The philosophical dialogue: a poetics and a hermeneutics / Vittorio Hösle; translated by Steven Rendall.

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The suspicion that the age in which we live is not one of the philosophically most productive eras of human history does not emerge solely from an analysis of the content of contemporary philosophical production. It also forces itself upon anyone who seeks to inventory the literary genres that are currently used by philosophers: what a loss in literary diversity, what a diminution of the possible modes of expression discovered and created by two and a half millennia of philosophy! The absence of philosophical dialogue is particularly painful, indeed puzzling, in a period that some people think is governed by the paradigm of intersubjectivity and discourse.

I am aware, of course, that a proposal to revive the philosophical dialogue comes with much better grace from someone who is capable of writing one himself—someone like my friend Manfred Wetzel. But even if one cannot do so, one can still advance the cause of philosophical dialogue by discussing systematically the possibilities of this genre. At any rate, an intertextual awareness is characteristic of even the earliest dialogues, and a survey of what the philosophical dialogue has accomplished up to this point, indeed, of its essential traits, might inspire new forms of this genre—and then this book would have truly fulfilled its goal.

But even from a purely observational point of view, an analysis of the philosophical dialogue seems to me rewarding for various reasons. The literary genre of the philosophical dialogue reflects or transforms a real phenomenon, philosophical exchange between different people. This exchange is so essential to the essence of doing philosophy that an analysis of the genre promises to shed light on the nature of philosophizing itself. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity are crucial fundamental
categories of philosophy, and in analyzing the philosophical dialogue, philosophy reflects on the connection of these categories in what it is itself: self-reflection and thinking through the fundamental categories are intensively combined in this analysis. In real conversations, arguments are exchanged, and the connections between the individual propositions that constitute arguments as such belong to the domain of logic. However, propositions are presented through speech acts, and their authors are persons. But relations between persons belong to the domain of ethics. Thus in the philosophical dialogue the two basic disciplines of theoretical and practical philosophy seem to be bound together in an especially close way.

However, actual philosophical exchange is only the starting point for the literary genre. What happens in the artistic transformation of the real starting point is governed by aesthetic rules, and hence a study of the philosophical dialogue will also produce insights into aesthetics and in particular into literary theory. The fact that many philosophers were clearly also great artists may be an encouragement; and it certainly has consequences for a theory of the relation between art and philosophy.

Finally, a theory of the literary genre of the philosophical dialogue will have something to contribute to the field of hermeneutics as well, for two reasons. First, actual dialogue between philosophers works only if they understand each other, and thus in every philosophical dialogue the problem of the mutual understanding between the literary characters who appear in it is an implicit, and frequently also an explicit, theme. Second, it is not just a matter of understanding the processes whereby these literary characters make themselves understood; it is also a matter of understanding the intentions of the author of the work. This is notoriously difficult, and perhaps some progress toward coping with it would be useful for the hermeneutics of philosophical and literary texts in general.

There are philosophical dialogues on almost every question, and although, of course, all these questions cannot be taken up here, because of the close relationship between the form and the subject of philosophical dialogue a certain familiarity with a multitude of philosophical disciplines is a precondition for a work like this one. There are also philosophical dialogues in all periods of the history of philosophy, even if they are distributed over time in a very interesting way that must itself
be philosophically explained. No overall history of the philosophical dialogue has appeared since Rudolf Hirzel's two-volume study of the dialogue in general was published in 1895, and this book is not intended to be one, indeed, not even a history of the philosophical dialogue. (Non-philosophical dialogues, especially if their authors are philosophers, will be occasionally cited if they present certain literary structures with particular clarity.) My book seeks only to present a taxonomy and theory of the categories of philosophical dialogue, and makes not the slightest claim to historical completeness; it is thus closer to Carlo Sigonio’s De dialogo liber (1562), the first work on the genre and a masterpiece of Renaissance poetics, than to Hirzel’s enormously learned work, which belongs to the age of historical positivism. Naturally, I have not read every philosophical dialogue that was ever written, nor have I even read in toto all the works to which I sometimes refer in this book; still less have I surveyed the whole secondary literature on the authors I discuss, even though I have looked into many more than I have cited. But it was not necessary to do so to grasp the essential characteristics of the genre. It is true that although I have limited myself to the realm of Western culture, I have sought to give examples from all periods, and in modern times from every century, partly to show the universality of the genre and partly to exemplify variations specific to a given period. The translations—often merely paraphrases—are, unless otherwise specified, my own—of course in this English-language version themselves translated by Steven Rendall. Sometimes, however, I have thought it necessary to assume that the reader can cope with Latin and French.

This book combines theoretical reflections with examples that sometimes require intensive hermeneutic efforts in a way that will seem to some philosophers too literary-philological and to some students of literature and philologists too philosophical. In it, the contents and arguments of philosophical dialogues do not play a central role, nor does it seek to provide meticulously detailed, overall interpretations of individual texts. An admirer of Vico may be forgiven for attempting to connect philology and philosophy in this way. So far as the choice of texts is concerned, my goal was to make clear both the main lines of the genre’s development and the contrasting ways in which the dialogue can be constructed. The preferred method is therefore comparison. Even if in
this book, with the exception of two short works by Diderot, hardly a single philosophical dialogue is interpreted in toto, I harbor the hope that future complete interpretations of such dialogues will be able to make use of the categorial differentiations and case studies provided by this book.

Whitehead’s famous remark that Western philosophy “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” strikes many people as an exaggeration; but there is no doubt that it is true of the philosophical dialogue. No one who had access to Plato’s works could have escaped his influence; even in the dark centuries his indirect influence can be seen. A book on the philosophical dialogue is thus inevitably also a book on the founder and greatest master of the genre. I wrote my first book about Plato, and this return to the philosopher who taught me what philosophy can be was a delightful experience. However, everyone who knows my earlier book will see how much my view of Plato has changed: my focus is now on the form of his dialogues, not their content, and thus on the early rather than the late dialogues. My awareness of how much in his philosophy belongs irremediably to the past has become clearer, but I am consoled by the certainty that no thinker has ever overcome the limits of his time as much as Plato did. Alongside Plato, Cicero (who is not an original thinker but is often a first-rate writer), and Augustine (whose Cassici- acum dialogues are particularly important for the inquiry pursued here), Hume and Diderot are heroes of this book, around whom numerous secondary figures are grouped.

After an introduction that is perhaps most innovative in seeking to use the categories of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to classify the plenitude of philosophy’s modes of expression, this book is structured by the classical triad of the production, inner structure, and reception of the literary dialogue. The third part is deliberately left sketchy; the center of the book lies in the second part. That many of the categories of this second part apply to actual conversations no less than to the literary universe of philosophical dialogue not only explains why it is so detailed but also lends it a certain philosophical dignity.

It may be an excusable performative contradiction that this book does not itself take the form of a dialogue, but it would be inexcusable if it were not in large part indebted to conversations with teachers of
literature and philosophy, students, friends, and colleagues. More than ever, the end of this preface must include thanks—to my father, Johannes Hösle, who introduced me early on to literary inquiry; to my teacher Imre Tóth, whose lectures on the philosophy of mathematics permanently shaped my approach to aesthetic issues; to my teacher Franz von Kutschera, whose systematic breadth and precision constantly spurred me on; to my teacher Dieter Wandschneider, without whose inexhaustible willingness to engage in conversation with me a quarter of a century ago I would not have found my philosophical way; to my teachers in Plato studies, Werner Beierwaltes, Konrad Gaiser, and Hans Krämer; to my friends and colleagues Pierre Adler, Wolfgang Braungart, Roland Galle, Rolf Geiger, Bernd Goebel, Bernd Gräfarth, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, Jan-Lüder Hagens, Jens Halfwassen, Walter Haug, Christoph Horn, Christian Illies, Christoph Jermann, Friedhelm Marx, Walter Nicgorski, David O’Connor, Gretchen Reydams-Schils, Mark Roche, Kenneth Sayre, Péter Várdy, Matthias Wächter, Manfred Wetzel, Catherine Zuckert, and especially Dmitri Nikulin for many discussions on the subject of dialogue; to my students and colleagues who participated, in four seminars in Essen and Notre Dame on very different groups of philosophical dialogues, with expertise, intelligence, and enthusiasm (I am especially grateful to Andreas and Christian Spahn and Alfonso Flórez); to Nora Kreft, who as “Nora K.” awakened me to the aesthetic potentialities of the dialogue in an epistolary conversation that went on for several years; and to the Erasmus Institute of the University of Notre Dame, at which I was able to begin thinking about this book during two research-leave semesters in 2001 and 2002. Writing the book, because of the difficulty of its subject, has taken far longer than I then thought it would. It was completed in 2004–5 during a year spent as a member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, which is probably in our own time the academic institution that in its universality and in the cultivation of space for independent thought, lively discussion, and civilized intellectual community most closely corresponds to the Platonic Academy. The friendliness and efficiency of the librarians Karen Downing, Gabriella Hoskin, Marcia Tucker, and Kirstie Venanzi, who met even my most rec-ondite needs, were exceptional. I thank especially the ancient historian Glen Bowersock, the medievalist Caroline W. Bynum, the Islamic Studies
scholar Patricia Crone, the sinologist Nicola Di Cosimo, the historian of science Noah Efron, the assyriologist Andrew George, the philosopher Hilary Gatti, the historian of science Peter Harrison, the physicist Piet Hut, the historian Jonathan Israel, the sinologist Thomas Jansen, the medievalist Joel Kaye, the historian of theology Yannis Papadyanakis, the educationist Marisa Trigari, the classical philologist Heinrich von Staden, the political scientist Michael Walzer, the philosopher Morton White, the classical philologist Christian Wildberg, and the Egyptologist Katharina Zinn for all they have taught me and for their encouragement, which have made this book less inadequate than it would otherwise have been. In particular, Jonathan Israel’s willingness to engage in discussion had Socratic dimensions and would be worthy of being preserved in a dialogue; without his help I could hardly have found the right approach to the eighteenth century. My greatest thanks, however, go to my wife, Jieon Kim, and our children, Johannes and Paul, who have supported me during this time with their daily conversation, which is not only the foundation of every family culture but ultimately also of every dialogue.

I am very grateful to Steven Rendall, who translated this book only a few years after its publication in German (2006), as with *Morals and Politics* doing a great job. I revised his translation carefully and decided not to integrate later secondary literature (only referring to some newer articles of mine when they clarified some points left vague in the book). I owe a particular debt to the University of Notre Dame for having financed with great generosity this translation, which I hope will prove useful to both philosophers and literary critics in the English-speaking world.

This book is dedicated to the memory of an intelligent and just man with whom it was always fascinating to converse, my beloved uncle Josef Hösle.
Someone who describes the Pantheon, the Boy with Thorn, the frescoes of the Villa dei Misteri, Beethoven’s Opus 111, Propertius’s elegies, or Fellini’s E la nave va (And the Ship Sails On) is often doing something useful, and occasionally indispensable, but he makes himself absolutely ridiculous if he claims that anyone who has read his descriptions no longer needs to see, listen to, or read these works of art. And this remains true even if nothing can be added to these descriptions, which is scarcely humanly possible. This has to do with the fact that the essence of a work of art consists not only in the satisfaction of conceptual thought but also of one of our senses or at least of the imagination, and that is precisely what cannot be done by the critic, who can never compete with his object. Wölflin was not a painter, nor was Hanslick a composer. The case of the literary critic is somewhat different, however, since he may sometimes succeed in producing first-class literature himself that either implicitly or explicitly competes with the work described. Plato’s Phaedrus and Cicero’s De oratore come to mind; they are not only significant philosophical analyses of oratory but also, seen from a rhetorical point of view, themselves first-rate; analogously, Friedrich Schlegel’s Gespräch über die Poesie (Conversation on Poetry) can
itself claim to have poetic quality. This implies that it will never be possible to describe these writings in such a way that reading them directly does not hold in store mental experiences that cannot be replaced by any summary and analysis, no matter how good.

The three works mentioned above are philosophical in nature, and that means that there are at least a few philosophical works that must be enjoyed as works of art, that is, to which justice is not rendered if only their argumentative content is analyzed. To be sure, philosophical texts differ from other texts in the specific kind of truth claim they make, which is more direct and oriented toward verification through argumentative analysis than are works of art in the narrower sense (i.e., excluding philosophical texts), and certainly any intercourse with philosophical works goes radically off-track if it does not take seriously this special truth claim. It is also correct to say that there are philosophical texts in which the aesthetic dimension is minimal. In fact, every intersubjectively verifiable contribution to philosophy is necessarily formulated in language, and often in writing. To that extent, every contribution to philosophy observes the norms of linguistic communication, and at least some specifically aesthetic norms—such as clarity and density—also guide, at least in a diminished form, everyday communication. And yet it is incontestable that the aesthetic value of, say, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, even the parts of it that avoid hiatus, is not very high. But that does not hold for all philosophical works; some philosophers have been first-rate writers, and a few have even been poets. This aesthetic quality of their works calls for an appropriate analysis that, as I have said, will in theory never be able to replace the theoretical analysis, but which the latter also does not make superfluous. We can speak of a *complementary* relationship between the two—just as in a very analogous way works on political philosophy can

1. “Thus we can really speak of poetry only in poetry” (Schlegel 1967; 285). Ludoviko’s plan to present in verse a system of false poetry (290) is thus superfluous, since in Schegel poetry does not presuppose verse—philosophical dialogues belong to the category of poetry (293, 304).

2. Conversely, there are also literary works in which philosophical ideas and discussions play an important role; for example, Schiller’s philosophical poems or Musil’s *Die Verwirrungen des Zögling Törless*; however, in my book they are not thematic. Cf., e.g., C. Schildknecht and D. Teichert (1996).

3. The term plays a role in the important works of G. Gabriel; see, e.g., (1997).
be analyzed with regard to both their truth claims and their function in a political debate. Both kinds of observation are legitimate, but may also disregard each other, time and again. For example, both historians of philosophy and political historians have to read Cicero’s *De republica*; the former will attend more to the arguments, the latter more to the function of these arguments in the political conflicts of the late Roman republic.

And yet the situation is even more complex and more interesting when the separation of the two modes of observation does not function properly. To return to my initial example of the complementarity of theoretical and aesthetic observation, it becomes impossible to separate the two if without an aesthetic analysis the correct understanding of the philosophical work is impossible. This holds for various philosophical works belonging to entirely different genres. For instance, stylistic devices are used to show that certain thoughts are central; often they are an expression of a specific attitude, a life-feeling, only against the background of which certain arguments can be rightly understood. It is probably no accident that it is precisely philosophical revolutionaries like Heraclitus or Nietzsche who break with centuries-old tradition and write in a stylistically exciting way, which we would not claim of someone like Thomas Aquinas, who saw himself as part of a tradition. The attraction of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, without which its success among readers incapable of understanding its logical propositions cannot be explained, is also and precisely stylistic in nature; combining a logical order reminiscent of Spinoza with an aphoristic formulation reminiscent of Nietzsche, it is not only extremely original, but a splendid counterpart to its programmatic content, logical atomism, as well as to an extraordinary mastery of formal logic that simultaneously recognizes that very little can be grasped with logic alone.

This claim, that the argumentative analysis of a philosophical text is dependent on aesthetic considerations, holds particularly true for philosophical dialogues. Why? Because at least a significant number of philosophical dialogues—namely, those in which the author of the text is himself not one of the interlocutors—confront the reader with important hermeneutic problems. The author speaks in them in a way different from the way he speaks in a treatise, that is, not in the
first person; and before we analyze and evaluate his arguments, which cannot be simply identified with those of an interlocutor, we have to find out what the author actually wants to say. Discovering this is not always easy, any more than it is easy to discover Shakespeare’s own moral convictions—no matter how obvious it is that it is clearly not a good idea to attribute to him Richard III’s or Lear’s statements as his own just because he wrote them. In reconstructing the theses to be attributed to a philosopher, and not solely to his literary creations, aesthetic tact is not the only condition, but it is an indispensable one, and anyone who lacks it will seldom correctly understand, even if he has great logical abilities, the arguments made by a philosopher writing a dialogue, because what he is analyzing is precisely not the argument, or at least not the complete argument, of the philosopher concerned.

Thus we have already determined a central reason why, in the framework of a literary theory of philosophy the philosophical dialogue plays an especially important role—especially important because in this case literary theory is relevant to philosophy in the strict sense. In order to explain more clearly what I mean by “philosophical dialogue,” in the following I shall first deal with the specific traits of philosophical dialogue.

4. The Greek term is *autoprosôpos*; cf. Luc. *JTr.* 29 and especially Ammon. *in Cat.* 4.14 ff. Busse, where, within Aristotle’s syntagmatic writings, *dialogika* are distinguished from *autoprosôpa*. On this, see C. Sigonio (1993), 124. However, the term is misleading insofar as Aristotle appears in his own dialogues. By “in the first person,” I refer not so much to the grammatical form as to the nature of the speech act, namely that the author himself seeks to assert something directly. Chapter 36 of Justin’s *First Apology* is important in this regard: he interprets the prophets as masks of God and in explanation refers to pagan writers who are themselves the authors of the whole work but present several masks that converse with one another: *hena men ton ta panta suggraphonta onta, prosôpa de ta dialogomena parapheronta.*


5. It is well known that the division of literary forms into authorial speech and character speech goes back to Plato (*R.* 392c ff.); see below, Part II, chap. 9. On the later history of this division see, e.g., P. von Moos (1997), 242 ff.

6. Cf. J.-J. Rousseau (1999), 157 ff. This situation may however lead one to deny a dramatist aesthetic views, for example, that are in fact his own: “My dear fellow, whatever you may say, it is merely a dramatic utterance, and no more represents Shakespeare’s real views upon art than the speeches of Iago represent his real views upon morals,” Vivian says to Cyril in Oscar Wilde’s dialogue *The Decay of Lying* (1966; 981 f.).
in contrast to other literary forms of philosophy, its special status among them. Second, I shall distinguish the philosophical dialogue as a literary genre from actual philosophical conversation, and as a philosophical literary genre from nonphilosophical literary dialogues. Third and finally, I shall explain the connection between literary form and philosophical content in the philosophical dialogue.