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Academic Writing, Philosophy and Genre

Edited by
Michael A. Peters

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Introduction
Thinking in Fragments; Thinking in Systems

MICHAEL A. PETERS

> To know is one thing, merely to believe one knows is another. To know is
> science, but merely to believe one knows is ignorance.
>
> —Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*
>
> Philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry.
>
> —Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Aphoristic Thought

One of the consequences of a materialist and historicist view of discourse and
academic writing is that one is inclined also to hold that there is a relationship
between the form of thinking and the form of discourse. This is not necessarily a
one-way or causative relationship but it does build upon the maxim underlying the
linguistic turn—that thought is expressed in language and the sentence, linguistically
speaking, constitutes a unit of thought open to the logic of truth-functional value-
testing (Peters, 2007). The kind of relationship I am elaborating is provided by
the example of aphoristic writing. The genre is an ancient form, from the Greek
αφορισμός) (aphorismos) meaning 'to limit' or 'define' and denoting an original
thought, a short pithy statement, expressing an evident truth in easily memorable
form. Hippocrates' Aphorisms (written 400 B.C.E) provides an early example of
the form.[1] He uses the form to state a series of medical observations from which
the patient's affliction could be deduced and treatment prescribed.

It belonged to what is commonly called the 'wisdom literature' exemplified in
'sayings' and intended to teach about virtue. These 'sayings' are clearly evident in
Biblical wisdom literature such as the *The Book of Job* and *The Book of Proverbs* and
also in the Hebraic and Islamic traditions.

The genre was used later by Hesiod, Epitetus, and Plutarch, among others. The
form of aphorism was reinvented during the Renaissance where it made use of
mnemonic statements. Later the form was embraced by Erasmus, Rochefoucauld,
and Pascal who saw in it the basis for a formulation of a moral principle. Dr
Johnson that human institution of English letters defined the aphorism as 'a
maxim; a precept contracted in a short sentence; an unconnected position.' He
favored the form because he thought it could stand by itself and treat a moral topic.

Morson (2003: 409) argues that 'aphorism, dictum, maxim, slogan, witticism, hypothesis, thought, and many other terms for short expressions have no clear definition and are used in contradictory or overlapping ways. Groarke (2007) provides an account of the aphorism as a philosophical genre elucidating the aphorism as an expression of 'aphoristic consciousness,' focusing on Pascal's aphoristic style, and the exegetical issues surrounding his *Pensées*. He demonstrates that aphoristic consciousness in an epistemological sense has been a *topoi* of Western philosophy.

With Dr Johnson in England and with Lichtenberg and later Nietzsche on the Continent the aphorism comes to inaugurate a moment or figure of thought that is more philosophical than literary (Fritz Mautner; J.P. Stern). It is this tradition that informs the gnomic statement and formulations of Karl Kraus and also the innovative ness of the thought experiment. In this context I am drawn immediately to Ludwig Wittgenstein and his style of philosophizing based on an understanding of the genre of aphorism as it motivates his method of composition (Peters & Burbules, 2002).

Wittgenstein's style owes a great deal to the great German aphorist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (Wright, 1982). Kimball (2002) argues that 'Lichtenberg's influence on Wittgenstein's work went deeper than mere content: the gnomic form of the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* owes a great deal to the example of Lichtenberg's aphorisms.' While Kimball notices the connection and its significance for Wittgenstein he really does not grasp the significance of Lichtenberg for Wittgenstein's style of composition. In Peters and Burbules (2002) we argued:

> All students of Wittgenstein who have grown up with the Wittgenstein 'mythology' know certain fundamental things about him and his work: that although Wittgenstein wrote a great deal he published very little in his own lifetime; that everything he wrote became part of a complex process of composition, passing from first or early drafts to finished work, through a number of phases; that what he wrote is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from what he said; and that what he did not write or say—what could only be *shown*—was at least as important as what he said and wrote. Each of these features, although perhaps obvious and familiar, requires further elucidation for the light they shine on Wittgenstein's styles.

The scope and character of Wittgenstein's literary *Nachlass*, the so-called 'Wittgenstein Papers', fall into three main groups: (a) the manuscripts (78), consisting of two *strata* of writings 'first drafts' and 'more finished versions'; (b) the typescripts (34) which were dictated or prepared by Wittgenstein himself; and (c) verbatim records of dictations (8) to colleagues or pupils (Von Wright, 1969: 485–86). In addition, von Wright mentions two further groups: the notes, more or less verbatim, of Wittgenstein's conversations and lectures; and his correspondence. Already, one might note that there is something extraordinary about the amount he wrote, most of which was never published in his lifetime. He agonised over the form and composition of his work and he developed

very complex methods of composition. He comments in *Culture and Value* that when he is thinking about a topic he 'jump[s] about all round it': 'Forcing my thoughts into an ordered sequence is a torment for me ... . I squander an unspeakable amount of effort making an arrangement of my thoughts which may have no value at all' (CV, 28e). Von Wright (1969: 503) refers to the 'layers of composition' of his work and describes the process of composition as one that involved dictation to a typist from a finished manuscript in which he would change and add words and sentences.

His method of composition based on the aphorisms was first to recognize the fragmentary nature of thought that comes to us in fragments and insights, rather than from a sustained effort of thinking. These flashes of insight then needed to be recorded in notebooks. Their statement then was worked on and together they became the raw material for a kind of composition process that attempted to provide a 'natural order'.

Encyclopedic thought[2]

The word 'Encyclopedia' comes from Greek *enkyklopaideia*. It means 'the circle of the education,' or a complete system of learning—if we take the expression literally. It is useful to think of the word and its original Greek meaning because it reminds us that the first encyclopedias, and the ordinary meaning of the word, did not draw any hard and fast distinctions between 'philosophy' and 'knowledge' and 'education.' Indeed, for over 2000 years from the point of its classical inception, through its history of transformations in the medieval, modern and postmodern periods, the encyclopedia has remained an exemplary pedagogical system designed to provide summaries of existing scholarship—often both the meanings and referents of words and concepts—in an accessible language and format for particular audiences.

Of all pedagogical systems and reference works—such as dictionaries, almanacs, gazetteers, atlases and directories—the encyclopedia was the only one to aim at a total comprehensive and self-contained system, although there was no one set of principles guiding the method for classification of entries or arrangement of contents. Classifications varied considerably in the period before the alphabetical arrangement of entries was introduced through a standardization that came with printing, reflecting the working epistemologies of the age and the evolution of disciplines and the formation of knowledges. Classical and medieval encyclopedias often classified contents arranged according to subject. Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, perhaps the highpoint of the classical encyclopedia, organized its contents by reference to the subjects of government, geography, zoology, medicine, history and practical matters. Contemporary philosophies were discussed impartially without any indication of personal preference. This 'objective' approach was not employed again until the 19th century. Those encyclopedists like St. Isidore of Seville, who were educated in the classical tradition, gave priority to the liberal arts and medicine. An important stage in the history of the encyclopedia was reached with Francis

Bacon's structure, which was arranged 'scientifically' into 'External Nature', 'Man' and 'Man's Action on Nature' based upon his empiricism. Bacon's project was to provide a comprehensive outline of the entire corpus of human knowledge. His form of classification was so influential that 130 years later Denis Diderot acknowledged his debt to Bacon in his *Encyclopédie* and Coleridge in his *Encyclopedia Metropolitiana*, impressed with Bacon, drew up a different table consisting of the five main classes of the 'pure' sciences, both formal (philology, logic, mathematics) and real (metaphysics, morals, theology), mixed and applied sciences (mixed: mechanics, hydrostatics, pneumatics, optics, astronomy; and applied: experimental philosophy, the fine arts, the useful arts, natural history, application of natural history); biography and history; miscellaneous and lexicographical; and an analytical index.

For both Diderot and Coleridge the encyclopedia revealed the structure of knowledge—its unity and its principles of harmony—and this logical structure was deemed necessary for its elucidation and ease of learning. The encyclopedia was also seen as an instrument to think methodically. From the earliest of times, the encyclopedia was considered an instrument for the pursuit of truth, dedicated to the improvement of mankind. Knowledge, in its vast comprehensiveness, arranged or organized into its 'natural' branches or disciplines and articulated into a giant system covering its full scope, was considered necessary for the good of society. In this sense then the early medieval and ecclesiastical encyclopedias, such as Vincent of Beavais's *Speculum Majus* ('The Great Mirror') or Domenico Bandini's *Fons Memorabilium Universi* ('The Source of Noteworthy facts of the Universe'), considerably predated the Enlightenment's emphasis on the relation between 'truth', 'knowledge', 'philosophy', 'education' and 'enlightenment', and 'the good society'.

Diderot and D'Alembert developed their underlying epistemology governing their Encyclopédie under the influence of Locke and Condillac: a rational and positivistic classification of existing knowledge based on the assumption of the unity of theory and praxis. Diderot planned to provide complete alphabetical treatment of the whole field of human knowledge from the standpoint of the 'Enlightenment' and the contributors included Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Turgot and Condorcet. The 28 volumes of the *Encyclopédie* completed between 1751–72 were not simply a repository of human knowledge but also a polemic from the viewpoint of the French Enlightenment and as such included a strong emphasis on democracy and equality, and a kind of tolerance of philosophical views that were essentially subversive of the established order.

The doors of the Modern Age opened, when the World walked by larger steps, and the division between 'education' and 'philosophy' was made definitively. The French philosophers, perhaps against themselves, wanted to hold on to something like a classical Paideia. But if this wasn't possible—and if some scholars already knew that it wasn't possible anymore because knowledges began to split and fragment into its professional specialties, then they, the French philosophers, would work in order to hold into a circle, even in its arrested form, the Paideia—education, in its classical expression.

What does Encyclopedia mean in a world in which a big gap exists between 'philosophy' and 'knowledge' and 'education'? What does Encyclopedia mean in a

world in which all this is a reality and in spite of the traditional gaps and disciplinary separations, the Internet becomes a great dominion? This is mainly a sociological problem; perhaps, also a philosophical problem. But also surely a social and existential problem. The sociological difficulty is something for the sociologists. The social and existential problem is, in this case, something very complex and dangerous, perhaps. Yet the philosophical problem shows itself to be one capable of rational discussion and debate. And when we come to discuss the Net as philosophers—its effects on knowledge and the disciplines, its manner of organization and classifying knowledge—we must be self-reflexively consistent; we must, at least, attempt to understand cyberspace in its applications to our own case.

In a few short years, the Internet has gone from being a specialist site for a few scientists and engineers to a place—a soft and almost infinitely flexible architecture—which incorporates a staggering variety of spaces: not just information exchange or reference banks or dictionaries but a vast conglomeration of different spaces, teeming with activity. The Internet, perhaps like the encyclopedia of old, now speaks to implicit knowledge formations, hybrid discourses, personal homepages that approve the existential conditions for aesthetically transforming oneself, chatgroups, bargain basements, advertising, new businesses and the whole vista of bookish elements now chaotically 'shelved' alongside video clips, images and other non-textual items. For the first time, the desire of the medieval or Enlightenment encyclopedists of bringing together the entire scope and corpus of human knowledge and information looks more than a possibility rather than simply a historical reflection of the vanity of a bygone age.

Yet some philosophers complain that the Internet promotes a collapse of knowledge into information or simply data, and they inform us that none of the three conditions of the traditional Platonic definition of knowledge as justified true belief are met: for information there does not need to be a belief condition, a truth condition or a justification condition. On one view this dangerous conflation imperils us, on another it promotes new discourses and new possibilities for dialogue. Of course, the reality is that there is both knowledge and information, and also cases where knowledge has been reduced to information, but there are also new kinds of discourse and the radical concordance of image, music, text and video. Our encyclopedia is, of course, not a compendium of knowledge items: it does not pretend to be the last word. Indeed, we would argue that the Internet and electronic space encourages a kind of philosophical pluralism for the same spatial limitations no longer exist: in our encyclopedia there is room for multiple entries and plural interpretations. And 'dynamic' encyclopedias—even specialist ones like the Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education—promote the possibility of an infinite revisability. We do not hope to complete 'the circle of learning' or to develop a rationalist system that effects a kind of closure, but we do hope that the Encyclopedia can, perhaps, widen the circle, to include more contributions and to admit many more learners and readers into the circle than was ever imagined by our encyclopedist predecessors.

The essays in this monograph pick up on various aspects of themes to do with philosophy, genre and academic writing especially as they manifest themselves in higher education. They explore the dimensions of relationships among philosophy

and literature, philosophy and genre, academic writing, and the wider issues associated with the politics and philosophy of writing.

Notes

1. For the full text see http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/aphorisms.html trans. by Francis Adams.
2. This section is based on Peters & Gharadelli (1999).

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