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## Never Out of Style: On the Critique of Literary Devices in Political Philosophy

Charlie Kuppens and Catherine M. Robb

There is widespread acceptance amongst philosophers and literary critics that certain works of literary fiction should also be considered as works of philosophy. For instance, Martha Nussbaum makes the case that some works of fiction are also works of moral and political philosophy,<sup>1</sup> and there have been numerous studies analyzing the philosophical content of various examples of fictional prose.<sup>2</sup> However, there is still a prevalent distrust of non-fiction texts that make substantial use of stylistic literary

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Noël Carroll, "Danto's Comic Vision: Philosophical Method and Literary Style," *Philosophy and Literature* 39 (2015): 554–563; Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Rosa Slegers, *Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments in Vanity Fair: Lessons in Business Ethics from Becky Sharp* (New York: Springer, 2018); Theodore Ziolkowski, "Philosophers into Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 39 (2015): 271–284.

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devices, yet claim to be works of philosophy. More often than not, philosophy that is stylistically presented using literary techniques and forms, engaging in rhetoric and using poetic language, is criticized as ‘unphilosophical’. A prominent casualty of this critique is the writing of Jacques Derrida, which makes substantial use of literary devices such as metaphor, motif and foreshadowing. These texts have been condemned by critics as an ignorant and obscure ‘intellectual joke’, failing to provide the rigor and clarity required for philosophical discourse.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche has similarly been criticized for using aphorisms and poetic language to present his philosophical ideas. His work is accused of being esoteric, rhetorical, and lacking the systematic coherence needed for philosophical content.<sup>4</sup> Another example is Simone de Beauvoir, whose novels are widely accepted as ‘philosophical’, whilst her non-fiction writing on feminist ethics and political philosophy is critiqued as mere works of ‘literature’, due to their highly subjective narrative and unscientific literary features.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, we address the two main reasons why the non-fictional literary presentation of philosophical content is critiqued as ‘unphilosophical’, and by drawing on examples from ethical and political philosophy, we argue that both of these reasons are inadequate. First, some critics have claimed that philosophical content can be clearly distinguished from its stylistic presentation, to such an extent that the stylistic features of philosophical discourse do not have any philosophical relevance. According to this ‘neutral’ view, the use of literary style is ‘unphilosophical’ because it adds nothing but ornamental value to a text, and only

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Simon Critchley, “Derrida: The Reader,” *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2005): 553–566; Niall Gildea, *Jacques Derrida’s Cambridge Affair: Deconstruction, Philosophy and Institutionalality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020); S. R. Postrel, E. Feser, and J. R. Searle, “Reality Principles: An Interview with John R. Searle,” *Reason Magazine* (February 2000): 42–50.

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of this critique, see Adrian Del Caro, “Nietzsche’s Rhetoric on the Grounds of Philology and Hermeneutics,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2004): 101–122; Laurence Lampert, “Nietzsche, the History of Philosophy, and Esotericism,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 10 (1995): 36–49.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of this critique, see Karen Vintges, “The Second Sex and Philosophy,” *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, trans. Anne Lavelle (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 45–58.

serves to undermine the reader's understanding of the relevant philosophical content.

Second, other critics endorse the claim that philosophical content and its stylistic presentation are clearly distinguishable, but do not reach the conclusion that style is philosophically irrelevant. Instead, these critics claim that the style of a text interacts with and influences its philosophical content. According to this 'influence' view, the use of literary style can serve to enhance or undermine the understanding of philosophical content, and is only considered as 'unphilosophical' if it inappropriately obscures that content. The 'influence' view seems to underlie the acceptance of certain works of fiction as philosophical, with the literary form of a text enhancing an understanding of its philosophical content. However, in sections one and two below, we suggest that both the 'neutral' and 'influence' views are unconvincing, as they assume that style and content are clearly distinguishable, constituting separate functions within philosophical discourse.

Instead, we propose that in some cases the stylistic features of a text generate, change and become integrated into what counts as philosophical content. On this 'integrative' view, literary forms and techniques generate philosophical content by evoking in the reader an immersive and engaged reading experience, or what Gadamer calls an *Erlebnis*. As we will suggest, this integrative understanding of the relationship between style and content better explains why fiction is accepted as 'philosophical', especially in cases where the text aims to express philosophical ideas about seemingly ambiguous, contradictory and inexpressible phenomena. Moreover, in the final section of this paper, we propose that the integrative view also offers a defense of philosophical non-fiction in which literary devices are applied. We offer two case studies in moral and political philosophy—Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*, and Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*—demonstrating the way in which literary styles, forms and techniques generate philosophical content in both fiction and non-fiction works. As such, whilst some literary devices may be more or less appropriate for certain philosophical discourses, they can never be critiqued as 'unphilosophical'.

I

There seem to be two main reasons why the use of literary devices in philosophical discourse is criticized as ‘unphilosophical’. The first is the claim that the stylistic literary features of philosophical discourse do not have any philosophical relevance. On this view, philosophical content and literary style are assumed as separate, clearly delineated components of a text, with the philosophical relevance of that text found exclusively in its content. As such, the content of a philosophical work can be distilled irrespective of differences in the use of literary devices. For example, the difference between Derrida’s use of metaphor and Nietzsche’s use of aphorism would be considered irrelevant to the content of their philosophical ideas; the ‘how’ of the style or form would be unrelated to the ‘what’ of the philosophical content. As readers, we should be able to glean and understand the content of an author’s philosophical claims irrespective of their stylistic idiosyncrasies.<sup>6</sup>

In his analysis of philosophical style, Berel Lang has labelled this understanding of the relationship between style and content as the ‘neutral’ view, advocating for the claim that literary style adds nothing to the content of philosophical discourse.<sup>7</sup> Lang also lays out the reasons why this view may be attractive: claiming that philosophical content is unaltered by differences in style allows for a unified understanding of philosophical progress, made possible by the critique and comparison of philosophical works that differ greatly in their presentation form and literary style, and from different time periods and social contexts. If what counts as ‘philosophical’ about these works is only found in argumentative content, then differences in style and form can be overlooked as extraneous.

Accepting that stylistic features of a text are irrelevant to philosophical content, and that philosophical content alone gives rise to philosophical progress, the conclusion easily follows that stylistic features of a

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<sup>6</sup>For a statement of this view, see for example Serge Grigoriev, “Theory and Fiction: Rorty’s View of Philosophy as Literature,” *The European Legacy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2011): 13–26.

<sup>7</sup>Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 12–13.

philosophical text are to be criticized as ‘unphilosophical’. If the philosophical element of a text is found only in its content, then any stylistic features are considered as philosophically extraneous, ornamental, with the potential to distract from or even obscure the relevant philosophical content. Any philosopher that makes use of literary devices as part of their text is either critiqued as confusing readers and detracting them from the philosophical content, or even worse, not engaging in philosophy at all. As a result, the use of literary devices and stylistic features ought to be minimized to avoid this distraction and obscuration, and philosophy should instead be presented as clinically, directly and plainly as possible.<sup>8</sup> Many philosophical texts adopt this direct, scientific approach to the presentation of their philosophical ideas, whereby the style in which the text is written is intended to be as unobtrusive to the content of an argument as possible. The extreme presentation of this is seen in the use of ‘formal’ argumentation, simply stating premises and conclusions rather than using narrative prose. This style of plain and formal philosophical writing can be found in all fields of philosophy, not just in the writings of certain kinds of theoretical philosophy where the topics, such as logic, epistemology and philosophy of science, lend themselves to a more scientific approach. Importantly, clear and direct writing with the use of formal argumentation is often considered the norm amongst contemporary political and moral philosophers, such as Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen,<sup>9</sup> Shlomi Segal,<sup>10</sup> and Alex Voorhoeve.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum (op. cit., p. 8) attributes this view to John Locke. Iris Murdoch also claims that philosophy ought to be presented as plainly, unambiguously, coldly and directly as possible, in order to analyze general concepts. See her “Philosophy and Literature,” *Talking Philosophy*, ed. Bryan Magee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 229–250.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Kasper Lippert Rasmussen, “Affirmative Action, Historical Injustice, and the Concept of Beneficiaries,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 25, Number 1 (2017): 72–90. The formal argument presented on p. 73–74 is used to structure the narrative discussion that follows.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Shlomi Segal, *Equality and Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Alex Voorhoeve, ‘Scanlon on Substantive Responsibility’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Volume 16, No. 2 (2008): 184–200. When it comes to political philosophy, this use of ‘direct’ and ‘clear’ writing is particularly evident in many of the papers submitted to journals that learn towards what might be considered an ‘analytic’ style of philosophy, such as *Philosophical Studies*, *Utilitas*, or *The Journal of Political Philosophy*.

There is good reason, however, to reject the neutral account of the relationship between style and content. There are numerous examples of stylistic features of a text that contribute to and influence the way that philosophical content is understood.<sup>12</sup> For example, the direct and impersonal style that is often advocated by the neutral view can paradoxically be used as an illustration here. The use of formal argumentation, whereby the premises and conclusions of an argument are isolated without prose, is itself an example of stylistic presentation that does contribute to the way an argument is taken-up and understood by the reader. Those who hold the neutral view would admit that this formal style is less obtrusive, and allows the philosophical content to come to the foreground of the text, which is just to admit that the style of a philosophical text influences the understanding and force of its argumentative content. If the purpose of philosophical discourse is to construct, as clearly as possible, a valid and sound argument, then the understanding of this will be enhanced by a text that is characterized by clear argumentative structure, conceptual clarity, and direct, logical prose.

Another example of the way in which style influences the understanding of content is Plato's extensive use of dialogue, written as a conversation between several characters who hold differing views on a particular philosophical subject matter. The dialogue form serves to encourage the reader to understand and receive the argumentative force of the written material, which in turn enhances their susceptibility to accept the philosophical content as plausible or convincing. As Henry Yunis writes in his analysis of Plato's rhetoric in the *Republic*, the use of dialogue and the corresponding literary devices such as metaphor, narrative, and humor, serve to present arguments "in such a way that the reader would be most likely to be compelled by them to choose to live in a particular way".<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Plato's use of dialogue not only influences the reception of the philosophical claims being made, but is thought to be representative of the way that Plato understands the role of philosophy. The dialogue

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<sup>12</sup> Andreas Vrahimis gives a list of important examples in his "The 'Analytic'/'Continental' Divide and the Question of Philosophy's Relation to Literature," *Philosophy and Literature*, 43 (2019): 253–272.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Yunis, "The Protreptic Rhetoric of the *Republic*", *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 1–26.

form is considered as a “written imitation of the oral practice of philosophy”, which represents the “highest form of knowledge” as a conversational exchange based on question and answer.<sup>14</sup> As such, Plato’s conclusions are considered more philosophically convincing when read as a conversation between a “multiplicity of perspectives”, rather than as separately stated formal and direct arguments.<sup>15</sup>

Those who hold the neutral view might respond that even though style may influence the way in which argumentative content is understood as convincing, it is not this type of interpretative influence with which we ought to be concerned. Instead, when determining the influence that style has over philosophical content, we should be concerned only with the validity and soundness of the arguments; that is, whether the conclusion follows logically from the premises, and whether the premises and conclusions are in fact true. The claim would be that the style in which an argument is presented should not influence the validity and soundness of that argument. While it might be easier for the reader to ascertain and understand the argument when laid out in formal presentation, this does not change the vital aspects of the philosophical content. This could be said for Plato’s arguments developed through his use of dialogue—although it may be easier for the reader to follow the claims and be convinced by them when laid out as conversation, on the ‘neutral’ view, this mode of presentation would not change the validity or soundness of the claims themselves.

However, this response relies on an implausibly narrow understanding of philosophical content as merely the formal statement of potentially valid and sound arguments. Even if we accept that the purpose of philosophy is to present valid and sound arguments, what counts as philosophical content or part of philosophical discourse is not exhausted by formal argumentation. In order to prove that an argument is valid or sound, an author needs to convince or persuade the reader, explaining and critically examining the reasons why we ought to accept a premise or conclusion, as well as refute possible counterarguments and alternative

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<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Kahn, “The philosophical importance of the dialogue form for Plato”, *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle*, ed. Jakob L. Fink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 158–159.

<sup>15</sup> Kahn, *op. cit.*, p. 173.



conclusions. In which case, philosophical content includes the explanation, analysis and comparison of arguments, and, as the examples of formal argumentation and Plato's dialogues demonstrate, the success of this is influenced by the form and style of a text's presentation. As a result, by accepting that what counts as philosophical content is more than merely the statement of formally valid and sound arguments, it follows that literary style and form play at least some role in the content of philosophical texts.

The criticisms of the neutral account give rise to the view that style and form do influence philosophical content to some extent. This 'influence' view, or as Lang terms it, the 'interaction' view, holds that even though there is a distinction between philosophical content and the way that it is presented, the style and form of presentation interacts with, or influences, the content in a meaningful way.<sup>16</sup> For example, Plato's use of dialogue or Nietzsche's use of aphorism are not neutral decisions, but instead play an influential role in their texts. As such, a literary device can be more or less fitting for the content being presented, depending on the extent to which it enhances the understanding of the philosophical content, or is inappropriately undermining. Whether or not the choice of style or form benefits the intended philosophical content will depend on the extent to which it enhances or obscures the understanding of that content.

Martha Nussbaum seems to hold this interaction account of the relationship between style and content when she makes the claim that certain works of fiction should be considered as works of moral and political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> In order to justify this, Nussbaum acknowledges that fictional narrative allows for an exploration of complex, abstract and seemingly mysterious aspects of ethics, in a way that conventional philosophical texts cannot. In other words, in the same way that Plato's use of dialogue and narrative allows for a more convincing account of his philosophical claims, Nussbaum states that in some circumstances the form of fictional prose provides a more fitting way to grasp certain aspects of moral philosophy. Nussbaum and Plato both seem to imply that not only does

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<sup>16</sup> Lang, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> See the many examples given by Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge* (*op. cit.*).

literary style influence philosophical content in general, but that some uses of literary styles are more fitting and appropriate for certain types of philosophical discourse. In fact, Nussbaum makes it clear that the ambiguity and complexity of ethical life cannot be grasped by formal philosophical argumentation, and that to provide a comprehensive ethical and political philosophy we must engage with fictional narrative.

Given the fact that the 'influence' view accepts that the use of literary style influences the understanding of philosophical content, holders of this view can in some instances critique the use of literary style as 'unphilosophical'. This critique does not amount to a total rejection of literary devices being used in philosophical discourse, in the way that the neutral account suggests. Rather, the concern is with the kind of literary devices that are employed, as possibly undermining and obscuring the understanding of philosophical content. This means that the use of literary devices would be deemed as 'unphilosophical' only if they obscure the understanding of the philosophical argument or content in a particular work. For example, Plato's use of dialogue, Nietzsche's use of aphorism, or Derrida's use of symbolism, can be critiqued as lacking philosophical rigor or clarity, insofar as they are uncomplimentary to the understanding of their philosophical claims. On the other hand, if it is deemed that these literary devices enhance the philosophical content, then they are considered 'philosophical', as an influential part of the understanding of philosophical content.<sup>18</sup>

The 'neutral' and 'influence' accounts of the relationship between literary style and philosophical content provide the two reasons that are most often cited when critiquing certain works as 'unphilosophical'. On the 'neutral' account, literary techniques and forms are 'unphilosophical' and to be avoided, as they detract from content altogether. By contrast, on the 'influence' account, literary techniques and forms are 'unphilosophical' and to be avoided only if they do not enhance the understanding of content. As a result, it may be fitting to deem some works as 'unphilosophical' if their use of literary devices obscure the philosophical content. In

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<sup>18</sup>Lang seems to support of this criticism, stating that works of philosophy in which the means of stylistic presentation do not match or correlate with the philosophical purpose of the content are unlikely to succeed (op. cit., p. 19–20).

the next section, we argue against the ‘influence’ account insofar as it provides an implausible distinction between style and content. Instead, we propose an ‘integrative’ account of the relationship between style and content, and suggest that while different literary styles and forms may be more or less appropriate for certain philosophical inquiries, it is never applicable to critique the use of literary devices as ‘unphilosophical’.

## II

Both the ‘neutral’ and ‘influence’ accounts of the relationship between literary style and philosophical content are grounded in the assumption that style and content are clearly distinguishable, having distinct and separate functions in philosophical discourse. The use of ‘style’ constitutes the way in which a text is presented and only determines the literary value of the text, whilst ‘content’ constitutes the arguments and ideas being expressed in the text, determining its philosophical value. Even though the use of some literary styles or forms may be more or less fitting for understanding certain philosophical ideas and claims, these literary devices are not considered as changing or generating philosophical content in their own right.

It is not always that case, however, that literary devices and philosophical content can be sharply distinguished in the way that the ‘neutral’ and ‘influence’ views suggest. Stylistic features do not necessarily play an exclusively literary role in philosophical discourse, and philosophical content does not remain constant irrespective of the style used to express it. Instead, there are instances in which literary styles, forms and techniques play a more significant role in determining the philosophical value of a text, over and above offering an appropriate way for philosophical claims to be expressed and understood. We suggest that stylistic features of a text do not merely enhance or obscure the understanding of philosophical content, but can also generate, change, and become integrated into what counts as philosophical content. On this ‘integrative’ view, in some cases style and content are not separable aspects of a text, but integral to and part of what is deemed to be its philosophical content.

The integration of style and content is epitomized by the kinds of philosophical discourse that do not present formal arguments, clear definitions or conceptual analyses. Take for example Nussbaum's claim, as mentioned above, that works of fiction can often serve as works of moral and political philosophy. Nussbaum's argument for this is not merely that in some cases fiction is more appropriate to get across the content of the text's philosophical claims, but that the form of fiction is integral to and generates the content of the moral and political philosophy.<sup>19</sup> The form of narrative fiction allows readers to emotionally engage and immerse themselves into the world and lives of each fictional character. This means that attentive and engaged readers empathically construct for themselves an understanding of the possibilities and limitations for each character, and what counts as ethical in the described circumstances. The fictional text does not offer a direct statement of an already determined philosophical argument. Instead, the readers create the content of philosophy themselves, through the reading experience made possible by the text's form and literary techniques. In this way, the stylistic features of the text give rise to the philosophical content, generated by the reader's engagement with the text and in a way that would not have been possible using formal argumentation.

Simone de Beauvoir gives a similar account to Nussbaum, claiming that in some cases literary styles and forms generate philosophical content.<sup>20</sup> According to de Beauvoir, narrative fictional prose does not directly state to readers what should be construed as general and abstract knowledge, nor does it try to convince them of the validity and soundness of arguments. Instead, it offers an immersive fictional world in which readers can reflect on their own subjective human experience, and arrive at their own understanding of the world around them. This is particularly significant given that there are many ambiguous, opaque and

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<sup>19</sup> See Nussbaum *op cit.*, pp. 256, 260.

<sup>20</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," trans. Tricia Wall, *Philosophical Writings* (2004): 269–278, specifically p. 270; Simone de Beauvoir, "What Can Literature Do?" trans. Chris Fleming, *The Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2020): 17–27; J. D. Marshall, "Simone de Beauvoir: The Philosophy of Lived Experience," *Educational Theory*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (2006): 177–189, specifically p. 180.

contradictory experiences in life that are hard to express through direct prose and logically structured conceptual analyses. As such, the reader's immersive experience allows for the generation of philosophical content that would otherwise have been impossible through direct argumentation. With the use of literary devices, this 'inexpressible' philosophical content is created by the reader's engagement and experience of the text. In these cases, the use of fiction is not 'unphilosophical' but in fact vital to, and that which gives rise to, the 'philosophical' content of a text.

We suggest that Gadamer's theory of aesthetic experience can help to explain why literary devices generate philosophical content and knowledge, in the way that Nussbaum and de Beauvoir imply.<sup>21</sup> Gadamer distinguishes between two different kinds of experiences, those which he calls *Erfahrung*, and those that he deems to be an *Erlebnis*. For Gadamer, *Erfahrung* is the generalized and passive experience of everyday life, continuous without pause from the start of one's life until the end, and relies on rational interpretation and judgement to make sense of the content of that life. Within this *Erfahrung* are experiences that Gadamer calls *Erlebnis*, immersive and immediate impressions that precede our rational judgment and interpretation. This first-hand experience is received directly as an unprejudiced and lasting impression of an idea or insight.

Given this distinction, philosophical texts that make use of formal argumentation, logical and conceptual analyses, are experienced as an *Erfahrung*, requiring rational judgement to process the philosophical content explicated in the text. The content of this text is not dependent on the personal experience of the reader, but is generalizable and reproducible, presented in such a way to rationally convince any reader of the same ideas and conclusions. In this case, style and content are separable; the style or form of the text may aid or obscure understanding of the philosophical content, but it is not integral to, nor does it generate that content. By contrast, the style of a text generates philosophical content by evoking an *Erlebnis*, an immersive and immediate experience or impression. This is made possible by the fact that the philosophical content is not presented explicitly to the reader for their rational

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<sup>21</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), see pp. xiii–xiv, 53.

interpretation and judgement, but is received as a personal experience and impression that precedes rational judgement. In this way, readers create the philosophical content with the help of the reading experience facilitated by a text's literary devices. A text that evokes an *Erlebnis* in the reader is particularly significant for the kind of philosophical content that aims to explore the contradictory, ambiguous and chaotic aspects of life that may be deemed 'inexpressible' through logical argumentative prose and conceptual analysis.<sup>22</sup> This immersive reading experience also generates a "unique" source of knowledge, insofar as it yields beliefs that would not have been otherwise generated by any other source.<sup>23</sup> In this way, through the use of literary devices, the reader's experience of a text may not only give rise to the philosophical content of that text, but also result in distinct knowledge of philosophical content that may have been otherwise unattainable.

The use of *Erlebnis* is prevalent in fictional works that are widely accepted as being 'philosophical'. For example, in de Beauvoir's novel, *She Came to Stay*, the narrative follows a period in the life of the main character Françoise, who suffers severely from the ambivalence of solipsism.<sup>24</sup> Even though de Beauvoir does not explicitly mention solipsism, or give any direct statements about its phenomenology or ethical status, the text makes use of various literary devices to generate philosophical content as to the ambiguity and incoherence of a belief in, and experience of, solipsism. Using these literary devices is necessary to generate a first-hand experience of confusion in the reader, something that would not be possible using clearly structured and defined argumentation. One instance of this is de Beauvoir's use of narrative contradiction in the

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<sup>22</sup>The sphere of politics is one such example of this ambiguous and controversial aspect of social life. See Nussbaum's claims about the complexity of political life as a result of emotions such as love, empathy and sympathy, in her *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>23</sup>René van Woudenberg, "Reading as a Source of Knowledge," *Synthese* 198 (2021): 723–742.

<sup>24</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, *She Came to Stay*, trans. Yvonne Moysé & Roger Senhouse (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), hereafter referred to as *She Came to Stay*. For further analyses of the philosophical content in this novel see for example, Ashley King Scheu, "The Viability of the Philosophical Novel? The Case of Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*," *Hypatia*, 27:4 (2012): 791–809; Torin Moi, "The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir," *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2011): 125–140.

character development of the main character, describing Françoise's contradictory behaviors, thoughts and feelings about her solipsistic tendencies. Françoise believes that she is the only person to exist, and that the lives of others are not as vivid and real as her own. Yet at the same time Françoise behaves as if others have autonomous existence, feeling envy towards others for leading vibrant lives that indicate the world does not exclusively revolve around her.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the use of narrative contradiction generates ambiguity and confusion in the reader's experience of the main character's belief in solipsism.

This confusion is also generated by de Beauvoir's use of chronological fragmentation. Throughout the novel, the depiction of events suddenly cuts between past and present, and often Françoise will be engaging in pleasant conversation then unexpectedly start to reminisce about events from the past.<sup>26</sup> The disorientation that Françoise's experience gives rise to is not stated clearly or examined using logical arguments, but is left to be immediately discovered by the reader through their own experience of the narrative fragmentation. Similarly, it is not explicitly stated that Françoise doubts her solipsistic convictions, or that her solipsism gives rise to feeling excluded from the lives of others. Instead, de Beauvoir makes use of word choice and metaphor to highlight the abrupt and drastic oscillation between Françoise's confidence in solipsism and the practical incoherence of this belief. With the repetition and oscillation between positive adjectives to portray ease and confidence (such as "rosy", "cozy", "warm" and "light"), and negative adjectives to portray unease and discomfort (such as "dark", "heavy", "black" and "gloomy"), this creates a disorienting impression for the reader, experiencing the impression of Françoise's incoherent belief in solipsism.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the novel, de Beauvoir does not explicitly state to the reader any philosophical arguments about the plausibility of solipsism or the confusing phenomenology to which it gives rise. However, through the use of word choice, narrative contradiction and fragmentation, the reader experiences the disorientation and incoherence that comes with a

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<sup>25</sup> *She Came to Stay*, see for example the passage at pp. 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> *She Came to Stay*, see for example passages at pp. 28, 108, 155–6.

<sup>27</sup> *She Came to Stay*, see for example passages at pp. 8–9, 36–7, 79–80, 151–156.

belief in solipsism. These literary features enable an *Erlebnis*, the reader's immersive experience of the novel which is integral to the generation of its philosophical content. In the next section, we propose that this immersive and unique source of philosophical knowledge is not only apparent in works of fiction, but also in philosophical non-fiction that makes use of literary style and form.

### III

As we have discussed so far, the integration of literary style and philosophical content in works of fiction seems to be widely accepted, to the extent that evoking an immersive reading experience is considered as 'philosophical'. However, when it comes to philosophical works that make use of literary style, this experiential reading experience is often critiqued as 'unphilosophical'. Some of the most unfavorable critiques of non-fiction work as 'unphilosophical' are pointed towards Derrida, whose texts do not offer argumentative structure or conceptual analyses, but instead make substantial use of motif, allusion, and foreshadowing. As such, many philosophers have critiqued his works as 'unphilosophical', lacking clarity and rigor, and replacing truth with complex and incomprehensible nonsense.<sup>28</sup> For critics who hold the 'neutral' view of the relationship between style and content, Derrida's work is critiqued as 'unphilosophical' because its stylistic features are considered as philosophically irrelevant, detracting from the philosophical content or masking the fact that it does not engage with any philosophical content at all. For critics who hold the 'influence' view, Derrida's work is deemed as 'unphilosophical' because the literary style is considered as inappropriate for an understanding of the underlying philosophical content.

However, according to the 'integrative' account of the relationship between style and content, rather than obscuring the philosophical content of his work, the literary style that Derrida employs can be

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<sup>28</sup>See for example Critchley pp. 559–562; John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 36; John Coker, "Jacques Derrida", *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 265.



understood as serving to generate philosophical content. This becomes apparent when noting the kind of philosophical content that Derrida aims to present in his texts. As Derrida has explained, one of his main theoretical commitments is an attempt to reject scientific ‘truth’ and its assumption that words or concepts have a fixed and determinate meaning. Derrida’s so-called method or style of deconstruction aims to overturn fixed definitions and understandings of concepts, exposing the multiplicity of meaning and the very impossibility of definitive and rational discourse.<sup>29</sup> In this way, Derrida’s texts aim to express the ‘inexpressible’, finding a way to present through language the ambiguous, chaotic and contradictory indeterminacy of language itself. If Derrida were to present his critique of ‘scientific’ philosophy using a ‘scientific’ style consisting in formal arguments and analyses, his critique would become a paradoxical performative contradiction. And so, rather than impossibly presenting a logical argument to convince the reader of his theoretical commitments, Derrida purposefully obscures and avoids explicit statements of fixed meaning and interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

The way in which Derrida’s literary style gives rise to philosophical content is similar to the way in which de Beauvoir elicits an immersive reading experience in her novel *She Came to Stay*.<sup>31</sup> In his text, *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida also makes use of narrative contradiction, fragmentation and word choice to explore the way in which decision-making gives rise to the anxiety, confusion and disorientation of ‘undecidability’.<sup>32</sup> According to Derrida, the moment of making a ‘just’ decision always comes with an anxious realization of an aporia: we cannot know whether our choice will be the right one. If we are truly making a choice, rather than relying on and blindly following a predetermined rule or principle, then the possible outcomes of our choices are indeterminate, unpredictable and uncertain. As a result, when making a decision the

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<sup>29</sup> See Caputo op. cit., pp. 31–32.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Rorty, “Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1978), p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Note that in both texts the original language is French. For the purposes of this chapter we put aside the many issues involved in the textual analysis of a translation.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005). Hereafter referred to as *The Politics of Friendship*.

decision-maker will be filled with a moment of anxiety, uncertainty and hesitation.<sup>33</sup> Derrida, however, cannot explicitly or directly state this realization to the reader in the form of clearly structured argumentative logic; this would be to offer a distinct conceptual analysis, which is something that Derrida denies is possible. Instead, as we suggest, Derrida uses various stylistic features to evoke an *Erlebnis* and enable readers to generate philosophical content through their experience of reading.

For example, in order to evoke the experience of anxiety and uncertainty that comes with just decision-making, in *The Politics of Friendship* Derrida often juxtaposes two contradictory terms, suggesting a simultaneity of the relationship between pairs of dialectical opposites such as possibility and impossibility, friend and enemy, life and death, singular and plural.<sup>34</sup> The anxiety that comes with decision-making can also be elicited from Derrida's use of symbolism, with the figures of ghosts and specters, and the image of haunting memories used to evoke a sense of the worry, doubt and regret that follows us when we finally do make a decision, closing off all other possible choices.<sup>35</sup> In a similar way to de Beauvoir, Derrida also invokes a sense of disorientation in the reader through the use of grammar, fragmentation and an ambiguous chronology, to generate curious shifts in temporality. For instance, Derrida frequently oscillates between the past, present and future tenses, using brackets and dashes to suspend and destabilize certain fragments of text from the temporal flow of the prose, and hinting at ideas or authors that will only be discussed in later parts of the text.<sup>36</sup>

Furthermore, there are moments in the text where Derrida seems to purposefully destabilize all fixed meaning and confidence in the concepts or words being discussed. For example, in the 'Foreword' to the text, Derrida questions the very nature of the text itself, calling it all of an "essay", "preface", "foreword", "book" and "introduction", casting doubt

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<sup>33</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971–2001*, trans. & ed., Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 147–198.

<sup>34</sup>*The Politics of Friendship*, see for example passages at pp. 3–5, 29, 35–36, 66, 72, 95, 123.

<sup>35</sup>*The Politics of Friendship*, see for example passages at pp. 15, 69–70, 116–117, 132.

<sup>36</sup>*The Politics of Friendship*, see for example passages at pp. 5, 8–10, 19, 42–33, 77–80, 83, 124, 133, 244.

as to what it is being read and how it should be interpreted.<sup>37</sup> By making ambiguous the very form of the text, Derrida gives rise to a lack of confidence, confusion and disorientation in the reader, something that could not be expressed through clear and logically presented arguments. As such, the literary style, form and techniques that Derrida utilizes are integral to and generate the philosophical content of the text, creating the disorientation, contradiction and confusion that comes with the undecidability of decision-making in the name of justice.

## IV

As the two case studies of Simone de Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay*, and Jacques Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* have shown, the use of literary style need not be critiqued as irrelevant or neutral to philosophical content, nor as inappropriate or unfitting for the philosophical content. Instead, the use of literary style and form is integral to and generates the philosophical content in ways that would not have otherwise been possible. In both these fiction and non-fiction examples, the philosophical content was 'inexpressible' through the use of rational and clear argumentative structure, but depended on an *Erlebnis*, an immersive subjective experience of disorientation, confusion and uncertainty. This means that the literary devices used by the authors did not merely interact with or influence the philosophical content, but was necessary to create it in the first place, through the experience and impression of the reader. This is equally the case for fiction and non-fiction works, which both make use of literary devices to generate philosophical content—in these specific examples, philosophical content regarding the nature and experience of solipsism and just decision-making. When critiquing the relationship between literary style and philosophical content in a particular text, the 'integrative' account considers the success of the way in which the stylistic features of the text enable the generation of philosophical content. As such, the use of a style or literary device is never 'unphilosophical', but rather more or less appropriate for the genesis of philosophical content.

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<sup>37</sup> *The Politics of Friendship*, see p. vii.

We propose that the ‘integrative’ view of style and content better accommodates for already existing claims about the philosophical content of fiction works, and it also highlights why the critique of non-fiction texts as ‘unphilosophical’ is unconvincing. Rather than brandishing a work as ‘unphilosophical’, critics ought to focus on the extent to which the literary devices generate philosophical content that would otherwise have been unattainable through formal argumentation or logical conceptual analysis. Acknowledging this does not put into question what philosophy is, the nature of philosophical progress, or what counts as philosophical discourse, but it does provide a more extensive framework for determining the sources of philosophical content and how it is generated.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>The authors would like to thank Martine Prange and Rutger Soffers for their valuable comments and feedback on earlier versions of this chapter.