Philosophy, Spoken Word, Written Text and Beyond

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Introduction

In philosophical reflection about the very nature of philosophy (i.e. in metaphilosophical reflection) one rarely encounters a debate over the issue of what form of discourse in fact philosophy employs or should employ. The particular characteristics of philosophical discourse are unfortunately often (tacitly) dismissed as stylistic. They are thus felt to be of interest to literary theory and linguistics rather than to philosophy. Indeed, philosophy is expected to convey some propositional content regardless of the variation in the use of linguistic forms or forms of discourse. Lang (1983) aptly comments on this situation, introducing the metaphor of a "literary museum without walls".

> The history of Western philosophy is predominantly a history of written texts, but philosophers have lived in that history and looked back at it as if a dependence on such unusual and complex artifacts had nothing to do with the work of philosophy itself. The assumption in this notion of a literary "museum without walls" is that philosophical meaning is self-generating and transparent – that both the medium and form of philosophical texts as they appear to the reader (and before that, of course, to the writer) are accidental causes, with no significant effect on philosophical meaning itself. (Lang 1983: 19)

In contrast to the assumption pointed out by Lang, the history of philosophy offers numerous examples of authors employing specific forms of discourse which itself seems to be of philosophical significance. One may recall, for example Plato's *dialogue* (employed numerously by many later philosophers), Augustine's *confessions*, Aquinas' *questiones,* Nietzsche's *aphorisms,* Wittgenstein's *Bemerkungen* etc.

This article is a contribution to the debate about the significance of particular forms of discourse in philosophy (cf. Lang (ed.) 1981), especially with regard to the possibility of employing new technologies, in particular hypertext, for philosophical ends (cf. Bardini 2003, Kolb 1994). I discuss the issue of appropriateness of the traditional linear textual discourse for certain philosophies and (or pragmatically speaking) for certain ways of doing philosophy. I briefly follow Plato's debate about the inferiority of written text to spoken word as well as Wittgenstein's comment in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* about the failure to do (his) philosophy within the bounds of traditional forms of written text.

Plato: spoken word and written text

Plato provides an early comment on the form of written text which he regards as a medium unable to properly convey philosophical thought. At least so it appears from two famous passages, one from a later dialogue *Phaedrus* (274b-278b) and another from his *Seventh Letter* (341c-e), only the latter passage, of course, being written in *propria persona*. The obvious paradox pointed out many times by the commentators (cf. Guthrie 1975, Ferrari 1987) arises from the fact that Plato himself offers a written critique of writing. Furthermore, the reason why Plato has been so influential throughout the history of philosophy lies also partly in the fact that his thought was preserved in a written form (unlike many works of his contemporaries).

In *Pheadrus*, Socrates introduces a myth of invention of writing, "a tradition", as Socrates refers to it, "that has come down from our fathers, but they alone know the truth of it." (Phaedrus 274c). The character of Phaedrus (as well as the readers of Plato's dialogue) are presented with a story, in which the Egyptian god Theuth confronts king Thamus with the invention of writing and argues in order to persuade the sceptical Thamus to look favourably on his new invention: "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories: my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom."

In what follows Socrates in cooperation with Phaedrus provides arguments which are in accord with Thamus' sceptical position. The main argument against writing is the static nature of written text, devoid of the sensitivity to reader's response. The words written on a papyrus (or paper) are for Socrates too heavy and inadequate for passing real knowledge; Socrates expresses a strong preference for discourse that is "written in the soul of the learner" (276a), i.e. spoken dialogical discourse.

Leaving aside the hypothesis that Plato's dialogues represent merely preparatory work to some real learning which was not written down, hence not preserved (see Guthrie 1975: 418ff), Plato's written dialogues can be seen as a result of an attempt to overcome the paradox discussed briefly at the beginning of this section (cf. Ferrari 1987).

Judging from the variety of forms of philosophical discourse in the subsequent history of philosophy, many of the authors were confronted with at least a partly similar problem to overcome the disadvantages of the linear, static nature of written text. This problem has remained constant despite the change in the technology of writing and the introduction of printing. Bolter (2001), reflecting on the development of professional academic writing in the last 200 years notes that

> [a]lthough Plato was unwilling to set out his philosophy as a treatise, as a linear progression in which the writer assumes overt control of the argument, for the past 200 years, academic writers have been reluctant to accept any form other than treatise. If in those 200 years our literate culture has used printing press to reinforce that attitude, we are now beginning to use digital technologies to call it into question. Why should a writer be forced to produce a single, linear argument or an exclusive analysis of cause and effect, when writing space allows a writer to entertain and present several lines of thought at once? (Bolter 2001: 107)

In rest of the article, I shall try to 1) discuss Bolter's question in relation to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and 2) briefly consider the possibility of the use of the new medium of hypertext for the purpose of philosophical work.

Wittgenstein: Philosophical Investigations

Unlike Plato, Wittgenstein does not provide an explicit discussion on the nature and limits of written philosophical text. Nevertheless, in the Preface to his *Philosophical In-*

vestigations dated January 1945 there appears what at first might be taken as a personal comment on his unsuccessful attempt to produce a coherent piece of writing:

> It was my intention at first to bring all this together in a book whose form I pictured differently at different times. But the essential thing was that the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural order and without breaks.

> After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks; (Wittgenstein 1998 [1953]: Preface)

Here, Wittgenstein first considers the traditional form of written philosophical discourse – a book – which is based on linear and coherent progression of subjects in "natural order". Such form, although rather popular (and thus unmarked and normative) throughout the whole history of philosophy, was seen by Plato as unable to express the dynamics of philosophical thought (see above).

In the latter part of the quoted passage, Wittgenstein admits the difficulty he experienced with such form, which made him finally resort to the form of philosophical remarks (philosophische Bemerkungen). With respect to this brief statement one should recall the complexity of the *Investigations'* textual history, in particular the process of almost constant rewriting and rearranging of Wittgenstein's notes obvious from the drafts in the *Nachlass* (cf. Stern 1996, Hrachovec 2000b).

So far, the nature of the obstacle which the traditional linear written form of philosophical discourse presents to Wittgenstein's later philosophy was left without comment. The inability to "weld [Wittgenstein's] results together" could have been, in principle, of two different kinds: 1) the author's inability to present his thoughts in a linear way or 2) a more fundamental inability.

The passage quoted above continues with the following explanation:

> ...my thoughts were soon crippled if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination. – And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation. (Wittgenstein 1998 [1953]: Preface)

Wittgenstein seems to suggest a fundamental obstacle in the traditional linear writing, inherent in the nature of this medium, which one can only overcome at the cost of twisting the philosophical message. This cost was apparently too high for Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein, therefore, resorts to the form of *Bemerkungen*.

Some commentators (cf. e.g. Bolter 2001) argue in favour of hypertextual reading of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. They base their arguments on Wittgenstein's dissatisfaction with linear text and expand on the metaphor of criss-cross travel "over a wide field of thought" from the Preface. They, moreover, point to the textual history of the *Investigations*, regarding the printed text as only one of the possible arrangements of the *Bemerkungen*. Hrachovec (2000b:7) in a slightly different context claims that "Wittgenstein's writing is particularly well suited to a post-Gutenberg environment."

Text and hypertext

It is a historical coincidence that in the same year in which Wittgenstein wrote the Preface to his *Philosophical Investigations* an American engineer Vannevar Bush published his article, in which he introduced the idea of Mnemex, a "device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with exceeding speed and flexibility, [...] an enlarged intimate supplement to his memory." (Bush 1945: 6) This device, which according to Bush's proposal would also be able to link individual pieces of information with "associative trails", is generally considered to embody the idea of hypertextual operations in a rudimentary form (Nielsen 1995).

It is also interesting to notice that Mnemex (a short form for "memory extender") is defined by its author with reference to its use as an aid to our memory, a similar justification to that given by Theuth, the inventor of writing in Plato's myth. What is striking is the fact that although the technology employed in each case is radically different, the functional justification seems to be similar.

It was, however, only twenty years later that Ted Nelson inspired by Bush coined the term "hypertext". Hypertext is often defined in contrast to ordinary written text as *nonsequential/nonlinear* in the sense that there is no pre-established order in which the hypertext is supposed to be read (cf. Nielsen 1999, Hrachovec 2000a). In traditional (linguistic) definitions (cf. Sanders & Sanders 2006), text is understood metaphorically much in accord with the etymological meaning of the word (Latin: *textere* – to weave, hence text – a woven structure) as a coherent stretch of discourse. In contrast to this, hypertext can be seen as a non-coherent discourse, at least in the traditional linear sense in which we use the word "coherent".

Floridi (1999) points out three main components of the hypertext: 1) a set of nodes (*lexia* in Barthes's terminology) 2) a set of associations – links 3) and an interactive and dynamic interface (cf. also Bardini 2003). Floridi goes on to stress the fact that the computer-human interface is not the only possibility (although the most often thought of in the current debate) and considers the advocates of this claim as committing *electronic fallacy*. In order to escape the trap of electronic fallacy, therefore, one has to be ready to recognise hypertextual features also in some of the traditional texts written or printed on paper (cf. the discussion about hypertextual features of Wittgenstein's *Investigations* above).

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that the computer technology not only promotes the use of hypertext but also provides support for its full and sensible use. It is the computer and appropriate software that enable us to move smoothly in the web of links and trace back the history of our virtual journey through the chunks of text (cf. Bardini 2003)

In comparison to written/printed text, hypertext seems to escape at least to some extent the major objection formulated by Plato and hinted at by Wittgenstein in the Preface to *Philosophical Investigations* (see above). The reader is much more actively involved in the process of finding one's way through the text and can enjoy a quasi-dialogical relationship with the text. Hypertext, although unable to respond in the personalised way of a teacher-student exchange which Plato had apparently in mind when praising the spoken word, is nevertheless able to "react" to the reader's need through enabling the him/her to enter yet another dimension of the written mes-

sage. Hypertext can thus be seen besides more traditional spoken discourse and written/printed text as a possible candidate to be employed in the work of philosophy. After all, hypertextual potential for philosophy has already been explored in David Kolb's Eastgate essays "Socrates in the Labyrinth".

Conclusion

This article does not close with a definite conclusion since many issues discussed here remain necessarily open. I tried to explore the concept of hypertext – first as a theoretical concept providing us with a new understanding of Wittgenstein's form of discourse in *Philosophical Investigations* – second as a form to be employed in philosophy to challenge the linear nature of text with all its philosophical implications. Needless to say that the possible objections to hypertext pointing out the loss of the line of argument i.e. the fact that the text might become incoherent rather than non-coherent (disregarded completely in this article but discussed e.g. in Kolb 1994) should also be evaluated.

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