

Privatization of Reason

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Abstract

No one owns a reason — not even the one who holds it. Its force lies in the structure it carries, not in the carrier. Sharing a proof does not divide it, and an argument that moves you takes nothing from the one who gave it. What cannot be possessed cannot be enclosed; to treat reason as ownable — to privatize it — is to fence what has no edges. The fence goes up anyway, by a single move: give a reason a *whose*, and let that decide *whether* it counts. Hang that gate at possession and it is the familiar defensiveness of a conversation that has stopped being one. Hang it on your own standing and it is quieter and far more common: the expert's seat, where you meet each argument as its judge rather than its peer — ready to be moved if what arrives earns it, and so already the gate. Scale that seat into procedure and it is the working architecture of institutions, which ask where a claim came from in place of whether it bears, let alone whether it is true. One operation raised to many heights, and one discipline refuses them all: verification blind to provenance, which lets a reason act as a reason no matter what carried it. What can be owned is not reason; what is reason cannot be owned.

What passes between us

Reasoning together is always positive sum. Sharing a proof does not divide it. Light your candle at mine and yours burns no dimmer — the oldest picture we have of a thing that passes whole, taking nothing from its source.¹ No handoff from a holder to a have-not, but a shared reaching: neither party owned what both were moving toward.²

Reason is not the kind of thing someone holds. What moved you was not the ink on the page, or the air the words rode on, or the firing in anyone's head; those only carry it. A reason crosses any difference of standing: the student who finds the flaw in the teacher's proof, the stranger whose question the room cannot answer. The force was never in the speaker. Take that independence away and what passes between people is no longer reason but reputation.

There is nothing to fence

To own a thing is to be able to keep others from it. Ownership is exclusion — the fence, the deed, the lock — and it needs something scarce to be worth drawing a line around. Here there is nothing to enclose. Use does not spend the structure that moved you; it has no supply to ration and no edge to run a fence along. Treating it as property is fencing what has no edges — a commons no one can enclose, because it was never made of the stuff a commons is made of.

The enclosure cannot succeed, but the attempt is not idle. It takes one form wherever it appears: it gives a reason a *whose*, and lets that settle *whether* it counts. Provenance becomes a gate. The gate asks first where a claim came from, and only then — if the source clears — whether it is true; often not even then, because clearing the gate was the whole transaction. In a genuine exchange the reason stands over both parties — each answers to it, neither presides — and working the gate means stepping into that empty place, setting yourself above what you were meant to answer to.

And the move inverts what needed care. Reason needs no guarding: accepting a valid argument costs nothing — the giver keeps what they gave, and the truth that moved you was there for the taking all along. What does need examining — whether your present beliefs are right — is exactly what the guarding posture shields, because the posture turns every reason that would test them into a thing to repel. The defense manufactures the vulnerability it was raised to prevent.

Notice where the gate fires. Before you weigh a reason at all, you must ask one thing of it: does it bear on the question? Relevance comes earlier than truth and, like truth, turns on content alone. Whether *this* bears on *that* has nothing to do with who raised it. The provenance gate fires before that test runs, and that is what gives it away: it cannot be a finding of irrelevance, since no one weighed relevance; the gatekeeper pins the name on afterward. A refusal that weighed relevance can point to the miss; one that gated on the source has nothing to point to — press it for where the reason goes wide and it can only shift the complaint. And here the move loses the one excuse it keeps elsewhere: a source can stand in, within limits, for whether a claim is *reliable*; it has nothing to say about whether a claim *bears*. At the first filter the gate has no pretext at all.

Provenance has two honest uses, and neither is the gate. One is triage: attention is finite, and a source is a fair way to choose what to read first — but deprioritizing concedes exactly what gating denies: the deferred reason may well bear, and it stays free to act when its turn comes. The other is credence where no check is in

¹Thomas Jefferson to Isaac McPherson, 13 August 1813: "He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me." The standard image for a good whose use neither divides nor depletes it.

²Plato, *Symposium* 210e–211b: Diotima's ascent orients desire toward a beauty no lover possesses. The reading here — the ascent as a shared reaching rather than a transfer from owner to owned — extends her figure from the solitary climb toward the Form to the passage of reason between persons.

reach: a source's track record may set what a claim starts out worth — a prior, not a verdict, one the reason stays free to move. Both keep the reason able to act. The queue is not the verdict, and neither is the prior; the one says *not yet*, the other *for now*, the gate *not it* — and dresses a glance at the source as a finding about content it never examined.

None of this makes reasoning solitary. An exchange of reasons is between persons: each grants the other address, and both answer to a standard neither presides over. That grant is real and comes first — withhold standing and no reason lands. But notice the office it holds. The parties supply the channel: whom they hear, whom they answer. Neither of them decides what passes through it. And the channel is all they supply — the source of a claim has already had its due, a queue, a prior, never a verdict; the standing of a person is narrower still. Its one legitimate act is the grant of address, and the gate inverts that office, using standing to refuse what standing exists to admit. Hang it on the speaker, on your own seat as judge, or on a credential, and the mis-seating is the same: a fact about persons sits in the chair reserved for a fact about content.

The expert's seat

The gate hangs wherever a *who* is let decide *whether*, and it hangs at more than one height. Lowest is possession — whose reason it is, mine to hold against you — the defensiveness anyone recognizes from a conversation that has quietly stopped being one: the argument lands, something registers, and the hearer explains it away instead of answering it — not *here is what is wrong with it* but *here is why you would say it* — reclassifying the speaker so the reason need never be met. A companion paper traces that failure; it is the loudest face of the move, and the smallest.³

Raise the gate from the speaker to yourself and it goes quiet. You no longer explain the reason away; you receive it, weigh it, allow that it might move you — should it prove it deserves to. This looks like the opposite of the flinch, open and judicious where the flinch was defensive, and it is the same move one height up: the expert frame. To sit as the one who rules on whether a reason has earned its way in is to keep the seat the reason was meant to share. Your interlocutor was not asking to be judged; they were asking you to think the thing through with them — to stand under the same argument rather than over their statement of it. The expert's seat declines that and calls the declining rigor. It comments on the reason instead of being moved by it, holds it at the distance where it can be appraised rather than the nearness where it could change you. Reformulation is the tell — *I would put it more precisely, the deeper point is, let me separate two things* — each pass, however apt, re-seating you as the editor of what was said rather than a party to it. In the register of agreement the tell is the hedge that never lands — *I'm not convinced, I can't independently verify* — a reservation that names no object and no test that would dissolve it, so the position holds while the modality slides under each push.

What hides the seat is that its corrections can be right. The flinch gives itself away by getting things wrong; the expert's seat can be accurate at every step and still let no reason act, because what it withholds is not assent to this or that claim but the standing of any claim to move it before clearing its judgment. The fault is never in the content; it is in the stance — and a stance can hold perfectly still while the contents of the conversation change without end. “If philosophy is esoteric,” Cavell wrote, “that is not because a few men guard its knowledge but because most men guard themselves against it.”⁴ What is guarded is not belief,

³Larsen James Close, “Respect as a Precondition for Corrigibility,” *Zenodo* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20525099>. The possession-frame at the scale of a single exchange: reasons routed to the symptom-channel rather than met as reasons. The same paper grounds the grant of address as prior — correction travels only where the corrector is granted standing as a reasoner: the channel, never the verdict.

⁴Stanley Cavell, preface to *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969). The guarding Cavell names is of the self against philosophy, not of knowledge against the many — the same inversion the expert's seat performs on a single reason.

and not ego, but position: the one seat from which everything is weighed and nothing need be undergone. Possession and the seat are not two moves but one raised by a degree — each makes the reason answer to a who, to its holder below or its judge above, when the who was the one bound to answer to it. The seat is the more dangerous for being the one that can be kept in good conscience, by someone certain they are being fair.

The gate made public

Scale that seat from a single reasoner to a standing body and the gate becomes architecture. Now the question is not whose reason it is but whose credential it bears — what the source is licensed to say, what venue stamped it. The private seat hardens into procedure: peer review that weighs authorship before it reads the page, a tribunal that lets a credential decide whether an argument is heard at all, any board whose first question of a claim is where it came from. Newest is the rush to sort claims by origin and let the label do the judging — to ask what produced a sentence before asking whether the sentence is true. One move, hung in many rooms; the rooms differ, the gate does not.

None of this needs the reason to be checkable; the gate is wrong for every reason, since content alone settles whether one bears. But it is most nakedly wrong at the limit, where checking is possible and decisive. Take a claim a procedure can settle outright — one anyone can run. The soundness of the reason is no longer in question; a check that cares nothing for its source has already settled it. Refuse it even so, for where it came from, and the gate stands fully revealed: the one thing never in doubt was whether the reason was good. What was being guarded was never the conclusion but the standing of whoever kept the gate. And what privatization guards it tends to make permanent — the body writes the gate into its next rule and lets the reason that breached it lapse, so the defended frame is given a future the correction is denied.

Checking the reason, not the source

An institution that sets the gate down takes a recognizable shape. It checks the reason and leaves the source alone. It verifies the proof by running it, not by asking whose hand wrote it; it puts the claim to the world, not to the standing of whoever advanced it. Where the check is decisive, provenance has nothing left to do — no work remains for it that truth has not already done. Volume is the gate's usual plea — no room can read the flood — and it cuts the other way: blinding works at scale exactly where the check is mechanized, which is why the formal domains are the beachhead rather than the exception. This is not a device to buy but a discipline to keep, and it works at every scale: in the journal, in the court, in the live minute of a single conversation. Let the reason act as a reason, whatever carried it.

No one can install the discipline — not as a rule, since a rule is one more thing a gatekeeper administers. But anyone can clear the ground for it: blind the venue, make the check decisive, and the gate loses its purchase. The clearing is real work and never the whole of it — it strips the gate of its pretext but cannot supply the disposition to let the reason land, and a gatekeeper bent on gating will still reach for the gap the blinding left. Only practice grows that disposition, and that is the unwelcome part: there is no procedure for the absence of a procedure.⁵ But what it asks for is neither strange nor new. The fence never held; the reason passed anyway, to everyone who would let it. What can be owned is not reason, and what is reason cannot be owned. The only honest stance toward it — in any room that keeps a claim waiting on the question of its source — is to let it act as what it is. Light your candle — yours burns no dimmer.

⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1, 1103a–b: virtue is a *hexis*, a settled disposition formed through practice — not a content that instruction or rule can install.