
BOTH PRECISION AND IMAGINATION

PAUL DURBIN

Ludus Vitalis has announced a new, third forum, with a title roughly translatable as “Knowledge: technical and conceptual advances in your professional specialty,” which the flyer helpfully translates as a “dialogue involving precision and imagination.” And I have once again been asked to contribute.

What would I have to offer under either of these headings?

I would certainly begin with Stephen J. Gould, who made two claims in an interview published shortly after he died in 2002:

I try very hard not to make a distinction between my so-called technical and popular writing. They’re both done at the same level. When you write popular stuff, there’s no need for any conceptual simplification. You should be able to write at the same conceptual depth you would for your professional colleagues, and I think I do that (*New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2002.).

I read this as saying that jargon is never needed even for professional audiences; and that he always tried to write even professional essays in jargon-free English—and generally succeeded.

Among philosophers, I have always admired Bertrand Russell for trying to do the same thing—and he received a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950.

In my view (based ultimately on a now-old book, Rudolf Fleschs *How to Write, Speak, and Think More Effectively*, 1960), technical precision and the kind of professional jargon (for example, among medical researchers) that is only intelligible to fellow experts—and has the effect of systematically closing off one’s writing from any except professional audiences—is almost always motivated by a fear of being *unclear*; and worst of all, of being *accused of being unclear* by others within the profession.

The classic example is “legalese,” defined as the attempt to prevent, in advance, all possible loopholes in any legal document, including laws.

Emeritus Professor, Philosophy Department and Center for Energy and Environmental Policy, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA. / pdurbin@udel.edu
Last contribution to *Ludus Vitalis*: “How to make our future world a better world,” vol. XVI, num. 29, 2008, pp. 169-172.

Ludus Vitalis, vol. XVII, num. 31, 2009, pp. 219-222.

Medical writers, as another example, feel that this is necessary to distinguish “real” scientific medicine from medical pseudoscience in any of its myriad forms—from so-called folk medicine to plain old quackery. Nothing counts except “evidence-based medicine,” that is, medicine based on well-designed clinical studies; and it is assumed that no one except the medically trained can fully appreciate such studies because only they have learned to do such studies themselves. This, of course, has the effect that even non-investigator physicians are assumed to be incapable of reading “the professional literature” with full intelligibility—which, curiously, undercuts recent calls for nothing but evidence-based medicine in the practice of that field, where only a small minority do clinical studies themselves.

I feel that these fears are exaggerated, and that society would be better off if more technical writers, in whatever field, worried as much about communicating imaginatively as they do about communicating clearly.

There are philosophers of technology who can and do write in a relatively jargon-free fashion, the best recent example in the USA being Albert Borgmann. Others who would come close include Langdon Winner. Some would also include Don Ihde.

But the vast majority write primarily for other philosophers, in some cases even limiting their audiences to other philosophers of technology—or, sometimes, to environmental philosophers, experts in science, technology and society studies, or a small number of related fields.

So my question here would be this: Would our field suffer if more philosophers of technology adopted a clean style like that of Borgmann, that is generally accessible to a broad range of members of the general intellectual public? Or if more adopted the essayist style of Winner? Or if they sprinkled in more concrete examples like Ihde?

And the answer would seem to be clear: the field would not suffer. And I have always advised graduate students with whom I have worked (with varying degrees of success) to strive to write their doctoral theses as if they were addressing clearly defined general audiences.

But is there any lesson to be learned by readers of *Ludus Vitalis* forums from a contrast between the best and the worst writers of philosophical essays on technology? Shouldn't I just be addressing my own philosophical colleagues, urging them to avoid technical jargon wherever they can? Do we philosophers, or at least we philosophers of technology, have the problem of blending precision and imagination that the forum organizers think other professionals have today?

My first reaction is to answer my own question in the negative. Much philosophy of technology is badly written in the sense of being jargon-filled, but we certainly do not have the problems that others do, such as lawyers or doctors or even economists or writers in more technical philo-

sophical specializations that deal with logic and epistemology and the nature of science.

But I'm going to go out on a limb here and argue that authors in *all* these fields should follow the examples of Gould in science and Russell in philosophy. Why? Why should *all* professionals be taught to communicate in simpler language and for wider audiences? Why, for example, should medical researchers not fear a loss of precision if they also write with imagination? Why, for that matter, would lawyers and engineers and even the most abstract scientists be better off if they worried less about precision (in language only their peers can understand) and instead worried more about conveying the general sense—nay the importance—of what they are trying to convey?

I would not want to be thought of as advocating imprecise language in professional fields. For example, lawyers and especially those who happen to be public officials writing laws or authoritative administrative documents have enough problems as it is with other lawyers, corrupt officials, and even the general public finding loopholes in what they produce. I'm not talking about that. I feel that it is possible to be both precise and imaginative, to "nail down the exceptions," so to speak, without losing sight of the public's need to know what documents mean for them and for society generally. Mine is an argument for good writing *generally*.

My best example would be medicine. A great many physicians in these days of patients being urged to take responsibility for their own good health would clearly benefit if clinical studies used no more jargon than is absolutely necessary. Then doctors couldn't complain that medical journalists are "popularizing" scientific findings in ways that mislead the public—and specifically their own patients.

It has always been said that being precise in our writing takes longer and is more difficult than falling back on the accepted jargon in whatever field. So in some sense it's a false dichotomy to pit precision against imagination. Sadly, to my knowledge, almost no directors of doctoral theses in any field—any more than those who train engineers or other technical writers—take the time to make sure that those they teach write *both* clearly *and* imaginatively. And that's a shame, in my opinion.

Clearly not every biologist can write like Stephen Gould, nor every philosopher like Bertrand Russell. And many professionals feel more comfortable writing for their peers than for the general public. But even then they would be well served to learn how to write not only clearly but imaginatively. And society—I will conclude—would be much better off, in our technological culture, if there were a genuine effort on the part of more writers in technical fields to communicate with broader audiences. Just as society would be better off if more mentors in technical fields taught

as much about good communicating as they do about getting things right in professional terms.

REFERENCES

- Borgmann, Albert (2006), *Real American Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Flesch, Rudolf (1960), *How to Write, Speak, and Think More Effectively*. New York: Signet.
- Gould, Stephen J. See www.stephenjaygould.org/interviews.html.
- Ihde, Don (1990), *Technology and the Lifeworld*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Russell, Russell (1945), *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Winner, Langdon (1986), *The Whale and the Reactor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.