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From Thought to Expression: The Importance of Style in Philosophy

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Abstract

This paper challenges the traditional, reductionist approach to reading philosophical texts, which prioritizes the extraction of arguments while overlooking the significance of style. The mainstream view holds that understanding a philosophical work depends primarily on grasping its logical structure and key arguments, often treating style as a secondary or irrelevant feature. Drawing on the insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this paper argues that style is not merely an aesthetic embellishment but an integral aspect of philosophical thought.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of style suggests that it is through the unique manner in which a philosopher engages with the world—expressed through their style—that we encounter the existential meaning of their work. By examining the "Vacuum Thesis," which views philosophical ideas as static entities that can be isolated from their linguistic and stylistic contexts, this paper critiques the notion that philosophy is solely about abstract, context-free ideas. Instead, I propose that style is essential to understanding philosophical texts because it reveals the philosopher's way of thinking, their engagement with the world, and the lived experience that underpins their ideas.

This paper argues that to fully appreciate and understand a philosophical text, we must consider not only the arguments it presents but also the style through which these arguments are conveyed. In doing so, we recognize that philosophical texts are deeply intertwined with the existential realities of their authors, making style an indispensable component of philosophical interpretation.

What is the key to understanding a philosophical text? The mainstream view suggests that it lies in its arguments. If we grasp the arguments and the logic within, we understand the core of the work. While people acknowledge that complete reduction is not always achieved, there is often an expectation that the lengthy and obscure text can be discarded, and we can understand a philosophy through its clear and concise arguments after reduction. There is also another perspective that would argue for the importance of reading the original text. While this might seem like an opposing stance, it could just be a variation of the former: the reason for why we should read the original text is that it requires the readers to extract the main arguments ourselves. This still implies that the key to a philosophical text is the arguments behind it. This perspective makes the reductionist approach more appealing for reading philosophical texts than for other forms of literature, such as novels or poetry. However, this reductionist approach overlooks an essential aspect of philosophical texts: their style. In my opinion, the experience of reading philosophy is not about communicating with the thoughts, but with the person behind the text. The core of a philosophy is not only about the thoughts, but also how the philosopher thinks, or how she takes up her world.

This paper aims to challenge the notion that the essence of philosophical texts can be fully captured by their arguments alone. Instead, I will argue that style is a crucial element in understanding philosophy, as it reveals the philosopher's engagement with the world and the existential dimensions of their thought. To support this argument, I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's concept of style, which he sees not as a mere embellishment of ideas, but as integral to how those ideas are presented, understood, and lived. I will begin by introducing the "Vacuum Thesis," a perspective that views philosophical reading as a process of extracting arguments from a neutral, context-free space, where ideas are seen as static

entities. I will critique this view, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's work to show that thought and language are inseparable, and that style is not just a vehicle for thought but its very embodiment. Then, I will reexamine the act of reading philosophy with the notion of style.

Before getting deeper into my critique, let me clarify what this "Vacuum Thesis" is.

According to this perspective, the act of reading philosophy is akin to a scenario where a sender and a receiver communicate in a vacuum. For instance, an ancient philosopher came up with an idea, condensed it into words, and recorded it in a book. This idea then remains frozen and stored in a vacuum until a reader engages with it. When the reader opens the book, she enters this vacuum, receives the idea, and she may accept it or challenge it. Proponents of this view typically perceive philosophy as a quest: it begins with generally accepted premises and, through logical steps, arrives at not generally accepted conclusions.¹ The rules of the game in the vacuum are as follows: if you agree with the initial premises, you must logically accept the conclusion. If you disagree, you must either concede that you are not rational and exit the discussion or you can question the logical steps. Within this framework, we can see that the condition of entering the game is the two parties being rational and impartial.

First, this view implies that when philosophers play their role as the sender, they first conceive the ideas in a world of thought and then use language to convey these ideas to the potential readers. Language, in this sense, only serves as a not-ideal tool, since information will inevitably be lost in this translation process. It also implies that if we could invent a machine that allows us to directly access someone's thoughts, language would become redundant. Consequently, reducing tedious philosophical work to concise arguments is often advocated as it supposedly brings us closer to the pre-linguistic world of ideas.

¹ Bence Nanay, "Philosophy versus Literature? Against the Discontinuity Thesis: Philosophy versus Literature," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71, no. 4 (November 2013): 351.

Second, the idea, the most important thing in this framework, appears as determinate and isolated. It is determinate because it is seen as a static entity that can be sent by the sender and received by the receiver. Even though people admit that 1) it might not be fully transformed while sending, as said above, and 2) it might not be fully received due to other issues like the problem of other minds, this view still presupposes a determinate idea in an ideal situation. Besides, the requirement for rationality and impartiality as tickets to the vacuum space is due to the expectation that the philosophical discussion can be free from human factors. If you are a writer, you should aim to write independently of your historical, cultural, or personal contexts. If you are a reader, you should strive to set aside your own preferences. Regardless of whether people agree on the possibility of completely isolating these human factors, this is considered the ideal scenario. However, people often forget that this is an aspiration and begin to treat it as a fact. Any elements that appear subjective are considered best excluded, leaving only the ideas themselves in philosophical discussions. I find the Vacuum Thesis insufficient in describing the philosophical reading or philosophical discussion. To uncover its problems in detail, a reexamination is necessary, and this is where the insights of Merleau-Ponty become particularly valuable.

The first misconception that needs to be clarified is that there may not be such a thing as a pure idea that exists before philosophers express it. In other words, there is no realm of ideas that we need to go back to, as the reductionists believe. The Vacuum Thesis holds that thought precedes language, which Merleau-Ponty disagrees. In the chapter "The Body as Expression, and Speech," Merleau-Ponty stands against the view that language is only an external accompaniment of thought which is held by both intellectualism and empiricism. He

argues that thought and speech are in fact, enveloping each other. To better understand his perspective, let's examine his words:

"A thought, content to exist for itself outside the constraints of speech and communication, would fall into the unconscious the moment it appears, which amounts to saying that it would not even exist for itself. ... It certainly moves forward instantly, as if through flashes, but it subsequently remains for us to appropriate it, and it is through expression that thought becomes our own. The designation of objects never happens after recognition; it is recognition itself. When I focus on an object in the shadows, and I say: "It's a brush," there is no concept of the brush in my mind beneath which I could subsume the object, and that moreover could be linked with the word "brush" through a frequent association. Rather, the word bears the sense, and, by imposing it upon the object, I am conscious of reaching the object."²

He begins by asserting that a thought cannot exist independently of language and communication. This is more clear in the phenomenon of deliberate designation. For example, for children, an object is only known if it has a name; the name is as essential to the object as its color and shape. Yet contrary to the conventional notion that recognition precedes designation, Merleau-Ponty argues that the two processes are simultaneous. At first glance, Merleau-Ponty's view might seem unpersuasive when we think of our daily experience. It is natural to think that we first have thoughts in our mind, such as an idea that "it's a brush," and then we might express it through language, whether speaking or writing it down. It would be weird to think that I do not have such an idea or that I cannot recognize the brush until I say it out loud. In fact, this is not what Merleau-Ponty means. He uses the word

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, English translation (New York: Routledge, 2014), 183.

"speech" in a broad sense that it is not limited to verbal communication but includes all ways in which language is used to express thought. The idea that "it's a brush" would also be seen as a speech, an inner speech.

One might wonder: isn't this simply a matter of definition? The intellectualist view refers to it as thought, while Merleau-Ponty calls it inner speech. The problem is that the traditional view contends that the recognition happens prior to any language. The idea that 'it's a brush' must first appear in the form of "thought." It is only for the sake of communication that we express it in language. Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, denies there is 'pure thought' like that. He does not aim at arguing this is a speech rather than thought, but against the dichotomy that thought and language are two isolated processes instead. In his view, the idea that 'it's a brush' is a thought that is manifested in inner speech. In his words, "For the speaker, then, speech does not translate a ready-made thought; rather, speech accomplishes thought."³

Furthermore, it is important to note that Merleau-Ponty's view does not merely mean that thoughts always appear in the form of language. It would still be implying that language is an external thing that we borrow. He proposes that the word is not the clothes but the body of thought. This view aims to emphasize that words also bear a sense and it play a key role in the generation of signification. This more primary sense, rather than being conceptual, gives the thought a style, an affective value, or an existential mimicry.⁴ I will elaborate on this in the next section, but for now, it is important to understand that by emphasizing the key role of speech over thought, Merleau-Ponty wants to highlight that we are not just thinking subjects but also speaking subjects. That is, we have to realize that we recognize ourselves as a member of a linguistic community prior to knowing ourselves as a thought about Nature.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 183.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 188.

When we see a philosophical work as a speech, it does not mean that it is a tool for the subject to express thoughts, but more essentially, it is the subject taking up her position in the world and potentially interacting with others.

Now that we see why the thought-centered perspective is not entirely convincing, we must ask: if ideas are not the only aspect we need to consider, what else should we focus on? My answer is the style of the text. This concept is borrowed from Merleau-Ponty. As he stated:

"A philosophical text that is still not well understood reveals to me at least a certain 'style'—whether Spinoza, critical, or phenomenological—which is a preliminary outline of its essence. I begin to understand philosophy by integrating into the special way of existence of this thought, by reproducing the tone or accent of the philosopher in question."⁵

When we think of "style," we might first consider it in a narrow sense. Typically, literary criticism examines sentence structure, vocabulary choice, and rhetoric. Similarly, in film, we analyze the use of shots, and in painting, the use of brushstrokes. However, philosophy often overlooks the form and emphasizes the content. While some philosophers are known for writing clearly or, more often, for writing in an extremely obscure manner, the focus has traditionally been on the content rather than the use of language. This is because many believe that such attention to style belongs to the realm of art, and philosophy is not considered art. I think that focusing on style is not exclusive to art but should be considered in all creative work. However, the 'style' that I am referring to would be more nuanced than this narrow sense. Style is concerned with form, but not merely a matter of form. In any case,

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 184.

this does not mean that we should all shift our focus entirely to the writing techniques of philosophical texts.

Merleau-Ponty frequently used the term "style," while he never provided a specific definition or explanation of it. We can gain insight into its meaning by analyzing some of the passages where he mentions it. For example, he said,

“For me, Paris is not an object with a thousand different forms, nor is it a collection of perceptions, nor is it a law of all these perceptions. Just as a person expresses the same emotional essence in his gestures, gait, and voice, so each of the distinct perceptions I get while traveling through Paris—the cafés, the faces, the poplars by the quayside, the bend of the Seine—is isolated from the whole of Paris only to confirm a certain style or a certain sense of Paris.”⁶

To put it briefly, the style of a person tells me who this person is, just as the style of a city tells me what this city is. For the purpose of discussion, I will refer to this "what something is" that is revealed by 'style' as essence. Merleau-Ponty thinks that style is the manner in which the essence of something is presented or manifested. At the same time, the essence of Paris becomes evident or “manifest” through the distinct sights, sounds, and experiences one encounters, such as the cafés, the faces, the poplars by the quayside, and the bend of the Seine. While essence might be abstract and intangible, style makes it perceivable. To say that essence is manifested is to suggest that, much like the relationship between thought and speech, style does not function as a sign that represents essence; rather, it is the body of essence. Besides, as Andrew Inkpin notes, style is different from rules.⁷ In a certain sense, it

⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 294.

⁷ Andrew Inkpin, “Merleau-Ponty and the Significance of Style,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 27, no. 2 (June 2019): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12430>.

shows generality, just like rules, but not with the requirement of identical instances. The generalization of style focuses more on identifying patterns, order, or similar arrangements within the structure of the work.⁸ This means that recognizing the essence of a work through its style isn't as simple as analyzing its aesthetic features and then categorizing it according to some instructional manual. It's not about believing that a certain quality corresponds directly to a certain style, or that a certain style corresponds directly to a certain essence. For instance, even if an identical café is replicated elsewhere, it doesn't mean that this place becomes Paris. This approach reduces style to a detached, third-person process. By contrast, recognizing style is dynamic; it requires the engagement of a perceiver. Now, shifting our focus back to philosophical texts, we can examine how this concept of style operates in this particular example. Let's begin by looking at Merleau-Ponty's own words,

“A style is a certain way of handling situations that I identify or understand in an individual or for a writer by taking up the style for myself through a sort of mimicry, even if I am incapable of defining it; and the definition of a style, as accurate as it might be, never presents the exact equivalent and is only of interest to those who have already experienced the style.”⁹

It is in the style of the text that I see the existential meaning, rather than the conceptual meaning, of a text. It tells me how the writer handles the world in front of her. It is hard to say that philosophy is the work of different generations of people solving the same problem. There are so many ways to approach the world, and there are so many different ways to ask questions. Even when two philosophers address the same issue, they do so from different perspectives, and their styles reflect how they think about these subjects, not just what they

⁸ Inkpin, 12.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 342.

think. Style is also not the attribute of the text, but how I understand how others handle certain situations. When I do the act of understanding, I put myself in the writer's situation, and I see how she is taking up her position. This is not a deliberate act but only happens if we read the whole text, and if we follow the thinking track of the writer. The scenario of reading philosophy is not like a pure and transparent subject approaching another transparent object. I am not communicating with a representation or an idea, but a speaking subject, an existential manner and her world. At the same time, I read with my background, with the context. It is the encounter of existence but not merely ideas. The emphasis on style challenges the notion that ideas are the most fundamental and, therefore the most important aspect. Such a view presupposes a consciousness that takes no position or that it can occupy various viewing points in turn, and then forget the presupposition. What we learn from Merleau-Ponty is that we reflect, only on a world that is talked about and spoken. We should be aware that we are reading with our bodies, which implies that we are viewing from a position.

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