GUIDELINES ON HOW TO REFEREE[1]

Draft: 2nd December 2010

Introduction

This essay offers clear practical advice on how to act as a referee when asked to review an article for an academic journal. The advice is also relevant for reviewing manuscript proposals for academic publishers. My advice is based on my experiences in editing an academic journal, the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, and four book series.[2] I will draw on these experiences throughout as illustrations. The structure of the advice is as follows. First, I will begin by saying a few words about the academic publishing industry. Secondly, I will discuss whether one should accept or decline an invitation to review. Thirdly, I will examine the question of what appropriate standard should be applied when reviewing submissions. Finally, I conclude with advice on how to draft a report before submitting it to an editor.

The essay is designed in much the same spirit as my earlier **"Publishing Advice for Graduate Students"** and my hope is that this new essay on refereeing advice will be found every bit as useful by colleagues and students.

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[2] The *Journal of Moral Philosophy* website can be found at http://www.brill.nl/jmp. The book series I edit or co-edit include *Continuum Ethics* (with Simon Kirchin), *Studies in Global Justice and Human Rights*, *Textbooks in Global Justice and Human Rights*, and *Studies in Moral Philosophy*.

Background on publishing

It is important to have some awareness of the academic publishing industry and how it works. The reason is that reviewing articles takes place within a specific context. The more one understands this wider context, the more one appreciates the nature of the task of reviewing.

The academic world moves slowly. An article may have been submitted more than a few weeks ago before you are asked. This may be for several reasons. One reason is that someone else had agreed to review the article, but later declined. A second reason is that it takes time for editors to determine who should review submissions. There are several considerations. They do not want to ask the same persons to review more than 1-2 per year. Searching for appropriate reviewers is no easy task. I normally select reviewers for the *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (*JMP*) through key word searches on the Philosopher's Index. Once a potential reviewer has been identified there is then the task of discovering their contact details. This can be easier said than done. (More than once contact details have proven out of date or the potential reviewers recently deceased.)

A third reason why it takes time for editors to organize reviews is because they should have a close look at the submissions received. It is no easy task assessing papers for the *JMP*, for instance. We have received well over 220 submissions in 2010. Each submission is about 25 pages on average. That's equivalent to about 5,500 pages to read during the year <u>in addition</u> to writing lectures, conducting my own research, and other professional activities. Put another way, I receive about 4 submissions roughly 100 pages total in length every week. Editing is almost a full-time job in itself.

While editors have much work behind the scenes in receiving submissions, they rely on the important work of referees in helping them assess the quality of the more promising submissions. Many journals conduct "desk rejections" where a submission is rejected before

being sent to review. While some may find the practice controversial, there are many cases where it has been helpful. It saves the time of editors who need not manage a review of the piece. It saves the time of referees who need not be troubled to writing a negative report for a paper the journal does not plan to publish anyway. It may also be useful to the author who might benefit from a swift decision either to more quickly resubmit elsewhere to perhaps a more promising venue or give quick pause for thought on the soundness of his or her paper's arguments.

Referees perform a vital role in helping editors manage the more promising submissions that survive possible desk rejection. This is not to say that papers sent out will be likely to be accepted later, but that these papers simply require (and may deserve) closer scrutiny before a final decision on publication can be made. Therefore, if you are asked to review an article for a journal, know that several things have already happened. An author submitted the paper to an editor. The editor has taken the time to initially consider the paper, deciding against immediate desk rejection. The editor has then taken the time to identify potential reviewers. The editor has taken the time to find the contact details for potential reviewers identified before sending an initial request. This request to review is normally sent by email although some still use the post. Thus, the clock has already been ticking and the author left waiting perhaps for at least a week or longer before reviewers are contacted. This is important to keep in mind.

Accept or decline invitations?

Should you accept or decline an invitation to review an article for a journal? The first thing to say on this is that you should decide this fairly swiftly. Normally, journals will allow you at least a week to decide whether you would like to accept the invitation. However, it is advisable to make a decision in 2-3 days. Expect a positive reply to entail at least 1-2 hours of work and often much more in carefully reading the paper and drafting your report (which I will say more about

below). Some submissions may simply take added time to review properly and this should be taken into consideration when agreeing to review.

One important part of academic life is "service to the profession" and refereeing papers for the profession's journals is a crucial service. Many academics note the journals for which they have refereed and it is rightly viewed as an indicator of esteem: the fact that journal *x* asked you to referee a submission suggests that this journal recognizes your expertise in assessing the suitability of their submissions for publication. If they did not think your work highly enough, then another would have been contacted instead. While I know of no cases where someone landed an academic job because they had refereed for any particular journal, I do know of cases where panels have commented on how impressed they were with – among many other things – the journals that had approached a candidate about refereeing papers for them. So it is a seriously important service to the profession that will get noticed beyond the journal which has approached you.

Should you accept? There are several factors to consider. Obviously, if you lack the available time for whatever reason, then you should refuse. Normally, it is best to spend no more than 4-6 weeks before submitting your report. If you do not have the time, then it is best to inform the journal immediately. Again, the academic publishing world moves very slowly: anything that can help speed things along benefits everyone.

One important factor to consider is your appropriateness to review a paper on subject *x*. There is perhaps good reason to believe you are appropriate to act as a referee on the grounds that the journal did contact you with an invitation after all. If you were genuinely unsuitable, then who would know better than the journal itself? However, sometimes mistakes arise. I would recommend taking a look first at the title, abstract (if any), and first few pages: you need not first scan the whole paper. If the distinct subject-matter is one where you have taught and researched,

then it is likely that you are suitable to serve as a referee.

A second important factor to consider is any conflict of interests. Do you know who is the author? Often papers are online or presented at conferences beforehand for initial comments. Referees may have come across the paper before at a workshop or from a philosophy blog. If you do know the identity of the author, then it is best to reveal this to the editor immediately. This need not entail that someone else provide the review if you felt confident you could provide an objective report despite knowing the author's identity. However, this knowledge can be useful for editors in determining how to act on referee reports.

A related consideration is where the paper directly praises or challenges your previous work. The worry for some is that this may lead referees to act differently than they might otherwise. For example, a paper praising one's past work would also help boost citation counts and a paper raising serious objections about one's past work might be damaging. However, the quality of the product in hand – and not considerations of citation counts and of whether certain arguments might lower regard for a particular philosophical argument – is all that should matter. In some sense, this is the real joy about academic journals. Their articles are published because of their quality alone and not because there is a "market" hungry for them. It is highly likely that an editor is already aware that a paper responds to your work. The reason for inviting you to referee the paper might be to confirm whether the paper's treatment of your work is fairly balanced and sufficiently complete. If you have any concerns about reviewing a paper that directly responds to your work, then I would recommend contacting the editor. In virtually all cases, your being asked would have been deliberate and the editor keen to know your thoughts about the submission.

Either way, respond to invitations to review promptly. If you do accept, then expect the editor to send the paper to you shortly. (Usually, an invitation to review offers a few words about

the journal and the paper's abstract.) If you elect to decline an invitation to referee for a journal, then it would be best to recommend alternative referees. Recommending 2-3 alternatives would be warmly welcomed by any editor. Editors spend much time trawling through the literature in pursuit of appropriate referees. If you are unable to commit to reviewing a paper for whatever reason, then it is a major time saver to offer alternative recommendations.

Selecting the appropriate standard

Now suppose that you have agreed to review an article. What to do now? You will be asked to either complete a brief form or submit a report. I will say more on how this should be drafted in the next section. First, it is important to become clear on the standard to be employed. This is perhaps a controversial idea. We might think that there is such a thing as "**publishability**": an article either has it or it does not. If it has it, then it should be published. Conversely, it should be rejected if it lacks it. This perspective would claim that all publishing venues are of equal standing and the general quality of the essays in one journal should be no better than the general quality of essays published elsewhere. After all, these papers are all "publishable" or so the story goes.

It is important to note that "publishability" comes in degrees. Different venues have different standards. One example is the book review. A book review need not offer a contribution to knowledge in the same way that a full article would be expected to achieve. The book review and the article each serve different purposes. The review might highlight and summarise key arguments in a book while offering some critical reflections, whereas the article is more substantive and in depth.

Likewise, different journals have different standards. If you are unclear on these standards, then you should consult the editor. However, you should review papers asking yourself

to what degree does a submission satisfy, say, the stated aims and rationale of the journal. Thus, a paper on Rousseau's Lawgiver might fit poorly in a medical ethics journal, but fit well in a history of philosophy journal. A paper that may be a good fit for one journal may not be a good fit for another. It may be helpful to recommend journals of greater suitability where a problem of satisfactory "fit" arises perhaps to the editor (and not explicit in a review) where this may be the case.

Another difference in standard pertains to the level of contribution. Some journals may serve to fill a niche in publishing good work on a particular specialist topic or on a specific philosopher. Other journals serve different purposes in, say, publishing what it considers leading seminal work. The different standards should be kept in mind. It may be more appropriate to recommend rejection for some journals while recommending major revisions for others. Again, always consult the editor when in doubt.

A worry some may have with this is that so-called "lower tier" journals might not be able to rise in stature. If referees were to be more lax with submission vetting, then they might not be an attractive home for work that might improve their standing in the journal pecking order. This worry is a worry for editors. Editors should be pro-active in trying to solicit the best work relevant to the journal and professional community that they serve. If the work could be improved, then editors need to revise their own refereeing guidelines and mission statements. This is not the task of referees. If one journal asks that you comment on whether a submission "marks a significant contribution to the literature" and a second journal does not or has a different standard, then you should vet the same paper differently depending upon which journal it was submitted to originally. Context matters, as it does in so many other situations.

Drafting the review report

We have now covered much ground in discussing some background on publishing, considerations about whether to review, and some ideas to keep in mind when forming a picture in your mind as to how you might vet the paper. I now want to address writing the review report.

Different journals will handle this differently. Some journals will send a form letter and expect referees to simply write a short report from scratch. Other journals will have a specific form that referees should complete. On this specific form, it will often have several tick boxes asking whether you believe the paper should be accepted, accepted with minor revisions (or "provisional acceptance"), minor revise and resubmit, major revise and resubmit, or reject. There will then be space to provide confidential comments to the editor and anonymous comments to the author.

First of all, click on "properties" and delete your self-identifying details – also do not save the file as "Thom Brooks - Report for Journal X" – **unless** you want the author to know your identity. There are many good reasons to want to identify yourself (and I have regularly done so). However, if you would like to retain your anonymity (which is your right), then this would be enabled best by keeping your report anonymous....and deleting the properties. Editors should normally check to ensure this is anonymous, but your taking care of this first ensures your anonymity would be retained if the editor makes a mistake.

This is how you should write your report. The top line should say nothing more than any identifying information that the journal may have given you in its invitation (e.g., *Journal of Moral Philosophy* submissions 2010–225). You should then summarise the paper and its claimed contribution to the literature very briefly before turning to your assessment of whether the paper achieves its aims. Often referees spend too much time in exegesis writing a few paragraphs about the submitted paper and what it attempts to do. Of course, authors already know what their paper is about and editors would be reading reports alongside the full article which they could readily

consult. The main focus of a good review is on what contribution to knowledge is attempted and whether this contribution is achieved. If the paper does what it claims, then this is a count in favour of acceptance. If a paper fails to live up to its own ambitions, then this is a strong count against. This should be as clearly stated in your report as possible.

It may be tempting to add venom, but this temptation should be avoided. Perhaps the author was misleading about or overly dismissive of important contributions on the topic. This is not reason to be discourteous in how criticisms to the paper should be raised. Remember that your report is an attempt to inform and persuade. The editor may not have the expertise you have on this topic and s/he is necessarily reliant on your good advice on the merits of the paper. If the report is rude or vindictive, then this will speak more about yourself than the paper's merit. To persuade editors clearly on your judgement about the paper, you should be direct (using bullet points, if necessary) to raise merits and criticisms of the paper. You should also comment on any items for revision, if revise and resubmit is your verdict.

Sometimes it is difficult to decide whether to recommend acceptance, revisions or rejection. Again, ask yourself about whether the submission meets the stated standards particular to the journal in question. Consult with the editor on these if unclear. If you have criticisms, but could envisage using the essay (if published) in your teaching and research than accept or revise may be the best recommendations. This is not to say that you should reject papers that stray from your teaching and research: it may be that you have moved onto new topics. However, that a piece would be something you believe high quality enough to use in your work is a count in favour. What matters most is your substantive comments on the merits (and demerits) of the submission: a verdict in favour or against publication is less important. Ultimately, the editor must determine how to proceed once reports are received. Additionally, there may be another 1-2 referees consulted on a given piece.

This advice applies to reviewing book proposals with a few caveats. Often publishers will have a set of questions they will want reviewers to address. I would approach this in much the same way as reviewing journal articles. Am I an appropriate referee? What is the particular standard applied by this press for works of this kind? I would then set about crafting a report that is substantive and avoids much exegesis or summary. What counts is your critical and honest feedback. If the publisher wants to learn more, then they can always ask for clarifications later on.

There are differences between writing reviews of articles and reviews of books. Article reviews should normally be no longer than 1-2 pages (single spaced) – of course, journal editors and authors will always welcome much longer substantive feedback. Book proposal reviews may be much longer extending to 5 or many more pages. Article reviews will be met with sincere thanks by editors, but little more. (I try to post free copies of the *JMP* to our referees where I can as a thank you.) Sometimes there may limited discounts on book purchases or journal subscriptions. Book proposal reviews will be much more generous, as they require more work. This usually consists in payment or free books up to a certain amount. (I recommend always accepting the free books: often publishers will offer more £ or $ in free books than £ or $ in cash.) With book proposal reviews, you should expect to see a proposal and 1-2 sample chapters (if not the full manuscript) usually with a CV. Be mindful of what you write. Publishers will be looking to see if there are sentences they might lift from a positive proposal review for inclusion in promoting the book (e.g., the website and back cover). If you want to recommend publication of a book manuscript, then you might help make your case by offering a clear endorsement that can be used.

Finally, some have asked me how they might be approached by editors and publishers to review journal articles and book proposals. One method might be to make yourself known (with

CV) to journal editors or commissioning editors in your field at publishers. The best method is to publish your own work. The more you publish high quality work, the more that editors and publishers will become alerted to you as a potential reviewer. The best judges of what is publishable are often those who have experience publishing high quality work themselves.

Conclusion

I hope that this brief guide on refereeing is of great use to readers, especially those that have not refereed for a journal or publisher before. I do not claim that it is complete, only that I hope there is some good practical advice to follow. As with **my essay on publishing advice**, I will regularly update this essay over time in response to feedback. Readers will advice on how this essay may be improved are warmly encouraged to **contact me** with their suggestions.[3]

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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[3] The advice in this essay is derived primarily from my own experiences and the advice a great many others have given to me over the years. My greatest debt is to Dermot Moran who took me under his wing in 2001 as temporary acting manager of the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*. I have also benefited from the advice of David Bell, Fabian Freyenhagen, Carol Gould, Bob Stern, and Leif Wenar. I am also grateful to Steven Gross, Darrell Rowbottom, and K. Brad Wray for written comments. I owe special thanks to Brian Leiter for kindly organizing a terrific thread on guidelines for referees on his blog, The Leiter Reports.

Dr Thom Brooks is Reader in Political and Legal Philosophy at Newcastle University (UK) and originally from New Haven. He is editor and founder of the *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. His recent books include *The Legacy of John Rawls* (2005), *Hegel's Political Philosophy* (2007), *The Global Justice Reader* (2008), *The Right to a Fair Trial* (2010), *New Waves in Ethics* (2011), and *Punishment* (2011). He was elected Academician in the Academy of Social Sciences in 2009 and elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2010. He is completing an edited collection, *Rawls's Political Liberalism*, with Martha C. Nussbaum and writing several papers on the topic of justice. He also writes on ethics, philosophy, and public policy at The Brooks Blog (http://the-brooks-blog.blogspot.com).