Against Advice

Agnes Callard

May 9, 2019

We live in a glorious era of podcasting, public conversation and boundary-crossing interest in niche academic areas. It's a great time to be a public intellectual, except for one thing: the part of the interview known as the "advice segment." When someone is found to have specialized knowledge that provokes public engagement and interest, you can bet she will be asked to offer suggestions as to how others might follow in her footsteps. And you can bet those suggestions will be useless.

The novelist Margaret Atwood, in a recent interview, responds to the relevant request with the predictable advice to write every day. Then, perhaps prompted by the fact that earlier in that very interview she admitted to not writing every day herself, she follows it up with: "I don't, but you should. Because if you're a starting-out writer, that's good for you."

She continues (I suspect she can hear how little wisdom she has just communicated): "But the main thing to remember is, nobody's going to see it until you let them. So you need not be inhibited when you're actually writing. It's just between you and the page. And if you don't like what you wrote that day, the wastepaper basket is there for you."

Given that "be uninhibited" is pretty useless advice to the inhibited, the information Atwood has actually conveyed here is "be prepared to throw out what you write." Which is to say, "practice writing." If you asked someone for advice about how to be a writer, and she said, "practice writing," it would be hard to hear that response unsarcastically.

Atwood is a brilliant and successful writer; she has a lifetime's worth of wisdom gleaned from near-daily battles with the blank page. She is gamely endeavoring to give the interviewer what he asks for: she wants to be helpful; she is trying to play ball. So why does she keep tripping herself up? Why does her advice sound empty and canned? (Who uses wastepaper baskets anymore?!)

I have a lot of empathy for Atwood: When starry-eyed students come to my office to ask for tips and strategies for becoming a philosopher, I find myself cringing in anticipation of the drivel I am about to spout. My advice isn't "bad" in the sense that it will lead them astray, but it is bad nonetheless, in that it won't lead them anywhere. It's as though right before I give the advice, I push a button that sucks all the informational content out of what I'm about to say, and I end up saying basically nothing at all.

This problem does not afflict every form of verbal assistance equally. Let me make a three-way terminological distinction between "advice," "instructions" and "coaching." You give someone *instructions* as to how achieve a goal that is itself instrumental to some (unspecified) further goal—here is how someone might get to the library, if for some reason she wanted to go there; this is the way to put toner in a printer, etc. *Coaching*, by contrast, effects in someone a transformative orientation towards something of intrinsic value: an athletic or intellectual or even social triumph.

Instructions make you better at doing what you (independently) valued, whereas coaching makes you better at valuing—it cues you in to what's important, at an intellectual or physical or emotional level. Coaching takes many forms—teaching philosophy

is coaching, and I see my therapist as a coach of sorts—but one thing it always requires is the kind of time-investment that generates a shared educational history. Coaching is personal.

As I'm using the word "advice," it aims to combine the impersonal and the transformative. You could think of it as "instructions for self-transformation." The young person is not approaching Atwood for instructionson how to operate Microsoft Word, nor is she making the unreasonable demand that Atwood become her writing coach. She wants the kind of value she would get from the second, but she wants it given to her in the manner of the first. But there is no there there. Hence the advice-giver is reduced to repeating reasonable-sounding things she has heard others say—thoughts that are watered down so far that there's really no thought left, just water.

The problem here is a mismatch between form and content. Instrumental knowledge is knowledge of universals: whenever you have an X, it will get you a Y. I can give you such knowledge without our having any robust connection to one another. Knowledge of becoming, by contrast, always involves a particularized grasp of where the aspirant currently stands on the path between total cluelessness and near-perfection. What are her characteristic weaknesses; where does she already excel; what nudges could she use? Only someone who knows her knows this. An aspirational history is full of minute corrections, dead ends, backtracking, re-orientation and random noise. It is as idiosyncratic, odd and particular as the human being herself.

Suppose Margaret Atwood gave us a detailed account of how she got to be who she is, and pinpointed for us which events were especially formative. No aspiring writer should try to use such an account as a template for success. For one thing Atwood was surely *not* doing when she, for example, moved to Berlin or took up a job teaching grammar was: following in anyone else's footsteps. The moral of every great person's story seems to be that they were not trying to retell another's. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of advice seems to be that those most likely to be asked for it are least likely to have taken anyone else's: their projects of "becoming" are the most particularized of all.

It would be really nice if information that could transform someone's values was able to be handed over as cheaply as driving instructions. In such a world, people could be of profound assistance to one another with little investment in one another's lives. The myth of advice is the possibility that we can transform one another with the most glancing contact, and so it is not surprising that one finds so much advice exchanged on social media. When people are not fighting on Twitter, they are cheerfully and helpfully telling one another how to live. In that context, advice functions as a kind of small talk or social glue: it helps people feel they are getting along in a space not bound together by any kind of shared weather.

There is probably nothing wrong with this, as long as we do not let it bleed into those contexts in which real assistance is possible. I do not have tips or tricks for becoming a philosopher to hand over to my students; my wisdom is contained in the slog of philosophical argument—the daily grind of reading old books, picking out the

premises, tearing them apart. I can make you better at that, by showing you how to do more of *this* and less of *that.* I can't help you become a philosopher without being your philosophy teacher, any more than I can massage you without touching you. Someone who wiggles her fingers and pretends she has magical powers isn't actually getting you anywhere.

Real assistance requires contact. It is, however, worth noting that not all contact needs to take a two-way form. Atwood can be quite helpful to young and confused people whom she has never met, for they might, nonetheless, have met her. I was one of those people. There is an image from her novel *Cat's Eye* that has stayed with me for almost thirty years now: a girl who peels the bottoms of her feet to deal with her loneliness and alienation. It's an image of knowing one's own difference and punishing oneself for it, and, at the same time, of suffering as a game one plays with oneself, and thereby takes possession of. As a teenager I connected it with the story of the little mermaid, who suffers in a similar way for her humanity, and with my own feeling that the process of self-creation involved a fair amount of violence to myself. I expect I'll be unpacking that image all my life, learning as I go along.

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The Point Magazine, Examined Life.
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