In Praise of Co-Authoring

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This article is written in the first-person plural. In other words, you’re going to see the word “we” a lot and you’ll be presented with “our” thoughts and opinions. If you’re used to reading philosophy, this might strike you as odd at first. It’s probably something you’ll notice straight away and, we’ll wager, will influence the way you read the rest of the article. That’s because philosophy usually involves engaging with an *individual’s* arguments and ideas. To study philosophy is, we’re frequently told, to study Great Thinkers. A philosophical text is seen to contain the thoughts, opinions, examples, arguments, and ideas of a single thinker; a gateway into how *that individual* saw the world and an insight into that thinker’s attempts to grapple with the big questions.

This article isn’t like that. Its two authors are colleagues (us!) with shared research interests and roughly similar thoughts on writing philosophy. We had been reflecting on the benefits of writing philosophy papers with other people and one of us suggested we could write about co-authoring itself. The other considered it, then agreed. Both raised questions and thought about how to answer them. Within a few minutes, a rough outline for an article (this article!) had formed. It was an organic process and we could be (somewhat) confident we were onto something since there was another person there nodding and shaking their head at various suggestions. Neither of us thinks this would have happened had either of us been out for a walk alone. Yet, despite these seemingly obvious benefits of co-writing (not just philosophy but pretty much anything), co-authored works make up a minority of publications in contemporary philosophy. We think this is odd.

In analytic philosophy, the tradition that has come to dominate the Anglophone world, this is especially surprising since the founders of this tradition originally set out to turn philosophy into what they thought of as a “scienceof truth”. In the sciences, the majority of publications are co-authored. A quick glance at the *Lancet’s* publications on the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, makes it clear that the research which led to the production of groundbreaking vaccines was collaborative, involving large teams of researchers. Meanwhile, in the eyes of many, writing philosophy is more akin to producing art. It’s a *creation*. It stems from the minds of brilliant, quite often quirky or extravagant writers, and is less susceptible to the kind of pragmatic division of labour that takes place in the sciences.

A cursory glance at the last four issues of well-respected philosophy journals – *Nous, The Philosophical Review, Mind, Journal of Philosophy,* and *Philosophical Studies* – reinforces this impression. Only about a fifth of papers published had multiple authors. Out of those, a tiny fraction listed more than two authors and none at all featured more than three. When one delves deeper into the history of 20th-century philosophy, co-authored works become even rarer. Those philosophers who did co-author almost always did so with the same colleague and their co-authorship has turned into a nearly-indissoluble bond. They wrote as a philosophical atom and eventually came to be treated as a single philosopher by the wider public. When typing “Deleuze and…” into Google, all suggestions start with “...and Guattari.” The same thing happens with, for instance, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann. Others hid their co-authorship (or failed to make it explicit), as was the case with the well-known utilitarian John Stuart Mill and his considerably less well-known wife Harriet Taylor Mill. Moving further back, co-authorship nearly disappears. Unless one is willing to consider the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence as a collaborative work or Plato’s dialogues as “co-authored” with Socrates, most famous philosophers come out as lonely cult figures.

It is, of course, possible to find equally well-known lone-figure scientists (like Feynman, Hawking, Eddington, or Brian Cox). But it is questionable whether such figures are known for their *research* as opposed to public appearances or other science-popularising activities. This is similar to several philosophical figures who gained international fame not because of their academic work, but because of their role in the public sphere (Henri Bergson, Bertrand Russell), other para-philosophical literary activities (Iris Murdoch, Jean-Paul Sartre), political stances (Hannah Arendt, Noam Chomsky) or just a general entertaining quirkiness (Slavoj Žižek). Nobel prizes in literature (which have been awarded to philosophers, such as Bergson in 1927 or Russell in 1950) have only ever been given to individuals. Those in physics almost always go to teams of people. This indicates that when it comes to the *research*, the popular conception of lone scientific geniuses is off the mark; scientific progress requires collaboration.

This paper is co-authored. We decided to write it while walking around the river Wear in Durham and the process has been fun. Of course, enjoying a process is by no means an indication of its being successful. But the methods we’ve used (and that co-authorship in general requires) offer benefits that might easily be transferred to a larger number of authors or academic peer-reviewed papers – especially cross-disciplinary ones. First off, there are practical upshots to co-authorship. For instance, co-authoring cuts down the amount of time spent writing and alleviates the arduous task of finding people to read through and provide feedback on your work. Such time-saving benefits are especially valuable to early-career researchers strapped for time but expected to have published prolifically to even be considered for an academic post. Of course, the co-authoring process itself can take time (sometimes compromises or concessions have to be agreed on) but, at least anecdotally, we have both found it to be considerably less arduous. Like any task, it depends on who you are working with.

However, the benefits of co-authorship also extend as far as philosophy itself. These benefits include almost instantaneous peer-review, positively-motivating psychological pressure from a friendly colleague to get the job done (a psychological pressure much more benign than that of looming deadlines for grant applications), and an easy devolution of “philosophical labour” (tasks, expertise, research). Using online platforms (such as Google Docs) also makes it possible to smooth over the seams between different sections written by different people. Indeed, as we write this, we’re both suggesting amendments or changes to one another “live”.  If we have done it well, you should not know which one of us wrote this particular sentence (and you’ll never find out). Co-authorship also allows for *disagreement* which pushes us to pre-emptively work through problems or note that there are some questions in response to which it is appropriate to arrive at an *aporia*; i.e., a state in which one decides no definitive answer can be given. Plato famously recognised this. As did the seventeenth-century philosopher Margaret Cavendish, who wrote “dialogues” between two sets of thoughts within her own mind and published a series of letters between herself and an imagined friend after failing to elicit any disagreement (or any engagement at all) from her contemporaries. Where real co-authors are hard to come by, imaginary ones are the next best thing. As any good philosopher will tell you, disagreement is at the heart of the profession – so why not make space for it in the writing process too?

If the whole process is so great, one must ask why it isn’t the default. We believe one answer lies in the aforementioned cult of the lone genius. The cognitive scientist Dan Sperber has referred to something akin to this as the “guru effect”. His 2010 paper (targeting the likes of Derrida, Heidegger, and Sartre, who he thinks of as continental obscurantists) describes the process through which certain philosophical intellectuals rely on philosophical obscurity to achieve cult-like status and authority:

Here emerges a collective dynamics typical of intellectual schools and sects, where the obscurity of respected masters is not just a sign of the depth of their thinking, but a proof of their genius. Left on their own, admiring readers interpret one recondite passage after another in a way that may slowly reinforce their admiration … Now sharing their interpretations and impressions with other admirers, readers find in the admiration, in the trust that others have for the master, reasons to consider their own interpretations as failing to do justice to the genius of the interpreted text. In turn these readers become disciplines and proselytes.

Perhaps an individual may intentionally come across as obscure to others, but this is difficult to do with a co-author who might see through the trick. So one ends up writing alone. Unless, of course, the lonely genius finds someone complicit in this obscurity, as Sperber would presumably say about Deleuze and Guattari.

Even if one is not convinced by Sperber’s claims about deliberately obscure writing, there are other explanations available. Indeed, one finds a similar lack of co-authorship in analytic philosophy – an approach that prides itself on actively *avoiding* obscure writing. Analytic philosophers usually strive for clarity of expression; sometimes, as John Cottingham argues, to the point of making itself damningly uninteresting to specialists working outside that particular sub-field of philosophy:

[D]ebates have become so much the property of specialists who have devoted prodigious energy to devising the most intricate arguments and counter-arguments to support their views, that it is unlikely that anyone who did not have a professional or career motivation for putting in the requisite effort would willingly wade through the resulting conceptual treacle.

More generally, the culprit might perhaps be the *difficulty* of reading, regardless of whether it’s caused by obscurity or by excessive technicality. After all, even analytic philosophers find satisfaction in deciphering Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.

Nevertheless, Sperber’s explanation points in the right direction: regardless of how “gurus” (if that is the right term) come about, their sheer existence reinforces the view that groundbreaking philosophy is something that one does on one’s own. This is in turn further strengthened by the public appearances of numerous philosophical celebrities (like Slavoj Žižek or Jordan Peterson). Just like with celebrities in the world of music, the philosophical revelation is supposed to descend on one creative genius-unit. We mentioned earlier that the Big Thinkers who co-author almost always do so with the same colleague, just as a guitarist tends to stick to playing for one band rather than moving to another to play drums. The creative spirit in a pop music band is thought of as moving in One Direction, so to speak(when a band member leaves, fans bemoan the music “never being the same again”), and not as something that jumps between minds like Kevin Parker’s Tame Impala– a collaborative enterprise involving different musicians playing different instruments at different stretches of the project’s existence.

We think philosophy is due an ethos change; one where the myth of the “lone genius” is dispelled and where co-authoring is both encouraged and acknowledged. In particular, we think philosophers at the early stages of their careers (whether undergraduates, PhD students, or on the job market) should be actively emboldened to work alongside one another – not just on “extracurricular” activities like reading groups or workshop organisation, but in the writing process itself. Training in philosophy, in most of Europe and the US at least, involves learning to do your own research and write your own philosophy – exemplified by the traditional model of a solo dissertation. We think that philosophy students should also be encouraged to work with their peers – perhaps on co-authored pieces of coursework (It is worth noting that undergraduates often *do* work together on presentations, but this kind of collaborative work often fizzles out as one progresses to postgraduate studies and beyond). What’s more, we don’t think that early-career philosophers should be put off by concerns that their co-authored publications “won’t really count” or that they will be scrutinized about how much they actually contributed to a co-authored publication. The profession as a whole should do what it can to acknowledge that a co-authored publication is a *publication full-stop*.

It is really promising to see that the profession *is* starting to take co-authorship seriously. Several recent peer-reviewed papers have explored the benefits (as well as the drawbacks) of co-authorship. Some have noted that co-authorship brings with it certain ethical questions about who gets credited for what work, especially in the sciences where it is increasingly common for more than 1000 authors to be credited on a single article. In true philosophical style, a recent paper by Joshua Habgood-Coote has raised the question of *what an author is* in the first place (along with a fascinating discussion of the history of authorship). But it should be noted that many of these discussions still focus on co-authorship in the sciences – which can give the impression that co-authorship remains a scientific phenomenon. There *are* signs that philosophers want more co-authorship in philosophy. For instance, Joshua A. Miller and Eric Schliesser wrote a blog post four years ago calling for more co-authorship and offering suggestions for how that might work, including a proposal for co-authored pieces that mimic the adversarial style of a courtroom. Others, like Joe Mazor, have suggested that this kind of “two sides” approach to writing might offer a form of objectivity that isn’t available to a single author. Yet, unfortunately, co-authorship is still far from being the norm.

We’re not pushing for something radical. As we’ve noted, co-authorship is the mainstream in the sciences, and philosophers themselves often sing the praises of collaboration. Indeed, co-authorship at the highest level of professional philosophy does take place. As we’ve suggested, things might slowly be changing (in *Nous,* which we mentioned earlier, 25% of publications in the last four issues were co-authored). But the perception, professionally and more generally, of philosophy as the enterprise of the lone genius ought to change too and co-authorship ought not to be seen as a novelty or something that needs to be qualified or explained. In other words, contrary to Descartes’ famous motto, philosophers should get used to reading “we think” rather than “I think”.

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