..

Patricia Lockwood

Adam’s laptop is an old one with a dusty screen and a ropy power-cable. The “E” key detaches and the “G” key sticks, but the internet is steady, and sitting in his North London flat he opens his email and peruses his inbox. He finds *everything tangled in the string of everything else*.

He is happy to see that Moya has also colour-coded their responses to his questions. The text alternates between purple, red and a colour he thinks

Sara Ahmed

is called fuchsia. But their co-written piece will appear in black and white. This is just one of the many aspects of their conversation that will be lost in the publication process. He thinks of Sara Ahmed. *We have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere.* He scans the email thread and sees a passage Moya wrote at the end of January:

Moya Mapps

Here's one problem that we haven't talked about yet. When women (or people with female-coded names) coauthor with men (or people with male-coded names), readers on e.g. tenure review committees tend to under-credit the women and over-credit the men. As a woman, that's always in the back of my mind, and it probably has a bit of a chilling effect when it comes to potential collaborations. To be honest, it was in the back of my mind when I was deciding whether to coauthor with you. I'm happy we decided to work together! But it's annoying that I need to worry about shit like this.

Adam is fostering a cat called Portia who glowers at him from the top of his kitchen cabinet. He tries to compose a response. There is the possibility their co-authorship will have a *chilling effect* on his co-author. He pauses and rubs the tips of his fingers along the palm of one hand. He wonders how their names will appear in the published article. He starts typing a reply. The “E” key falls onto the floor and he thinks of George Perec’s *A Void*.

Adam is worrying about the issues with crediting. Moya, meanwhile, is still unsure in which direction this collaboration is going. When they started grad school they used to do all their work with a stopwatch. Every time they read or wrote something, they would time themselves. They compiled the data in these big excel spreadsheets and calculated the averages: How long does it take to read a philosophy article? How long does it take to write a term paper? Moya, in short, is used to control. The process of working with Adam is unfamiliar, unpredictable; it puts them on edge. But at the same time, those years of building excel spreadsheets reflect an interest in exploring *how* they work, in experimenting with process. Perhaps they are more temperamentally suited to this project than they thought.

María Lugones, Elizabeth V. Spelman, Jane Tomkins, Helen Kara, and Annachiara Cozzi

Uma Narayan

Adam has sent over *a selection of papers* and some sample material that he has produced for the column. The sample material is a mixture of third-person narrative, reported speech, and email correspondence. It includes a short description of Moya checking their email and reading a message from Adam. There is, perhaps, something awkward about this description. *The right and power to speak for oneself is closely tied to an oppressed group's sense of autonomy, identity and self-respect. This is a good enough reason to say that the oppressed should speak for themselves.* In later drafts, Moya will rewrite the narrative sections about themselves, so that they become less awkward and more natural. Moya will figure out how, in the context of this partnership, to speak for themselves.

María Lugones

La solidaridad requiere el reconocer, comprender, respetar y amar lo que nos lleva a llorar en distintas cadencias.

Jane Tompkins

Moya is writing a dissertation chapter about the ways analytic philosophers write about – or more often, *don't* write about – their own social locations and social experiences. The dominant norm is that *you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work*. The same goes for teaching: we tell stories about brilliant people, and brilliant people don't live in houses or buy groceries or go to the toilet. Adam's new storytelling game is a form of resistance. An overcorrection, maybe: some details seem more important than others... But still, Moya thinks, this new writing style is worth playing around with. It's a good experiment.

Moya visits the graduate lounge in the Yale philosophy department. They are enjoying being back on campus now the mask mandate has been relaxed. It is the first time in years that they have been able to hang out and work in the department. They take out the phone and open a voice-recording app. They compose themselves. They compose a message. There are a couple of colleagues in the room next-door and Moya worries momentarily whether the recording will annoy them, but decides not to worry about it. They press record.

Portia the cat has been collected by the cat charity and taken to a home where she can socialize with other cats. Adam does not miss her exactly, but he is aware of her absence. He is listening to Moya's voice recording.

Moya Mapps

Hi Adam. So it's me, obviously.

He laughs. He likes voice recordings and Moya has a cheerful way of talking. He listens and feels an almost child-like joy when he hears they enjoyed the sample material. They are explaining the files they attached to an email and some additional texts they think would be interesting to discuss.

Moya Mapps

One is this book that came out, maybe one or two years ago. It's co-authored by Daniel Dennett and Greg Caruso about free will. The content doesn't matter for us at all, but the form is interesting.

So it goes like this. They have about a one-page preface where they're like, this–

–Sorry... So my recording just cut out and I...

One of the problems with using this voice recording is that I keep having glitches on the app, so that's not great, but I only lost like thirty seconds. So yeah, Dennett and Caruso have this quick preface where they're like, This book started with a conversation we had on some rooftop bar or whatever after some conference, and we were continuing to argue about free will and moral responsibility... and so they wrote it down and formalised it into an Aeon article. Then they were like, Oh wait, this is really interesting and so they expanded it into a book length project...

Linda Martín Alcoff

Adam pauses the recording and makes himself a cup of coffee, some of which he spills on the table. He mops it with a handkerchief. He is indefinably irritated by the mention of Dennett and Caruso. He finds the book preface Moya is referring to and looks through it. It turns out that the rooftop bar is in Beirut, Lebanon. The book was published in 2021 and there is no reference at all to the difficult political situation in the region. Beirut features as a nice backdrop to the philosophical dialogue. If this were a scene in a Hollywood film it would take place at sunset, with a soundtrack of zithers and a call to prayer. But Beirut is not a backdrop and *it is only because being is always being in the world, and not apart or over the world, that we can know the world.*

Emma Leiber

Later, Adam is in his kitchen, frying onions. Vegetables are roasting in the oven. He moves the onions around the pan with a spatula. He is listening to a podcast about “auto-theory”, *which is a kind of movement in writing that has existed ...for a very long time, but has only gotten a name... in the last twenty years or so.* According to the discussants on the podcast, auto-theoretical texts are *texts that merge high critical theory and memoiristic writing... by people like Maggie Nelson, Chris Kraus or [a name he is unfamiliar with] Paul Preciado.* He wonders if the text he is writing with Moya is auto-theory or “co-auto-theory”. The discussants on the podcast point out that nobody owns language. There are no property rights. His onions are burning.

Emma Leiber

Annachiara Cozzi

In one of his previous emails, Adam had mentioned a paper about collaborative writing practices in Victorian fiction. The author of the paper examined the way co-authorship challenges the model of the *solitary genius*, the *inspired genius who creates works of art in isolation* and the assumption that *the author is and must be alone in the creative act.* The paper’s author uses another author’s work to draw out the ways co-written texts disturb their readers. *A collaborative relationship that consciously disperses power and authority appears not only unusual but psychologically unnatural.*

Linda Karell

**Matyas Moravec
Peter West**

Unlike Adam, who has been writing collaboratively for years, Moya is new to the world of co-authorship. They are working to map the unfamiliar landscape, to taxonomise the various species. There are the single-voice pieces, like our colleagues at *The Philosopher* who declare: *If we have done it well, you should not know which one of us wrote this particular sentence (and you’ll never find out).* Then there are the multi-voice pieces. Among the multi-voice pieces, there are the relatively conservative ones, like the Dennett and Caruso book. The Dennett and Caruso book switches back and forth at a steady pace: “you write a couple paragraphs, then I’ll write a couple in response, then you write a couple more.” It’s like the world’s tidiest conversation. Then there are the more experimental multi-voice pieces, like the Spelman and Lugones paper. In the Spelman and Lugones paper, two sections are written *in a Hispana voice* – one in Spanish, one in English. One section is written *in the voice of a white/Anglo woman who has been teaching and writing about feminist theory*; one is written *unproblematically in Vicky’s*

**Elizabeth V. Spelman
María Lugones**

[Spelman] and María's voice; one is written problematically in the voice of a woman of color. (Is the final section "problematic" because it was written, in part or in full, by Spelman? Is it "problematic" because Lugones feels more comfortable speaking for Hispanas than she feels speaking for women of colour more generally? They leave the labels unexplained.)

Moya squints so hard at the concept of co-authorship that their vision starts to blur. Really, how different is the co-authored paper from the single-authored paper? On some level, all philosophy is collaborative. None of it exists in a vacuum. To write a "single-authored paper" is to put one's work in conversation with the work of countless others, not to mention the feedback of editors and colleagues. The difference between "single-authored" and "co-authored" is a difference in degree, Moya decides, not a difference in kind.

An email appears in their inbox. It is from Adam. They hadn't been expecting one so soon. The tiny pixelated paperclip indicates there is a file attached.

Adam Ferner

Hi Moya!

*Thanks again for your last email and the voice recording – a lot of food for thought! I had a bit of free time today and I went through our emails and wrote up a contextualised exchange (attached!). It's quite rough, but I'd be really interested to know what you make of it (and of course, I'm very happy to try a different angle on the discussion if you'd rather). I'm not sure if it's good or if it's too annoyingly self-reflexive, but it definitely feels like it's ...something :) It clearly doesn't capture everything we've been talking about, but I think that's interesting in itself and hopefully the ending signals that these are only preliminary thoughts. Anyway, I hope you're doing well! I'm around for a zoom chat this week if that would be useful at all! Cheers,
Adam :)*

As he waits for Moya's response, Adam listens again to an old voice memo.

Moya Mapps

*One easy place to start would be: Why? Why are we doing this?
Why do you want to co-author a series of essays with me?
And why do I want to co-author a series of essays with you?*

...Okay. I'll talk to you later. Bye.

Moya is PhD candidate in the Yale Department of Philosophy. They study ethics and feminist philosophy. Website: moyamapps.com

Adam is a writer and youth worker based in London. His latest books are The Philosopher's Library (with Chris Meyns) and Notes from the Crawl Room. Website: adamferner.com