

# I Told My Son to Always Be Himself. Was I Wrong?

Actors and teachers both pretend to be other people in order  
to find the truth.

Agnes Callard

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“What will you think of me if I become an actor when I grew up?” my son once asked. He was about four years old at the time, and we were discussing my opposition to the profession. To act in a movie or play is to pretend to be a different person than the person that you are: to have different feelings, and different beliefs, and different attachments, even a different appearance.

We tell everyone, but especially children: be yourself! Don’t put on a performance! Don’t try to give off the impression of being someone you’re not! It seemed to me that these were good rules, and also that they ruled out the acting profession. That was my argument.

But my son’s counter-argument was “What if I become an actor? Will you be disappointed in me?” Not exactly a rebuttal, but it gave me pause. He didn’t become an actor, but he did become a filmmaker, and slowly, as he’s grown up, I’ve revised my views on acting.

As background, it’s worth pointing out just how blind I am to the artistry of pretense. When I hear people say, “so-and-so was great in that role,” I have no idea what they are talking about. Every actor, in every movie, always fully convinces me. As far as I’m concerned, all the extras deserve Academy Awards. I’ve never spotted bad acting.

Clearly, I’m just easy to fool. When visitors come to my home, I tell them that “gullible” is written on the ceiling, and it is: I have a piece of paper that says, “gullible” taped to the ceiling of my kitchen. In This House, Everything Is As it Seems. Or so I thought, and then, around the time my son turned five, I started teaching.

Teaching philosophy means arguing passionately for views you don’t agree with. One week I am standing in front of the room as a representative of Cartesian rationalism, using the cogito argument to pull the rabbit of God’s existence out of the hat of doubting God’s existence, and the next week I’m Hume, arch-enemy of rationalism, refusing to acknowledge much beyond what I can see, smell and touch. Of course the class examines and challenges these positions, but raising objections is the students’ job, whereas my job is to be up on the chopping block.

I don’t try to *look like* Descartes or Hume but I am trying to inhabit their way of seeing things, their assumptions and their frameworks and their styles of argumentation, and this requires me to “be them” in a pretty deep sense. Maybe I’m being deceptive by *not* dressing like them?

The bottom line is: when I’m teaching, I don’t matter, my views don’t matter, I’m busy trying to be someone I’m not. And that turns out to be a good thing! Being the medium through which students interact with great minds from the past is a job I love.

Back when my son was 4, I was a graduate student, with the luxury of devoting all my efforts to figuring out what I myself thought. I didn’t have to spend time being other people, and I didn’t have much natural ability to grasp just how many different ways there are of doing that. Now I can see that the task of an actor is not dissimilar to my own: they have to set their selves aside in order to participate in the project of channeling another world.

Not that I've arrived at a blanket endorsement of acting: just as I wouldn't impersonate a philosopher unless I thought his or her views deserved to be taken seriously, someone has to make sure that a given role is worth filling, because it is part of a story worth telling. I leave that job to my son.

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