

Philosophical Genres and Literary Forms: A Mildly Polemical Introduction

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The essays collected in this special issue of *Poetics Today* examine philosophical genres with illustrations from important and representative texts. Since the inception of Western philosophy, myriad expository styles and literary forms have been used there with extraordinary subtlety in addressing the conceptual problems within the tradition. Aphorisms, dialogues, epistles, autobiographies, essays, systematic treatises, and commentaries—to name only some of the most obvious examples—should be familiar to both casual and serious readers. Philosophers have exercised a great deal of ingenuity in their experiments with these and other genres. Still, it is fair to say that the amount of scholarly research on philosophical genres is not commensurate with either the diversity of genres that have been used in the tradition or with the vast amount of research on other dimensions of these texts, including, for example, philological work on the provenance and integrity of source manuscripts, historical work on intellectual influences upon the authors, or analytical work on the logical cogency of individual arguments. In short, there has been little elucidation of the distinctive virtues and limitations implicit in the different genres. The present special issue draws critical attention to a representative sample of genres that have been used in different periods of the Western philosophical tradition.

Most of this introduction will review what little scholarship there is on the formative role and hermeneutical demands of philosophical genres. This part of the introduction is polemical insofar as the account is ani-

mated by a complaint that philosophical genres have not received the respect or critical attention they deserve. But the polemic is tempered by the fact that the article I begin with (Jordan 1981) raises a set of theoretical points that inform the focused studies collected in this special issue of *Poetics Today*. Reviewing this and similar work will help draw out, develop, and clarify our theme and focus. The final part of this introduction will survey the contents of this special issue itself, emphasizing both how the essays assembled here collectively fill the scholarly lacuna indicated above and how each individual article contributes to this purpose.

It is appropriate to begin outlining our theme by recalling a point made in Mark D. Jordan's "Preface to the Study of Philosophic Genres" (1981), one of the few attempts to consider the topic generally and directly. After raising the issue of how one asks questions about the formative, interpretive, and theoretical implications of philosophical genres, Jordan (*ibid.*: 202) responds:

It is not to look for connections between philosophy and something else. It is not to feel the surface of the text as an afterthought. It is, rather, to ask about the shape of the work and what might it mean for the discourse of philosophy "in" it. *Might it be that a work of a certain shape is the only one possible for certain thoughts?* (Emphasis added)

The hypothesis that Jordan frames here as a question, which I have italicized, encapsulates much of the spirit of this special issue: certain thoughts, along with ways of formulating and collecting these thoughts, appear to be inextricably bound to the form of the text in which they are embodied. Jordan's use of scare quotes with reference to the discourse that philosophy is "in" is suggestive. He seems to have picked up his corporeal metaphor from Julián Marías (1971 [1953]: 1), who invokes it with even stronger emphasis:

Philosophy is expressed—and for this reason is fully made real—within a definite literary genre; and it must be emphasized that prior to this expression it did not exist except in a precarious way or, rather, only as intention and attempt. Philosophy is thus intrinsically bound to the literary genre, not into which it is poured, but, we would do better to say, in which it is *incarnated*. (For references to Marías see Jordan 1981: 210n12, 211n24, 28, 29.)

This conception of genre as an indispensable, unifying feature of the text is in keeping with an Aristotelian conception of immanent, substantial form—as opposed to separable form.

After twenty-five years, it is time to return to Jordan's hypothesis in order to fill out its implications and open up the question of its explana-

tory adequacy. First, let me extract two distinct but related questions that are combined in Jordan's single question:

1. In articulating and formulating a single thought or a set of coordinated thoughts, why might one genre be more appropriate than others as a mode of representation?

And

2. To what extent, if any, is the philosophical content of the text defined by its genre, i.e., its unifying form?

I have tried to formulate these questions in a way that is consistent with Jordan's careful handling of the form/content relation. In the passage quoted above, he complains about form and content being conceived as a sharp dichotomy. The complaint is more explicit in another passage in connection with the view that "one gets a philosophic idea and *then*, in a moment which is logically and temporally posterior, one begins to worry its expression." Such a model

betrays both a weak sense of what style is and a doubtful philosophy of language. A word is not a container into which the distilled thought is poured, as if one were filling different glasses under a tap. (Jordan 1981: 202)

Bearing in mind this warning and our two questions, let me try to illustrate our theme with reference to two contrasting philosophical texts. The first is Joseph Butler's *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel* (1729), which explores a host of philosophical questions about moral psychology in a book of thematically linked sermons. The second example is Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1889). As announced by the subtitle, *How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, *Twilight of the Idols* is an iconoclastic philosophical work; it consists of over a hundred aphoristic remarks attacking various presuppositions about morality (as being rational and objective, as being metaphysically grounded, as a coherent system of prescriptions and proscriptions of human behavior, etc.).

Both *Fifteen Sermons* and *Twilight of the Idols* are unmistakably philosophical in their aims, Butler attempting to ground morality and Nietzsche to undermine it. But differences in the specific character of these works are tied up with differences in their formal, literary construction, and such genre-oriented differences are not reducible to matters of pure "content"—that is, content conceived independently of form. The moral psychology of *Fifteen Sermons* emphasizes "reflection" (a kind of analytical self-awareness about one's own moral principles) as a central component of moral agency, and the sermons return repeatedly to the sorts of theoretical issues that are central to such reflection (e.g., the cogency of egoism, the possibility

of genuine benevolence, etc.). By contrast, Nietzsche's (1954 [1889]: 470) grand ambition to provoke a "revaluation of all values" requires a critical approach to any moral or metaphysical principle that purports to be axiomatic, foundational, or unquestionable (e.g., the distinction between appearance and reality), and the scattershot presentation of aphorisms in *Twilight of the Idols* is a formal expression of his contempt for systematic theorizing (see, for example, Aphorism I 26: "I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them").

The philosophical purpose of *Fifteen Sermons* is conveyed by Butler's focus on moral reflection and the manner in which he addresses his readers. His implied audience consisted of sophisticated, reflective Anglicans seeking clarity and guidance for their own moral agency, and the sermons serve their needs by removing obstacles to such agency (e.g., doubts about human benevolence planted by popular and systematic versions of psychological egoism are dismantled in Sermon XI) and by explicating the implications of accepted moral principles (e.g., of Christian charity in Sermon XII). Butler is issuing a specific kind of exhortation, not arguing for a purely theoretical purpose. He is, therefore, not obliged to situate his position in relation to all the relevant theoretical alternatives, as would be the case were he addressing an academic audience in a treatise. The homiletic mode of address, together with the audience it presupposes, explains both why Butler is not required to differentiate his own position from that of rivals and why his posture is predominantly didactic.

As Nietzsche (1954 [1889]: 466) says in his preface, *Twilight of the Idols* is "a great declaration of war." From the beginning, he subverts a range of conventional views and authority figures by subtly transforming what they say. A proverbial "truth" such as "the lord helps those who help themselves" is reformulated in Aphorism I 9 as "Help yourself, then everyone will help you," and in Aphorism I 3 Aristotle's declaration "to live alone you must be an animal or a god" is supplemented with "Leaving out the third case: you must be both—a philosopher" (ibid.: 467). Ad hominem attacks on Socrates, on the English, on the German national character, on systematic moral theorists, and on others only make *Twilight of the Idols* all the more unsettling for most readers. As a whole, the book might mistakenly be criticized for being a fragmented, inconsistent statement of its author's own theoretical position on the issues addressed by his many opponents. But this would be to treat *Twilight of the Idols* as a failed treatise. If anything, its construction and polemical tone defy the expectation that there is a systematic theory within or behind the text, and this defiance appears to be indispensable to its purpose (see Aphorism I 26 above). It is revealing that one of the few people to receive Nietzsche's praise is

Heraclitus, whose own thought was both polemical and aphoristic (ibid.: 480). Not only would the iconoclasm of *Twilight of the Idols* be less forceful if presented in a treatise of explicitly connected arguments, the treatise form itself would undermine an essential part of its message—that one should not depend on a book or an author to deliver conclusive answers to momentous questions. A didactic posture, which is perfectly natural in Butler’s sermons, would be incongruous with the evident purpose of philosophizing with a hammer. Provocation that consciously avoids providing explicit guidance is better accomplished in an oracular text: in this case, one that consists in a series of clipped, apothegmatic barbs whose connections are left loose or obscure.

A sermon addresses a reasonably well-defined audience and can naturally strike a didactic tone (although this is not necessary), whereas a compilation of aphorisms tends to be oracular for any audience. So, while both *Fifteen Sermons* and *Twilight of the Idols* may be intended to direct a reader’s attention to the underlying presuppositions of morality, the manner and purpose of the encouragement is quite different in each case. Nor are these differences only a matter of major substantive disagreement; they are also very much bound up with the respective genres of each of these books. The two questions I teased out of Jordan’s hypothesis are designed to press for a further consideration of the nature of the relation between the thought a text embodies and the genre that shapes that embodiment. *Fifteen Sermons* and *Twilight of the Idols* succeed as *philosophical* texts in large part because the thoughts they articulate, including connected and disconnected lines of thought, are suitably, generically embodied.

Contributors to this volume were asked to bear in mind the two questions posed above about the generic form/content relation. While there has been some recent work that anticipates the theme of this special issue, there are no real predecessors who have covered these questions with the same focus and historical scope attempted here. A brief review of these “anticipations” may help define our theme more precisely. Jordan’s own study is—as advertised—prefatory; it points out a route for further exploration rather than following this route into the territory to examine any particular texts. Around the same time, however, Berel Lang embarked on a wide-ranging program of research on the literary forms of philosophical discourse. Lang’s (1990: 1) general goal was to consider the “formulations or modalities . . . implicated in the conjunction of philosophy ‘and’ literature” (as opposed to a more narrowly focused consideration of philosophy “in” literature). To this end, he uncovers the substantive implications implicit in a range of stylistic devices—genre among them—used by philosophers in their written work. Although Lang 1983 and 1990 do not refer

to Jordan, both works capture the spirit of Jordan's hypothesis in some crucial respects, and both may be read as providing partial elaboration and testing of it.

In particular, Lang's two monographs stand out for making several provocative suggestions about philosophical genres. (Lang 1980, an anthology on philosophical style, touches occasionally on genre, too.) Using a model of literary "action" as the transaction between speaker, reader, and referent, Lang (1983: 29) adopts as his working hypothesis a schema of four superordinate genres (each one capable of ramifying into narrower categories): the dialogue, the meditation or essay, the commentary, and the treatise. He further identifies three meta-generic modes to characterize the dynamics of the transaction between speaker, reader, and referent, these modes being all defined in terms of the speaker's posture toward reader and referent. They are the *expository* mode, in which the author presents material in a detached, impersonal manner (as, e.g., in Hobbes's *Leviathan*); the *performative* mode, in which the author's personal point of view is prominent (as, e.g., in Descartes' *Meditations*); and the *reflexive* mode, which synthesizes the kinds of engagement distinctive of the first two modes (ibid.: 50–59). In both Lang 1983 and 1990, these explanatory categories are theoretically refined and applied to particular philosophical works.

Both thus seem to take up Jordan's hypothesis and advance the study of philosophical genres in ways that resemble the aims of this special issue of *Poetics Today*. Some important differences between these studies and the present one should be noted, however. First, Lang's programmatic suggestions are part of a wider investigation into the relationship between theoretical content and *style*, within which genre is subsumed as one component. The style of a written work can, of course, be studied without any special regard for the macrostructural features that are associated with its genre, and Lang 1983 is, indeed, devoted largely to such nongeneric features—the implications of authorial point of view, for example. Lang 1990 uses genre as a lens for studying several philosophical texts, but—as with Lang 1983—when it turns to particular cases, the focus is more diffused than that of this special issue, and only Lang's two programmatic opening chapters and the chapter on Descartes can be read as exploring the same territory as that outlined in Jordan 1981. Lang's (1990: 94) wider interest in style ("The style, in other words, is also the philosophy") includes considerations of tone (e.g., irony), of point of view, and of various literary devices, such as allegory, metaphor, and metonymy. All of these Lang often studies without reference to genre. Richard Eldridge (1993: 80–81), who finds much to admire in particular chapters of Lang 1990 and in Lang's overall project, faults the book on the following points: for the ambitious themes it

urges, the book has, “not enough concentration on enough specific cases, not enough attention to precursors [on the wider concept of style], and not enough thinking about the implications of positions.” Eldridge’s demand for more exegetical corroboration of Lang’s theoretical themes seems especially pertinent with regard to his suggestions about philosophical genres, given that the true appeal of Lang’s schematic array of genres and modes is the promise that these analytical tools will yield new insights into the primary sources themselves.

More recently, Robyn Ferrell’s *Genres of Philosophy* (2002), which surveys Western philosophy from antiquity to the present, seems to make some inroads along the historical and thematic lines pursued in this special issue. This turns out not to be the case, however. Certainly, it does not inspire confidence that she never cites or comments upon Jordan, Mariás, or Lang. Early on, she disavows any interest in “practical criticism” (ibid.: 5). Ferrell’s very aims turn out to be different from those of this special issue both historically and thematically.

First, her coverage of historically significant works of philosophy tips toward modern and postmodern texts. After two chapters on the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry in Plato and Aristotle, the book jumps ahead to David Hume, leaving aside two millennia of philosophical work. There is much to be said about late ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy that gets bypassed in this enormous leap (see, e.g., Sweeney 2002). Second, the book’s exegesis of particular texts is very much fixed by the author’s interest in the contemporary rivalry between Anglo-American and Continental philosophy; consequently, the general conclusions drawn from these texts have little to do with the formative and exegetical questions we are asking about philosophical genres. Third, Ferrell’s analysis of primary sources often subserves a partisan, extra-exegetical preoccupation with the contemporary professional rivalry mentioned above and, in particular, with her defense of a conception of philosophy that is derived from Gilles Deleuze. In the end, it is clear that Ferrell’s real expertise lies in this contemporary theoretical material on which her exegetical work depends, not on the historically significant philosophical texts that are the purported subjects of each individual chapter. Again, as in Lang 1983 and 1990, a book which at first appears to promise a comprehensive, wide-ranging development of Jordan’s hypothesis turns out to be pursuing other theoretical questions.

Interpretive or analytical work that can be read as refining and testing Jordan’s hypothesis in a focused, detailed way is scattered throughout the secondary literature on a variety of particular philosophical texts. Plato scholars have contributed by far the most intensive and sophisticated work

in this area. But they usually focus on *Plato's* use of the dialogue without regard to other practitioners of the form; also, they tend to differentiate the dialogue form by contrasting it with “the treatise”—using treatise as a crudely conceived catchall category that includes *all* nondialogic genres without further differentiation.

Let me single out one example which illustrates both of these features. In the aptly named “Treatises, Dialogues and Interpretation,” J. J. Mulhern (1969: 631) promises to canvass the “different problems presented to an interpreter by philosophical treatises, on the one hand, and philosophical dialogues, on the other. . . . Special notice is taken of the Platonic dialogues; but what is said of them is meant to be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to other philosophical dialogues.” What Mulhern *says* about the relationship of Plato’s dialogues to other dialogues is problematic in itself, for there are obvious differences between Plato’s dialogues and the dialogues of Augustine or George Berkeley, for example. Augustine casts himself in his own dialogues; Plato never does this. And in Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1974a [1710]) one character, Philonous, develops philosophical theses that Berkeley (1974b [1713]) defends in his own voice elsewhere; Plato never left analogous documents to enable this sort of comparison. What Mulhern *implies* about treatises is more problematic still: “philosophical treatise” is tossed off as self-explanatory and is supposed to include every other genre except dialogue. No special notice is taken of how any particular author uses the treatise or of the treatise as one genre among many that could be compared with the dialogue.

Consider, also, Michael Frede’s “Plato’s Arguments and the Dialogue Form” (1992). Frede uses “treatise” in a more restrained way than Mulhern. But his references to the treatise still imply that the dialogue/treatise contrast is more illuminating than, for example, a dialogue/sermon contrast or a dialogue/aphorism contrast. After developing his own account of the role of the arguments in Plato’s dialogues, Frede (*ibid.*: 219) concludes:

It turns out that there are a large number of reasons why Plato may have chosen to write in such a way as to leave open, or to make it very difficult to determine, whether or not he endorses a particular argument. It seems that these reasons are at the same time reasons against writing philosophical treatises, and hence offer an explanation as to why instead Plato wrote the kind of dialogue he did.

If something along these lines is true, it is clear that the dialogues are not philosophical treatises in disguise. (Cf. *ibid.*: 203)

Should we still wonder if Plato’s dialogues are not philosophical meditations in disguise? This question would probably seem uninformative to Frede. Yet the dialogue/meditation contrast it rests on is not more of a pre-

sumption than Frede's dialogue/treatise contrast; moreover, my question seems to address the issue about whether Plato endorses the arguments in his dialogues just as well as Frede's. The persistence of Frede's presumption is nicely illustrated in the way it is left unquestioned even by J. Angelo Corlett in his criticisms of Frede's position on Plato's use of the dialogue (see Corlett 1997: 425, 431–33).

Scholars working in other areas of historical or philosophical research also display some interest in the role of genre as it relates to their individual specialities. Without trying to be exhaustive, we might point to a few pockets of such activity. Augustine's *Confessions* has been examined for the relation between its intimate, prayerful, confessional form and its content (e.g., Crosson 1999 and Hartle 1999, which considers Augustine's *Confessions* with reference to Rousseau's *Confessions*). Several authors have explored the debt of Descartes' *Meditations* to the genre of religious documents known as spiritual exercises. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (1983), Gary Hatfield (1986), and Zeno Vendler (1989) diagnose some possible influences from St. Ignatius Loyola; Lang (1990: 57) joins Bradley Rubidge (1990) in cautioning against this reading. Along broader lines, Shlomit Schuster (2003) exhaustively surveys philosophical autobiography, and Jeffrey Mason (1999) gives an account of the philosophical journal article. Focused and analytical contributions of this sort are, however, few in number and limited in generic scope. So, as I said earlier, while genres are a ubiquitous and ineluctable presence in the history of Western philosophy, they have not received their due in the secondary literature.

How did this disparity arise between the variegated literary forms used by philosophers and the treatment of their works in scholarly contexts? It does not seem to be a direct, considered, self-conscious reaction on the scholarly side to the instability of genres as they transform over time and ramify into subgenres or cross-pollinate with each other. That authors of the primary sources sometimes deliberately confound established genre categories does not seem to be the problem either. No one has articulated these objections in any case. Nor is there any reason to believe that these kinds of mutability present insuperable difficulties for anyone attempting to incorporate genre in philosophical exegesis—certainly, no difficulties more formidable than those faced by literary critics working on fictional genres or by biologists working on species evolution. Most scholars simply take for granted or ignore the implications of genre in the works they are studying.

The closest anyone comes to consciously formulating nominalist objections to the existence, formative role, or interpretive utility of genres is

chapter 9 of Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic* (1964 [1909]: 67–73). But Croce's (ibid.: 71–72) skepticism about the function of rhetorical or fictional genres applies to their use in aesthetics; in science and philosophy, he grants that such terms can be perfectly helpful. No one has attempted to extend Croce's arguments about form and content to a denial of the formative and interpretive function of genres in *philosophical* exegesis; in general, the possibility is simply ignored. So, while authors of the primary sources exhibit thoughtful regard for the genres they use, there is little corresponding interest among commentators or scholars.

In general, scholarly disregard for philosophical genres must be attributed to what may be called cultural factors. Most contemporary philosophers simply prefer to take science rather than literature as their point of reference. This is why the academic essay, extended treatise, and specialized anthology have become the predominant genres of philosophy in the last century. Professional philosophers, those working in academic departments under the title "philosophy," rarely use "nonstandard" genres—dialogue, confession, epistle, aphorism, and so on. (For some detailed, diagnostic speculation on the role of professionalism on this point, see Mariás 1971 [1953]: 6–7; Levi 1976: 19–20; and Mason 1999: 26, 30, 117–22.) This narrow generic range in contemporary philosophical writing is exceptional in the history of philosophy and accordingly notable. It helps to explain why scholars and historians of philosophy generally have so little regard for genre, even when a primary source exhibits a kind of literary form that calls for notice.

In contemporary philosophy, questions of methodology tend to be framed independently of questions about the *formulation* or *communication* of philosophical thought. In the marketplace of philosophical ideas, the crucial work is thought to take place in the research and development department, where explanatory principles are assumed to emerge pure from a self-contained laboratory of contemplative activity. Matters of exposition, literary form, and presentation are presumed to have more to do with the packaging, marketing, and advertising of what comes out of the laboratory. Naturally, these ideas need to be expressed in some form before being circulated, but the form of this expression is thought to be of secondary importance. The presumption is that philosophical content is independent of the literary form of the text in which "decontextualized content" is presented. Accordingly, an author's use of a treatise, a dialogue, a set of disputed questions, or a series of aphorisms relates to the content only contingently and externally as its outward shape. This view is precisely what

Jordan (1981: 202) ridicules as getting “a philosophic idea and *then*, in a moment which is logically and temporally posterior, one begins to worry its expression.” It is no mystery, then, that examination of philosophical genres has taken place only sporadically and is not part of the main current of philosophy scholarship.

Jordan’s hypothesis goes against this current, however. If, indeed, “a work of a certain shape is the only one possible for certain thoughts,” then the architectural construction of a philosophical text can evince aspects of thought that are not reducible to decontextualized doctrines. In the hands of an author who is blessed with some measure of literary or rhetorical skill and sensitivity, the function of genre may be as much *organizational* or *formative* as expressive. This is the most important and least thoroughly explored corollary of Jordan’s and Marias’s Aristotelian conception of the form/content relation. The suggestion here is that genre can play an organizational role in the way one conceives philosophical problems and questions in the first place. By characterizing the role of genre as organizational, I do not mean that it imposes shape upon separable, formless content; rather, I am arguing for a kind of textual hylomorphism in which form and content are reciprocally responsive to each other. The unity of a text (in so far as it exhibits unity) is a function of its generic form, and its relationship to other texts may be mediated as much by similarities of generic form as it is by doctrines (if, indeed, it’s possible to decontextualize doctrines). These critical, interpretive considerations do not rule out the possibility that a particular text may be a hack job which fails to mesh form and content, nor will they blind us to the subtle act of subversion by an author who deliberately sets out to transform the established practices associated with a given genre. If the general developments of Jordan’s hypothesis that I have attempted to sketch out in this introduction are correct, then genres are integral to the *formulation* of doctrines, definitions, explanatory principles, and arguments that are ordinarily treated independently of genre.

Individually and collectively, the contributions in the body of this special issue of *Poetics Today* (presented in two parts) extend these general developments by looking closely at particular texts, using the two questions teased out of Jordan’s hypothesis as points of departure. The first question presses us to consider how the articulation of thoughts, singly or collectively, might require one genre rather than another to be authentically expressed. The second question presses us to consider how the content is shaped and constituted by the genre of a text. The studies presented here seem to confirm Jordan’s initial hypothesis on a wide range of philosophical texts, repre-

senting a sample of genres manifested throughout the history of Western philosophy. More importantly, they also prepare the ground for a refinement of the hypothesis, and this, as we see in several cases, leads to further questions about what philosophy *is*.

These eleven studies are ordered chronologically, according to the historically significant philosophical texts at the center of each essay. The first four contributions explore ancient and medieval representatives of several different genres: Plato's dialogues, the ancient tradition of commentary up to Simplicius (ca. 530 CE), the inner dialogues of Augustine and Anselm, and Abelard's autobiography and letters to Heloise. The next four turn to Renaissance and early modern texts, including two distinctive uses of the dialogue by sixteenth-century authors Justus Lipsius and Giordano Bruno, Pascal's aphoristic *Pensées*, and Spinoza's systematic, Euclidean, impersonal guide to personal salvation, *Ethics*. While the first eight articles examine traditional ways in which literary form coordinates with substantive content in various works, the final three articles concentrate on some recent experiments in which the genre is indispensable for unseating deeply ingrained expectations as to what a philosophical text is supposed to accomplish. These experimental efforts are evident in Kierkegaard's subversion of conventional genre categories in several of his works, in Wittgenstein's reflections on some basic problems underlying the notion of philosophical self-examination, and in the unappreciated philosophical potential implicit in biography.

Because Plato occupies such a central place at the origins of Western philosophy and because his dialogues have already provoked extensive and detailed reflection on the interrelationship between literary form and philosophical content, it is natural to begin with a focused review of the reception of his dialogues. My own contribution, "Plato's *Protagoras* and the Frontier of Genre Research," surveys a cross section of critical, exegetical scholarship on Plato since 1956 (exactly half a century from the time I write this). During this time, a now-familiar set of approaches to Plato emerged and evolved, using logical, literary, historical, and other kinds of analysis. With reference to the scholarship on *Protagoras* as a case study, I track this evolution as it proceeded in three reasonably distinct stages. From the beginning of this period to the present, we see two transformations, one in the way the dialogue is conceived as a complex text and the other in the way scholars interact with each other as they comment on the text. For much of the first three decades following 1956, the dialogue was treated as a collection of atomically self-contained parts or "modules," each of which was routinely explicated in isolation from the whole. Then, in the early 1980s, a trend developed in which commentators explicated the parts

with an attentive eye on the relations between these parts and the whole dialogue. Finally, since the early 1990s, a number of innovative interpretive strategies have become popular which are marked by an increasing sensitivity for the text as a dialogue, that is, a genre that has its own distinctive features, which impose their own conditions upon interpretation.

Han Baltussen's "From Polemic to Exegesis" follows the growth and maturation of ancient commentary. Baltussen identifies the principal antecedents of the genre as (1) the polemics of pre-Socratic philosophy, (2) the recognition of some philosophical texts as "canonical," and (3) the practice of writing second-order texts (i.e., exegetical texts about other texts) on canonical literary works. Here we see how the tradition of philosophical commentary came to be defined by two impulses for criticism (*kritikos*, Greek for "judge" or "discern"): from philosophy (1) and (2), the impulse to judge a text by the standard of truth; from literary criticism (3), the impulse to discern most precisely what that text means. Over time, greater and greater sophistication is evident in the way the philosophical canon (Plato and Aristotle, in particular) was interpreted and analyzed in formal commentaries by such authors as Galen and Simplicius. Baltussen argues that commentaries in the late ancient period do not simply supplement canonical philosophical texts, they *are* philosophical texts in their own right and, accordingly, must be read as full-fledged contributions to the wider tradition.

Gareth Matthews also traces the advent and advance of a distinctive, influential genre—in this case, the soliloquy, meditation, or inner dialogue in Augustine and Anselm. Although the possibility of this genre is broached by Plato's account of thinking as the soul conversing with itself (*Theaetetus* 189e–190a), Augustine's *Soliloquies* (386 CE) is clearly the progenitor of the inner dialogue as a literary philosophical form. There are, however, two significant epistemological obstacles to the genre, and these are not dealt with adequately by Augustine himself. Matthews identifies these as follows: (1) the Targeting Problem, that is, *how does one know in advance of an investigation at what to aim one's inquiry?* and (2) the Recognition Problem, that is, *how does one know during the course of an inquiry when one has arrived at a satisfactory answer?* In a standard dialogue between two or more interlocutors, each individual might be able to contribute part of a response to these problems so that the parties involved may overcome them collectively. But these problems impose themselves more forcefully and problematically in the solo enterprise of an inner dialogue. The lone inquirer appears to be trapped by limitations of perspective that seem, on the face of it, insurmountable: there is no immediately available source of guidance to target one's efforts and no one to corroborate one's own judgment when one

thinks it is completed. According to Matthews, it is not until Anselm's *Prologion* (ca. 1077–78) that we find an example of the genre that deals with these problems consciously and adequately.

The final essay concerning texts from the ancient or medieval periods is Eileen Sweeney's "Abelard's *Historia Calamitatum* and Letters." Sweeney examines Abelard's sophisticated construction of his own "self" in an autobiography, *Historia Calamitatum*, and in his letters to Heloise. Both the autobiography and the letters are philosophically complex, literary exercises in self-presentation and self-definition. According to Sweeney, these works embody Abelard's struggling efforts to integrate the outer self of his actions and the inner self of his intentions in a project that aims at the very modern goal of authenticity. The result is a significant development in the conception of the "self" (standing between Augustine and Rousseau) that owes its success as much to Abelard's literary ingenuity as to his theoretical originality.

The next four articles (to be presented in part 2), on Renaissance and early modern subjects, can be paired instructively. First is a pair of essays on two Renaissance authors who use the dialogue form to quite different purposes. These are followed by another pair of essays examining works which represent two genres that could not be more different from each other—namely, the collection of aphorisms and the Euclidean treatise.

John Sellars offers a close reading of a single dialogue by Justus Lipsius, *De Constantia* (1584), after which Eugenio Canone and Leen Spruit survey the variety of devices used in Giordano Bruno's six Italian dialogues (published 1583–85). Not only do these two essays expand the scope of our understanding of the dialogue form beyond Plato's use of it; the dialogues under consideration are more intimately autobiographical than those of Plato. This is not to say that Lipsius and Bruno are not elusive in their own ways, however. In *De Constantia*, Lipsius casts himself as a younger man in conversation with a mentor, Langius. It is to Langius that controversial Stoic doctrines are attributed. Is this Lipsius's way to distance himself from theses that might have gotten him persecuted by church authorities (the sort of trouble that led to Bruno's trial in 1600)? Perhaps, but that is not all. According to Sellars, a stronger interpretation of the interlocutor/author relationship in *De Constantia* emerges if we understand how the relationship between the two *dramatis personae* really depicts the author in dialogue with himself; it is in this regard that *De Constantia* constitutes a spiritual exercise. It would be desirable, of course, for readers to follow the author's lead in this exercise, but according to Sellars, it is already enough for his core purpose that Lipsius himself has benefited from the act of com-

position. Here we see, also, how ordinary dialogue shades into the kind of “inner dialogue” examined earlier by Matthews.

According to Canone and Spruit, Bruno’s purpose, on the other hand, is more political than spiritual. Bruno’s six Italian dialogues, which were all composed while he was in London, are personal in so far as they explicate the genealogy of his own views. But the unifying goal of the dialogues is to effect political and ethical reform, which they aim to achieve by modeling or evoking in words the kind of community Bruno wishes to develop in reality; consequently, doctrines are dealt with in such a way as to encourage readers to take up the discussion where the interlocutors leave off. Thus, while both Lipsius and Bruno attempt to secure a reader’s “participation” in the conversations they dramatize, the manner in which these dialogues encourage this participation is quite different. Whereas Lipsius models personal growth, Bruno models a political ideal.

In “Philosophy as Inspiration,” Louis Groarke builds a theoretical frame around the limpid, incisive, fragmented thought of Pascal’s *Pensées* and shows that these aphorisms are more rationally defensible than might be supposed by more systematically minded readers. There is, in fact, a neglected strand of epistemology that recognizes the legitimacy of nondemonstrative knowledge. Several influential philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Aquinas, have argued that systematic, scientific knowledge requires a prior kind of knowledge which may be called variously nondemonstrative knowledge, direct insight, or intuition. Pascal was not personally familiar with this strand of epistemology, but his own work fits into the tradition, and Groarke traces the conceptual connections between Pascal and his “precursors.” Groarke argues that the aphoristic form of *Pensées* conveys this nondemonstrative, intuitive knowledge in a perfectly appropriate manner. Indeed, the aphoristic form of *Pensées* should be accepted as integral to the insights it seeks. As a consequence of this epistemological fit between form and content, we should be wary of well-intentioned but ill-conceived attempts by editors and commentators to rearrange or reconstruct Pascal’s aphorisms into a systematic order.

We turn next to one of the most systematic texts ever written, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, the organizational scheme of which is explicitly announced in the subtitle, *Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*. In “The Geometrical Method in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” Laura Byrne argues that the Euclidean construction of Spinoza’s masterpiece is, indeed, essential to his purpose. This despite occasional apparent departures from the strict geometrical order of its argumentation and despite an apparent incongruity between the abstractness of this method and the personal orientation of its ethical purpose.

Typically, commentators treat Spinoza's organizational scheme as an affectation or a nonessential overlay that does not really convey the logical, epistemological, or metaphysical order of the thought it contains. Part of the reason commentators are inclined to disregard the logical order of the Axioms, Propositions, Corollaries, and so forth is that several times Spinoza resorts to rhetorical devices that do not seem to fit this geometrical order. There are passages in which he directly addresses the reader and others which are ironic. These seemingly incongruous passages, Byrne argues, are carefully interlaced with the geometrically developed metaphysical and ethical tapestry that makes *Ethics* so impressive. Spinoza does not drop the thread of the central argument, nor do these passages undermine the systematic design of *Ethics*; rather, they supplement the system by anticipating a set of assumptions that Spinoza could expect to be held by the Cartesian friends in his immediate circle. Byrne reconciles not only the two seemingly inconsistent strands of Spinoza's work but also the impersonal, systematic organization which makes *Ethics* so distinctive, with its manifest personal and ethical purpose.

The final three essays examine more radical experiments in literary, philosophical form. First, Kierkegaard's imaginative experiments in genre challenged assumptions about the form/content relation that were popular among his peers. Nineteenth-century Danish readers expected a literary work to exhibit a systematic harmony between its form and its content. According to George Pattison, Kierkegaard's critique of systematic, Hegelian philosophy and conventional, European Christian culture are of a piece with his self-conscious violation of bourgeois literary practices. In "Kierkegaard and Genre," Pattison fills out the theoretical background against which this complex critique takes place. A looming presence in this background is J. L. Heiberg, the most influential Danish literary critic in Kierkegaard's day and whose careful delineation of genre categories was undertaken as a thoroughly systematic, Hegelian enterprise. Pattison interprets Kierkegaard's open defiance of Heiberg's genre categories in terms of Bakhtin's account of "carnavalesque transgressions." The disorder created by these transgressions of cultural and artistic forms exposes what is for Kierkegaard the deep paradox of Christ's human incarnation of the divine. Thus, Kierkegaard's literary experiments in genre are integral to the overarching religious purpose of all his work.

Wittgenstein is central to both of the final two articles in this special issue. First, in "Wittgenstein's Voice," Garry Hagberg explores the special kind of self-examination that Wittgenstein is undertaking in *Philosophical Investigations*. Then, in "Life without Theory," Ray Monk (Wittgenstein's biographer) gives an account of biography that exposes its inherent,

though unappreciated, philosophical potential; again, the sense in which biography is philosophical is drawn from Wittgenstein.

Hagberg focuses directly on Wittgenstein's critical exploration of "reading" in a few pages of *Philosophical Investigations* (sec. 154–77). In these pages Wittgenstein worries about the misleading conception of self-knowledge that derives from the Cartesian picture of it as "reading" one's inner life. Both the conventional account of reading and the Cartesian account of self-knowledge that uses it are subjected to a searching critique by Wittgenstein, which Hagberg presents as an exercise in self-monitoring. In this investigation, Wittgenstein gives voice to a succession of pictures and explanatory schemas that tempt him to simplify and overgeneralize what is involved in self-understanding. The result is an interpretation of *Philosophical Investigations* as an intensely personal, intellectually rigorous form of self-examination.

Monk, on the other hand, reviews numerous accounts of biography that attempt in various ways to distinguish it from, and relate it to, a traditional account of philosophy as necessarily theoretical. By Monk's own estimation, biography ought to be divorced from theory and should convey a strong "point of view" that unifies the individual moments in the life being narrated. This perspectival conception of biography turns out to exemplify the Wittgensteinian goal of philosophical insight as "understanding that consists in seeing connections." Whereas Hagberg elucidates the sense in which *Philosophical Investigations*, in particular, is autobiographical, Monk expounds a conception of the literary form of biography that satisfies the philosophical impulse in ways that are not available to theoretically oriented genres.

In this last article especially and in all the articles to some extent, we see how opening up questions about genres of philosophy leads inexorably to questions about what philosophy *is*. For we cannot ask about the genre of a philosophical work without asking also what makes it philosophical. And whether we are talking about Plato's dialogues, Abelard's letters to Heloise, Pascal's aphorisms, Spinoza's *Ethics*, or any other works at the center or the periphery of the Western tradition, the question about what makes a text philosophical turns out not to be answered by a simple glance at the content. We must examine the text's unifying form and consider what implications its formative, literary features have for its overall purpose.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Meir Sternberg for indispensable guidance and moral support as this project was being completed. Many thanks also to the referees, whose thoughtful comments improved this introduction and the articles that follow.

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