On Written Dialogue as Form of Assessment

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The setting: a rather grubby kitchen. In the sink a number of milk bottles with varying degrees of mould.The floor is sticky and dirty dishes and empty beer bottles are piled up on the counter.The window has a crack. Hazy light filters through. In the background the sound of a radio upstairs.
A man sits at the table, which is scattered with books. On a piece of paper in front of him only one line: 'In my last lecture ?' He picks up his pen, when the door opens.
Two women enter the kitchen.Tallis Brown rises when they do.
'Miss Sayers, Mrs.Woolf.'
'The door was open.'
'Yes, of course. It was.'
The women cannot but notice the rancid smell and both light a cigarette.The scent of burning tobacco slowly overwhelms all others.
'Please, take a seat.Would you like anything to drink.There is beer, I think, and water.'
There is also the sink and its dirty glasses.Tallis sits down again. 'There have been complaints about your classes,

Mr. Brown.'

'I see.'

'Your students are confused about the purpose of these classes. It is just not what they expected.Ah, and one said you failed to mention ... I am afraid I can't read this name.'

'What did they expect?'

'They were not very clear.What did you tell them to expect? Why did you decide to teach this class?'

'They asked me, the people from the workers education society, I was not sure, but well I need the money. I should have taken a different approach, and read other works.'

'We all need money, Mr. Brown.The pressing question is how badly you need it.'

'Well...'

'What is the purpose of these classes, Mr. Brown.Why do you teach?'

The following reflections follow from a project on the written dialogue as form of assessment, which has been sponsored by the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies.1 The project allowed me to critically rethink the assessment of the written dialogue, through a study of distinct resources (pedagogical, philosophical and literary), the involvement of creative writing, and by eliciting feedback from students. The project has raised a number of concerns which go beyond the specificity of this assessment, such as persistent habits in philosophy and current thinking in higher education in Britain. This article is a first attempt to present these in writing.

Originally, I had a much longer title in mind: 'On Written Dialogue as Form of Assessment, or How to Do Philosophy in a (Grubby) Kitchen'. The kitchen is found in Iris Murdoch's thirteenth novel, A Fairly Honourable Defeat. It must be one of the filthiest kitchens found in literature and houses the novel's saint, Tallis Brown.2 The kitchen's state forces a response from most of the characters as well as from Murdoch's readers.3 I too have been fascinated by this kitchen, in particular for the challenge it poses to philosophical habits. Reading Murdoch's novel as a commentary on her philosophical work ?A Fairly Honourable Defeat is published only a few months before The Sovereignty of Good?I unde rstand the image of the kitchen as a reflection on the clarity expected from philosophical thinking.

I would assume most will recognise the desire to have thoughts clear in one's head, as well as the related expectation of salvation ('When I have it clear in my head, I can finish this essay/write that book/live my life properly etc.'). This longing is a great motivator, and the clarity a virtue of many texts. Yet, they can also create difficulties. Too strong a longing for clarity can lead to disregard for the muddle and ambiguities of everyday reality. This is certainly Murdoch's concern in The Sovereignty of Good, when she struggles with a form of philosophy that prides itself on clarity, but fails to acknowledge the moral virtues of mothers of large families.4

In contemporary higher education, an analogous kind of clarity which obscures can be created by learning outcomes. Understood as exact descriptions of achievable goals, they do not allow for an understanding of learning as continuous, or for the experience that rereading a text can challenge as well as confirm existing knowledge. It is this assumption about learning that I have become increasingly aware and wary of when working on this project. In what follows I present the argument that the assessment of the written dialogue can provide some necessary counterbalance.

My argument proceeds as follows. I first outline the origins of the project. I then reflect on written dialogues in both the history of philosophy and contemporary practice. Next, I present some of the findings of the project and I end with a brief reflection on the relevance of the project for contemporary practice in higher education. First, however, a brief note on the form of this text. When first presenting this project I was asked why I had not written a dialogue myself. My initial response to this question was twofold. First, as I shall explain later, I do not think that philosophical dialogue is limited to those texts featuring two or more people speaking. Even seemingly straightforward articles can be of a dialogical nature. Moreover, while I intend to promote a wider use of the written dialogue for philosophical writing, I do not think it suitable for all philosophical writing. Again, more specific reasons will be given below.

Yet, I have since come to reconsider the question, and decided to include (only) the beginnings of a longer dialogue in

this article. This dialogue is situated in Tallis Brown's kitchen and features a conversation between him, Dorothy Sayers, and Virginia Woolf. The work of each of these women, created against the background of women's recent access to formal education, presents an important challenge to contemporary thought on higher education.[5] I have more than once returned to the pivotal scene in Shrewsbury's common room, in Sayers' Gaudy Night, where the women discuss a case of a male scholar who concealed a document that undermined this theory. Every time I am struck by the final verdict: 'A man as undependable as that is not only useless, but dangerous. He might do anything.'[6] I also teach now and again the visit to the British Museum in Woolf's A Room of One's Own. Both texts raise the question of accepted practice, and as such have inspired my thoughts about this.

The excerpt only introduces the question of education. It does not really present or question Sayers' position, or Woolf's. However, I have included these reflections to begin this article in a different tone. I hope the excerpt itself may start a dialogue with the rest of the text and with its reader.

1.Written Dialogue as Assessment

Before embarking on this project I had been using the written dialogue as assessment for some years in a module called 'Philosophy and Gender'. The original idea was not mine, though I was to first to put it into practice in a relatively young programme. Being blessed with small classes enabled me to actively involve students in the realization of this assessment. Throughout the semester we looked at dialogues and worked on a number of exercises (create a setting, and characters, write the first 500 words, submit a bibliography), which were discussed in class.[7] Reflecting on these, we designed the criteria for this assignment, and decided to add the requirement of a commentary to account for resources consulted.

That first year followed a pattern, which returned in later years. At first, students are apprehensive about this assignment, most of all because they do not know how to start, how to end, and how to introduce philosophical argument into this assignment. This uncertainty is experienced by some as a problem. Throughout the module, when they start working on their dialogue, students start to feel more confident and to enjoy the assignment. In the end, the dialogues are almost all very enjoyable to read. I often find myself laughing out loud. Second markers are rarely far off in marking, and external examiners are generally satisfied. The use of dialogue was commended in the recent validation.

Thus, the assessment can be considered successful according to quality assurance criteria such as student satisfaction, and peer review. It was not until I found myself preparing for a symposium on creativity in theology and philosophy in Glasgow that I realised how limited my understanding of the assessment was.[8] 'It works' seemed no longer sufficient. Yet, at the same time the symposium suggested a way to proceed, by underlining how the present project is imbedded in its own tradition.

2. Dialogue in the History of Philosophy

A first clarification of the notion of dialogue can be found when looking at the word's original meaning. The Greek dialogos literally means through-talking or through-thinking. The word more commonly denotes a conversation between two or more people. The literal meaning makes clear that a dialogue aims at further understanding of the topic under consideration by thinking it through. Ideas are questioned and challenged. People involved in a dialogue do not need to come to an agreement about their topic. Sometimes it may be more truthful to only acknowledge the complexity of a problem.[9] A dialogue, then, is not a debate. The objective of a debate is to convert others to your point of view, hence the frequent use of words like 'I agree', 'I disagree', and 'winning' or 'losing'. A debate, Plato would grumble, is about opinion. It is sophistry?not philosophy.

The difference between debate and philosophical dialogue is suggested by an important characteristic of a Platonic dialogue: elenchus. Elenchus literally means shame. Someone involved in a dialogue can feel shame when finding that his or her knowledge is not as certain as initially assumed. This feeling of shame is an essential part of the

dialogue. Unless the limitations of knowledge are recognised it is impossible to come to a deeper understanding.

Thus, what would be considered 'losing' in a debate, is a positive and necessary element of a philosophical dialogue. It is, of course, not always pleasant, as Plato's dialogues testify. In The Republic Thrasymachus responds very angrily to Socrates' constant questioning.[10] In the Euthyphro young Euthyphro does not know how quickly he should stop the conversation when his initial definition is discarded and they are about to start on the question 'what is piety' afresh.[11]

Dialogues have always been part of the history of philosophy. Plato is without doubt the most famous of all dialogue writers, but certainly not the only one. In antiquity he is joined by authors like Cicero, and Augustine; in modern times by René Descartes, George Berkeley, and David Hume, and even more recently one could include the plays by Jean-Paul Sartre as well as the Platonic and Xanthippic dialogues written by Iris Murdoch and Roger Scruton. Yet others, while not writing actual dialogues, have emphasised the importance of dialogue and proposed particular theories of dialogue (for instance Leonard Nelson, Martin Buber, and Hans-Georg Gadamer).

Dialogues from philosophy's history differ significantly. Plato, for instance, rarely appears in his dialogues. He is mentioned twice in the Apology, but notoriously absent in the Phaedo, the dialogue that depicts Socrates' death. Plato missed this conversation, because?it is explained?he is believed to be ill. Moreover, the accepted interpretation that the early dialogues depict the historical Socrates, and that in later dialogues Socrates is Plato's mouthpiece, is increasingly challenged. [13] The dialogues by Descartes, and Berkeley, in contrast, do feature clearly defined positions. For instance, the two characters in Berkeley's dialogues are Hylas (meaning matter) and Philonous (lover of mind). Nomen est omen?the latter is an obvious defender of Berkeley's position, the former the materialist who will be shown to be wrong.[14]

Yet, notwithstanding the omnipresence of dialogues in the past, they seem to be less prevalent today.[15] Apart from a few exceptions professional philosophers do not write dialogues. What is more, with the exception of the treatise, essay and commentary, the same applies to the various other genres one finds in the history of philosophy: autobiographies, novels, aphorisms, meditations, scholastic questiones, myth, etc. . Moreover, as Jonathan Lavery argues, given these various genres in the history of philosophy, there exists comparatively little research on philosophical genres.[16]

Part of the reason for this lack of interest in genre is that philosophy, especially in the English speaking world, takes its cue from science rather than art of literature. Form is considered of secondary importance, and comes 'logically and temporally' after the philosophical thought, as 'a container into which the distilled thought is poured, as if one were filling different glasses under a tap.'[17] What that means for the practice of philosophy is shown in the following example.

In a programme called 'Men of Ideas' made for the BBC in 1978, Bryan Magee engaged in conversation with various philosophers and thinkers. The conversations have also been published, Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy (1978). One of the thinkers was the British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch?out of fifteen the only female Man of Ideas.

Magee had invited Murdoch to talk about the relationship between philosophy and literature. However, in his introduction he puts a decisive spin on the conversation by stating: '[i]f a philosopher writes well, that's a bonus?it makes him more enticing to study, obviously, but it does nothing to make him a better philosopher.' He goes on to presume that Murdoch's literary and her philosophical writings are of a very different nature and that the sentences in her novels are 'opaque, in the sense that they are rich in connotation, allusion, ambiguity', while those in her philosophical writing are 'transparent ... saying only one thing at a time.'[18]

These are remarkable comments?not in the least because Murdoch can be understood to concur with these statements, and the interview has created considerable confusion in the interpretation of Murdoch's work.[19] Yet, at present, I am interested in the presuppositions behind Magee's initial declaration: '[i]f a philosopher writes well, that's

a bonus?it makes him more enticing to study, obviously, but it does nothing to make him a better philosopher.'Writing well may make for more enticing study, but not for better philosophy. Magee here affirms an understanding of the actual wording of any text as additional to the thought, rather than intrinsically related. A good writer merely makes reading more enticing, but this is of no philosophical consequence.

Indeed, philosophers should be immune to any such temptation for otherwise they may miss out on the 'great philosophers'. Mere mortals may be seduced by well written words, but the philosopher is trained to distil thought whatever the form.[20] Magee exemplifies a kind of thinking, for which the assessment of the written dialogue would be a mere gimmick. Even though the interview is more than thirty years old and things have changed since, its remains still linger. In what follows I argue against that kind of thinking. My argument begins by considering the module for which the assessment has been designed, 'Philosophy and Gender'. This module considers a number of thinkers for whom reading habits and form are of great importance.

3. Philosophy and Gender

The module 'Philosophy and Gender' considers classical texts on gender, ranging from Plato's Republic V on the education of women, and Christine de Pisan's City of the Ladies, to Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women, Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own, Simone De Beauvoir's Second Sex, Iris Marion Young's Throwing Like a Girl, belle hooks' Ain't I a Woman. In the first classes we consider the marginal position of most of these texts. Students will find that the library's classification system has placed most of these books not in the philosophy section, but under sociology or literature. Moreover, the authors rarely appear in other philosophy modules, or in textbooks. Or, if they do, it is usually at the very end, and under the heading of 'Other X'. Thus, Simone de Beauvoir sometimes appears in a list of most important thinkers, and Mary Wollstonecraft occasionally enters a textbook of modern philosophy.[21]

The marginal positions raise questions about the creation of the history of philosophy. By discussing Nancy Tuana's 'Reading Philosophy as a Woman' we reflect on prevailing reading habits.[22] Tuana explains what it is to read as a woman?for which one does not need to identify oneself as a woman in daily life. Her starting-point is the alienation a wo man can feel when reading philosophical texts, which often assume the reader to be a man (as well as often of a certain class, race, or even religion). This assumption becomes even more apparent when the topic of woman is addressed, which is often presented as Other.

In contrast to this tradition, and through a reading of the Biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, Tuana exemplifies and promotes a kind of reading which calls attention to the construction of woman and the feminine in a text. She considers what is said as well as what is not said, and what is not questioned. (E.g. the lack of any praise for courageous and faithful Susanna, who prefers death and dishonour over rape.) This kind of reading often goes against the grain of the author, and the tradition. Tuana's recommendations explicitly ask the reader to take 'control of the reading experience.'[23] Throughout the module it becomes clear that most of the authors find themselves in a tradition that barely allows them to express their argument and raise their questions, thus compelling them to reconsider forms of argument and of writing. Confronted by misogyny Christine de Pisan invokes the aid of ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice to help her build a City of Ladies. Yet, the best illustration is found in Woolf's A Room of One's Own. Having experienced the difference between men's and women's education in Oxbridge in the first chapter, the narrator visits the British Museum, to find some truth. For, she muses, if 'truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum ... where is truth?'[24] While waiting for her books, she regards the young man next to her who, being 'trained in research at Oxbridge has no doubt some method of shepherding his question past all distractions till it runs into his answer as a sheep runs into its pen.' She is sure the man's 'little grunts of satisfaction' indicate that he is 'extracting pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so.'[25] What is a woman without the proper training to do? Yet, in the course of the chapter a clever and funny play on the notion of truth, fact, and fiction unfolds, which leaves Woolf in the end with no facts, no truth about women and fiction. The woman that appears from the scholarly books ('an odd monster ... the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet') is a

product of the imagination.[26] The British Library has failed to provide facts. Had she been armed with a method she would have plenty. Now, she can provide her own and original argument in the story of Shakespeare's sister.

The texts and authors of this module thus challenge customary ways of reading and writing. They make the students reflect on the tradition of philosophy, its perceived habits, as well as on questions which can and cannot be raised. In what follows it will becomes clear that the assessment of the written dialogue further supports this reflection.[27]

4. Returning to Plato

All philosophy may be footnotes to Plato, as the worn quotation goes.[28] Yet, the exercise of imagining the explicit questioning of one person by another as exemplified in his dialogues has slowly disappeared from that same history. While the assessment of written dialogue does not aim to replicate or revive Platonic dialogues, it still takes its cue from an understanding of Plato's early dialogue?specifically from an understanding of Socrates as going around At hens questioning whoever wanted to talk to him.[29] It also seeks the help of creative writing.[30] In what follows it will become clear how creative writing exercises can be exercises in philosophical skills.

Socrates, especially in the earlier dialogues, can be understood to presume an understanding of education as examination of beliefs.[31] This is evinced by his famous 'The unexamined life is not worth living' and by his practice.[32] Unlike the sophists, Socrates does not teach a method, but questions whoever is willing to start a conversation with him. Learning happens, for Socrates, through students considering and questioning beliefs?more than by re presenting, however ably, those of others, or by creating one's own.

The conversations in the early Platonic dialogue illustrate these characteristics best. They all start from the compliance of the different participants. It is a discussion amongst friends.[33] Thus, in the Euthyphro the conversation begins when cocky young Euthyphro reassures Socrates that he is more than happy to explain what piety is, and thus help Socrates in his imminent trial. It ends when he is no longer interested in the conversation.[34] Throughout the conversation, Euthyphro is made to rethink his knowledge, until none of his answers is left standing. Socrates expresses eagerness to continue, but Euthyphro claims no longer to have time. Euthyphro may seem the teacher at the start, with definite knowledge to impart, yet the practised reader will distinguish the various jokes which warn against any such conclusion from the very beginning of the conversation.[35] The written dialogues allow students to take up such Socratic questioning in a number of ways. Indeed, some immediately grasp this opportunity to bring themselves into the conversation. Thus, one finds Socrates dragged into Starbucks, Wollstonecraft and Plato summoned in séance in a sorority, and Plato and Aristotle taking the 65 bus to the Benthall shopping centre in K ingston. Philosophers are thus subjected to all sorts of questioning by a group of friends, or a by-passer.

The majority of students need some encouragement to start such questioning. The initial uncertainty about the exercise often expresses itself in stilted beginnings: dialogues in unspecified places where thinkers exchange treatises. Of course, such dialogues have also been written in the history of philosophy. However, the assignment as designed for this module aims for not just any dialogue written by philosophers, but more specifically a more Socratic dialogue as described.

Creative writing exercises have proven to be helpful in taking away students' concerns. In one such exercise students are asked to first write down for five minutes what they dislike about the exercise, followed by five minutes of solutions.[36] The difficulties can be kept private or they can be shared. Next, students are asked to reconsider the place of the dialogue. Significantly, students who at first suggested some sort of heaven or some other nondescript background?for, it is argued, where else could Plato meet Aristotle and De Beauvoir??will now think of more specific sett ings, which suddenly allow them to express philosophical ideas, or introduce new questioners, thus encouraging unusual and Socratic questions. Other possible exercises could involve the creation of character, which students mention as an important factor in writing the dialogue. In all these, these solutions are the students', and the final result almost always surprises.

A more particular setting, and more developed characters allow for the acknowledgement of knowledge as incomplete, for thoughts to be left unfinished, and questions unanswered.37 Such incompleteness is promptly created by the entrance or exit of characters, or by interrupted conversation, but it is also a feature of reading the dialogue. When taking the dramatic aspects of a dialogue seriously, it becomes more difficult to distil a single meaning from it. The setting, the characters all suggest that the arguments are created within a specific context, where a reader takes part in the decision how the context questions the words. This aspect will not be appreciated by all. It certainly unnerved Plato?if the 'Seventh Letter' is considered authentic.

It is this element of the limitation of knowledge that distinguishes the better dialogues. Their authors do not mind the odd questions or directions a conversation can take, but indeed explore them. Thus, incidental remarks or entrances are not ignored, and the setting becomes as an additional conversation partner. Weaker dialogues, in contrast, are less likely to enter into unknown territory. They also show a greater need to agree to disagree at the end.

The surprising nature of the dialogues also affects marking. These dialogues reveal the enjoyment of the students writing them. They are funny, and as examiners agree, they often make you laugh out loud.38 The enjoyment is not just 'enticing', but indicates that the dialogues surprise. I am often impressed by the inventiveness of students. This surprise is important and, I have to confess, also unsettling. It challenges an understanding of assessment as measuring clearly defined learning outcomes, and of the lecturer as the omniscient impartial assessor.

5. Higher education today

It may be objected that this kind of project does not suit the present climate in Higher Education, with its ever growing numbers of students, and dwindling contact hours. The writing exercises, it could for instance be argued, would reduce the limited contact time even more. The assignment of the written dialogue gains by individual attention and generates highly individualised texts. Thus, the project does not tally with an understanding of university as a business, with the dominant terminology of transparency, and accountability.39 These objections are not without grounds. I assume that it would have been difficult to run this project in a larger university, or with considerably larger classes. Yet, this does not imply that the findings cannot be adopted for use in larger groups. Moreover, the highly individualised nature of the dialogues has the great advantage of making plagiarism almost impossible. Yet, most importantly, I dispute the claim that such writing exercises?time-consuming as they may be ?take time away from teaching philosophy.

This objection seems to be based on an understanding of philosophy, which?not unlike Magee's?distinguishes thinking from writing. If that distinction no longer holds, as I have argued, the writing exercises are (or can be) philosophy. The written dialogues as conversations with oneself exemplify what Plato considers 'thinking', 'the discourse that the mind carries on with itself about any subject it is considering.' 40 It is an exercise in 'difference and otherness' which, according to Hannah Arendt, is both the characteristic of the conversations we have with others as well as 'the very conditions for the existence of man's mental ego as well, for this ego actually only exists in duality.'41 The writing exercises then can encourage the kind of thinking central to philosophy.

Yet, this explanation does not answer the last and possibly major objection. This project, with its emphasis on the limitations of knowledge, the notion of aporia, and the unique dialogues, runs counter to the ever-increasing demand for transparency in higher education. What this demand means for the written dialogue can be explained by returning to the notion of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are now widespread in education?with an unintentional consequence that students are often more accustomed to them than their lecturers, and as a consequence often can have significantly different expectations from their lecturers.42 Learning outcomes are taken to identify the 'relatively specific and long-lasting change in the students who achieve it',43 and the major difficulty with them is at the same time their asset. Learning outcomes ask for clarity in teaching. They compel lecturers to reflect on their teaching habits, rather than continue in the customary fashion. What is the purpose of a class, and what would be the best way to reach that? This reflection should ideally expose implicit messages, which in the past were only understood by the initiated few. In that sense, they can be a tool for inclusion.

The difficulty arises when it is assumed that learning outcomes allow for complete clarity. This happens when they are 'hijacked by managers' and used as indicators for performance. It is also detectable in the learning attitude of students and even teachers, when learning outcomes are considered as exhaustive. Such 'commodification' of knowledge does not acknowledge that, as Trevor Hussey and Patrick Smith argue, no exhaustive description is ever possible.[44] Knowledge does not come in neatly defined units, because 'learning ... is part of a continuum.'[45] Moreover, what is learnt always depends on a student's existing knowledge and abilities. Agood teacher will recognise this and adjust his or her teaching when finding that students are not engaged, thus teaching an excellent class without meeting any of the objectives. Seminars provide here particularly appropriate examples, as they often improve by diverging from plan.[46] It is obvious that the written dialogue defies the commodification that is desired by managers, and increasingly present in students' and lecturers' understanding of education. This may make it more difficult to advocate the assessment, though the strong tie to tradition may help here. It may also complicate implementation in certain contexts, and opposition from managers, students or even lecturers.

This also means that it proposes an important contrast to prevailing thinking. This last claim is supported by Paul Standish's distinction between two different economies of learning: the economy of exchange and the economy of excess.[47] The former considers education in terms of exchange and treats learning as a commodity. The image of exchange ('You lend me ten pounds today, and I agree to pay it back tomorrow. I pay it back and the debt is settled') can be applied to both lecturers[48] and students.[49]

This kind of approach is favoured by managerial considerations, if not by all managers. Yet, of course, neither lecturer nor student may fully believe in this system or act accordingly. The lecturer may refute the idea that all learning can be fitted into precise learning outcomes, which will be tested in assignments?as it was not in most lecturers' education. Th e student may take out more books than necessarily needed for doing the coursework and passing the module. The lecturer and teacher thus surpass the economy of exchange to enter, what Standish calls, the economy of excess, in which 'the subject of study comes to be understood as deepening and expanding the more one pursues', rather than 'a body of knowledge or skills to be mastered'.[50]

Yet, Standish argues, there is a crucial difference between lecturer and student. The student who supposes that there is more to the course than learning outcomes is also still in the process of learning what education is about. The lecturer then gives the student mixed messages. Such mixed messages may keep a student from achieving well, i.e. from achieving well in the closed economy. Standish does not recommend complete abolishment of the closed economy. He does not provide reasons, but merely assumes that such abolishment would be 'absurd'.[51] The present political climate would certainly prove him right. I would suggest another reason why complete abolishment is not so much 'absurd' as wrong. For the economy of exchange is an important tool?however inadequate?to instigate a more dive rse student body. It is more difficult to differentiate by implicit messages to the initiated. Such implicit messages are often detrimental for the achievement of women, and other minorities within higher education.

Nevertheless, it is important to cultivate an understanding of an economy of excess, even though it may seem naïve or i mpractical to retain such a notion in the current educational climate. It can be argued that it is difficult if not impossible to retain such a notion of philosophy, when departments are primarily judged in terms of production: the number of students delivered, the number of publications produced. Yet, Standish provides some important suggestions to sustain an economy of excess, relating to the content of the curriculum, ways of teaching, assessment etc. It becomes, moreover, increasingly important to present the argument that the economy of excess is not just important in itself, but also from the perspective of the larger society or even the economy.[52]

Coda

Back to the kitchen in which it all started. Sayers' question, 'Why do you teach?', still lingers. I don't think Tallis Brown has answered it to anyone's satisfaction, but in a second attempt to offer his guests something to drink he has started cleaning some glasses. The conversation has moved to Sayers' understanding of learning, which the others consider too elitist. Whom is she trying to outdo, Woolf wonders? I am not sure yet how the conversation will end. I do think it is

one worth having.

Endnotes

- It is introduced as follows (Iris Murdoch, A Fairly Honourable Defeat (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) p. 68): 'It looked much as usual. The familiar group of empty beer bottles growing cobwebs. About twenty more unwashed milk bottles yellow with varying quantities of sour milk. A sagging wickerwork chair and two upright chairs with very slippery grey upholstered seats. The window, which gave onto a brick wall, was spotty with grime, admitting light but concealing the weather and the time of the day. The sink was piled with leaning towers of dirty dishes. The draining board was littered with empty tins and open pots of jam full of dead or dying wasps. A bin, crammed to overflowing, stood open to reveal a rotting coagulated mass of organic material covered with flies. The dresser was covered in a layer, about a foot high, of miscellaneous oddments: books, papers, string, letters, knives, scissors, elastic bands, blunt pencils, broken biros, empty ink bottles, empty cigarette packets and lumps of old hard stale cheese. The floor was not only filthy but greasy and sticky and made a sucking sound as Hilda lifted her feet.'

- See for instance Jo Brans' interview with Murdoch, 'Virtuous Dogs and a Unicorn: An Interview with Iris Murdoch', Dooley, Gillian, (ed.) From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch (University of South Carolina Press, 2003) pp. 155-166, see esp. 165-166.

- See for instance Murdoch, Iris, 'The Idea of Perfection', in Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997) pp. 299-336.

- See in particular Dorothy Sayers' Are Women Human? (Eerdmans, 1971), and Gaudy Night (New English Library, 1996), and Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas (Vintage, 2001).

- Sayers, Gaudy Night, p. 416.

- These included Plato, Republic V, and Roger Scruton, Xanthippic Dialogues (St. Augustine's Press, 1998).

- Glasgow, January 2009. Presentations by Heather Walton (Glasgow), Sue Yore and Richard Noakes (York St. John), Kei Miller (Glasgow), and Marije Altorf (St. Mary's University College).

- Cf. Kristof van Rossem,'Wat is een Socratisch gesprek?', http://www.socratischgesprek. be/teksten/wat_is_socrgesprnieuwe_tekst.pdf [last consulted 29 July 2010].

- Plato, Republic, 336aff.

- Plato, Euthyphro, 15e-16a.

- Plato, Phaedo, 59b.

- See for instance Charles H. Kahn's Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

- Berkeley, George, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (Hackett Publishing Company, 1979). Cf. Lavery, Jonathan, 'Philosophical Genres and Literary Forms: A Mildly Polemical Introduction', Poetics Today 28:2 (Summer 2007), pp. 171-189. See in particular p. 178.

- i.e. in their written form. Spoken dialogues are still part of contemporary practice, and should be so. Cf. Hutchinson, Phil and Loughlin, Michael, 'Why Teach Philosophy?', in Kenkmann, Andrea, (ed.) Teaching Philosophy (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 38-54, see especially p. 49. Cf. too MacDonald Ross, George, 'Electronic MCQs with no Right-or-Wrong Answers as a Means for Developing Dialogic Thinking', Discourse Vol. 8, no. 3 (2008).

- Lavery, 'Philosophical Genres and Literary Forms', p. 171; cf. p. 180.

- Jordan, Mark D.,. 'A Preface to the Study of Philosophical Genres', Philosophy and Rhetoric 14 (1981)pp. 199-211. The quote is taken from p. 202, as in Lavery p.

- 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee'. Murdoch, Existentialists and Mystics, pp. 3-30. See p. 3 and 4 in particular.

- See for a discussion of this Altorf, Marije, Iris Murdoch and the Art of Imagining (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 2-6.

- Cf. Bassett, L., 'Blind Spots and Deafness', in Deutscher, M., (ed.) Michèle Le Doeuff: Operative Philosophy and Imaginary Practice (Humanity Books, 2000), pp. 105-125. See especially her comments on the myth of the Sirens, used by Michèle Le Doeuff in 'Philosophy in the Larynx' (The Philosophical Imaginary, Continuum, 2002, pp. 129-137): 'The voice of the Sirens is perilous if you are open to its seduction, but if you are a philosopher, you are projected by rigor and thus able to be seduced without charm. On the other hand, if you are the philosopher, you are also able to utilize this seductive singing voice to charm the mere mortals who listen to you. They are not shipwrecked, either, because the philosopher retains control of reason and is not led and does not lead the mortals to madness.' (Bassett, 'Blind Spots and Deafness', p. 106).

- For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft is included in both Radcliffe, Elisabeth S., McCarty, Richard, Alhoff, Fritz and Vaidya, Anand Jayprakash, (eds.) Late Modern Philosophy: Essential Readings with Commentary (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) and Cottingham, John, (ed.) Western Philosophy: An Anthology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008). The latter includes one more text by a woman, the former does not. 22 Tuana, Nancy, Woman and the History of Philosophy (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1992), pp. 1-12. See also the work of Le Doeuff 'Preface', and 'Long Hair, Short Ideas', both in The Philosophical Imaginary.

- Tuana, Woman and the History of Philosophy, (ibid.) p. 7.

- Woolf, A Room of One's Own, (ibid.) p. 20.

- Woolf, A Room of One's Own, (ibid.) p. 22.

- Woolf, A Room of One's Own, (ibid.) p. 36.

- I thus start from an understanding of assessment as a tool to promote effective learning, and not just an instrument to measure what learning has taken place. Cf. Toohey, S., Designing Courses for Higher Education (Buckingham [England] ; Philadelphia, PA : Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press 1999) p. 180.

- Whitehead, A.N., Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), p. 63.

- This understanding is based on my readings of Plato's dialogues, and close to the interpretation of Leonard Nelson (see for instance Nelson, L., 'The Socratic method' in Saran, R. and Neiser, B. (eds.) Enquiring Minds: Socratic Dialogue in Education (Stoke on Trent, UK ; Sterling, USA : Trentham 2004), pp. 126-165) and Hannah Arendt (in particular The Life of the Mind (New York: Harcourt, 1978)). Other resources are mentioned in footnotes.

- It can be argued that 'the closest we come in the 21st century to Plato's dialogues are plays or transcripts of conversations.' Dorbolo, J., 'Philosophical Dialogue', http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl201/general/papers/philosophical_dialo gue.pdf. [Last consulted 29 July 2010]. Cf. too Nickolas Pappas on the relation between Plato's dialogues and plays. (Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Plato and the Republic (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 9-14).

- Cf. Arendt, The Life of the Mind: Thinking, (ibid.) p. 172ff.

- Plato, Apology 38a.

- Arendt, The Life of the Mind: Thinking, (ibid.) p. 189.

- Plato, Euthyphro 4e, 5c15e.

- See for instance Plato, Euthyphro 2cd, 4ab.

- This exercise is taken from Julia Cameron: The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life (London: Pan, 2000), p. 136-137.

- Cf. Nelson, 'The Socratic method', (ibid.) p. 148: 'To Socrates the test of whether a man loves wisdom is whether he welcomes his ignorance in order to attain better knowledge.'

- Cf. Kenkmann, A., 'Creativity and Enjoyment in Philosophy Teaching', Discourse vol. 7, no. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 207-220. See esp. pp. 214-215 on the importance of humour in teaching.

- On university as a business, see for instance Howie, Gillian, 'Teaching Philosophy in Context: Or Knowledge Does Not Keep Any Better Than Fish', esp. p. 7ff, and Hutchinson & Loughlin, 'Why Teach Philosophy?'. Both in Kenkmann, Teaching Philosophy (ibid.) pp. 5-22 and pp. 38-54 respectively.

- Plato, Theaetetus 189e. (The translation is by F.M. Cornford, and taken from Hamilton, E. and Cairns, H., (eds.) The Collected Dialogues of Plato (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996). Cf. Le Doeuff, Michèle, ' Women in dialogue and in solitude', Journal of Romance Studies, volume 5.2 (2005), p. 10. Apart from the passage from the Theaetetus, Doeuff mentions two other passages in Plato: Philebus 38c-39b and Sophist 263e.

- Arendt, (ibid.) p. 187.

- Cf. Crome, Keith, Farrar, Ruth and O'Connor, Patrick, 'What is Autonomous Learning?', Discourse vol. 9, no. 1 (Autumn 2009), pp. 111-126; 'students are nowadays prone to treat their tutors as repositories of information, whose job is to tell them what they need to know'. (p.121)

- Hussey, Trevor and Smith, Patrick, 'Learning Outcomes: a Conceptual Analysis', Teaching in Higher Education vol. 13.1 (2008), pp. 107-115. The quotation is taken from p. 108.

- Hussey & Smith, (ibid.) p. 107.

- Hussey & Smith, (ibid.) p. 109.

- Hussey & Smith, (ibid.) p. 110.

- Paul Standish, 'Towards an Economy of Higher Education', Critical Quarterly 47.1/2 (2005), pp. 53-71. **http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/2180/1/standish_Towards_an_economy_of_higher _education.pdf** [Last consulted 29 July 2010].

- 'I undertake to teach a particular class, which involves marking the essays the students write, being available to them during my 'office hours', attending the examiners' meeting, collecting course evaluation forms, and so on, and I do all this meticulously. At the end of the year my work is completed'. Standish, (ibid.)

- 'So too we might think of students, who enrol on a module, identify the assessment requirements, complete the necessary coursework assignments and revise sufficiently to answer the requisite numbers of questions in the examination, and satisfy expectations of attendance. They return their library books, and the course is completed, leaving them ready to proceed to the next module'. Standish, (ibid.)

- Standish, (ibid.)

- Standish, (ibid.)

- Cf. Hussey & Smith, 'Learning Outcomes', and Hammershøj, Lars Geer, 'Creativity as a Question of Bildung', Journal of Philosophy of Education 43.4 (2009), pp. 545-558.

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