

WHAT IS AN ESSAY? THOUGHTS ON THE ESSAY AS THE FORM OF PHILOSOPHICAL EXPRESSION AT THE INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OLYMPIAD (IPO)

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Abstract

The author examines the essay as the form of philosophical writing practiced in the context of the International Philosophy Olympiad. He questions the idea that the essay would be an open, smooth, and neutral form in view of the many expectations of the jury. He argues that these expectations as to what constitutes a good essay, sometimes uncertain, ambiguous, or even contradictory, are not yet sufficiently explicit.

Keywords: essay, evaluation, Montaigne, quotation, questioning, interpretational work

The International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO) is an international philosophy competition. It is an essay contest between high school students whose work is evaluated by a jury of philosophy teachers from countries worldwide. The best essays are awarded prizes and published on the home page of the official IPO website.¹

The essay is a smooth, open, and consensual form. Under the term “essay” no particular structure is imposed *a priori* on the contestants. The essay can be considered the touchstone of written expression in philosophy, which would explain the consensus it enjoys as a form of expression particularly appropriate for an international competition. The consensus around the essay stems from the participants’ common wish, whatever their country, to adopt a single form of discourse as a common denominator, giving no advantage to this or that national form of teaching. We believe in the neutrality of the essay as a form. As a fluid form of expression, perhaps even as a non-form, the essay leaves aside the cultural and national asperities of philosophical writing. It is therefore also an open form, capable of accommodating a wide variety of productions. The first issue at stake in these reflections is *whether this hypothesis concerning the essay corresponds to reality*.

The second issue in this paper is to clarify *what the jury implicitly expects from a good essay*.² Indeed, not everything that presents itself as an essay can be accepted, formally, as a good essay. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that there is a hidden nature or dynamic to

¹ URL: <http://www.philosophy-olympiad.org/>

² This paper was discussed during the e-IPO 2020 with other jury members. My special thanks go to my colleagues Christine, Frosina, Mitieli, Attila, Gadi, Jonas, Marjan, Panagiotis and Thor for their comments.



essays, which we will try to uncover. What do we mean by essay? We cannot rely solely on any intuition we might have regarding the term, because it could include preconceived ideas which vary from country to country. Shall we face up to the Socratic demand for a definition, so as to determine precisely what we expect from students: “How can I know the qualities of something I don’t know?” asks Socrates in the *Meno* (71b).

Despite its apparent neutrality, the essay has a long and rich tradition. The term was coined by Michel de Montaigne in the 16th century as a test or an attempt at personal judgment. Etymologically, the term refers to an attempt or a weight (in Latin, *exagium*). Montaigne evaluates the weight of ideas or opinions, with the aim of forming a personal judgment from other judgments, mainly of authors, whose authority appears to him to be contingent, variable, and susceptible to contrary assessments. The form of the essay implies that the personal judgment adopts the position of an arbiter, but not of an omniscient arbiter. The reflections proposed by the author of the *Essays* do not have the value of a statement of universal knowledge, quite the contrary. Montaigne claims a subjective truth in this matter: “These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself”³, and points out the limits of this exercise, perhaps out of false modesty: “As for the natural faculties that are in me, of which this book is the essay, I felt them bending under the load. My conceptions and my judgement move only by groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering; and when I have gone ahead as far as I can, still I am not at all satisfied”⁴. Writing an essay certainly retains something of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays*. It has the sense of exercising a thinking subjectivity, in contrast to a presentation of knowledge based on the student’s memory. Francis Bacon’s essays, published in 1597, are the first works in English that describe themselves as “essays”. The English tradition is particularly rich, with authors such as John Locke, David Hume, or, closer to us, Bertrand Russell. Thus, the essay has behind it a dense literary and philosophical tradition, but also a significant tradition of teaching. Under the appearance of a smooth and neutral form, the essay has a historical depth that we should explore further. This is the first criticism, in the positive sense of the term, that I would like to make: *In the context of IPOs and the practice of essay writing, it is very likely that the less we are aware of a particular tradition, the more we are conditioned by it.*

Do we have a definition of the essay? With respect to the IPO, no particular form of writing is imposed on the contestants. We could consider the essay as being to philosophical expression what the good savage is to civilized man, or what man in Rousseau’s state of nature could hypothetically be in relation to us. The essay could be seen as representing the possibility of thought free from any pre-established rule, of spontaneity without any particular hindrance. No imposed division, no *a priori* guidance of thought, no obligatory reference or expected author. The essay offers a great deal of formal freedom to the students, who are at liberty to determine a course of action for themselves. This is what the *IPO Guide for Contestants* emphasizes: “A philosophical essay should be an exploratory device, something that starts with a question and takes you on a path towards an answer” (Murphy 2017: 53).⁵ This is a normative (“should be”)

³ *Essays*, II, 10, p. 410a. The reference to the *Essays* is given in the French edition by Pierre Villey at the Presses Universitaires de France (1924); here translated by Donald Frame (1943).

⁴ *Essays*, I, 26, p. 130a.

⁵ A note indicates that this description of the essay is borrowed from a professor of philosophy at a Canadian


but open-ended description. There will be a starting point at least (“starts with a question”), but not necessarily an end point (“towards an answer”), as in Plato’s aporetic dialogues.

But is the essay truly a free form? The IPO Guide defines the essay as an “exploratory device” of thought. I googled (!) for an image to find out what this expression means in English, and I came across a NASA probe vehicle. The image of the “exploratory device” entails a number of expectations: the essay must demonstrate the student’s curiosity and desire for intellectual conquest; as a “device”, the essay essentially becomes a technical plan, whose genius consists in inventing tools, weapons, and machines in order to ensure the success of the author’s desire for conquest; the “path” proposed by the student is an image that refers in reality to a “device” aimed at exploring a territory, etc. Not everyone will agree with this implicit vision of philosophy as the expression – among others – of a technical and conquering civilization. We need to continue working on a definition.

What are the main expectations of a good essay? The absence of an imposed form belies underlying norms, a certain number of expectations, and unfortunately, serious ambiguities, which I will now try to unveil. At the IPO in Rome in 2019, the IPO jury received the compendium of evaluation criteria written by Floris Velema in 2017. The “rubric” sets out the five official evaluation criteria in a concise and graduated manner. It provides valuable guidance for the members of the jury.

Essay number:

Name of reviewer:



International
Philosophy
Olympiad

	0	0,5	1	1,5	2
Relevance to the topic	The essay has no relevance at all to the chosen theme.	The essay has some relevance to the chosen theme.	The essay has sufficient relevance to the chosen theme.	The essay has more than sufficient relevance to the chosen theme.	The essay is fully in line with the chosen theme.
Philosophical understanding of the topic	The essay shows no philosophical understanding.	The essay contains some philosophical references without any clear understanding of the topic.	The essay contains some philosophical references and sufficient understanding of the topic.	The essay shows a philosophical understanding of thinkers, concepts, theory, etc., but is at times inconsistent or incomplete.	The essay shows insight and competence, as well as a clear understanding of thinkers, concepts, theory, etc.
Persuasive power of argumentation	The essay lacks argumentative force, analysis and persuasiveness.	The essay contains some analysis, but has limited argumentative force and persuasiveness.	The essay contains some analysis, has argumentative force and is to some degree persuasive, but not always consistent.	The essay contains good philosophical analysis and has argumentative force, but is not entirely convincing.	The essay contains good philosophical analysis, has argumentative force and has the power to convince.
Coherence	The essay lacks structure.	The essay has limited structure.	The essay has sufficient structure, but is hard to read.	The essay has a clear structure, including subheadings, summaries, etc.	The essay offers clear reading, is accessible, well-structured and arranged with good care.
Originality	The essay voices no original viewpoint.	The essay attempts, but fails to present an original viewpoint.	The essay shows signs of originality, but does not present itself as such.	The essay shows more than sufficient character, color and personality.	The essay shows character, is colorful and expresses personality.

Fig. 1. Rubric by Floris Velema

The criteria are clear and concise. What are the corresponding expectations? Let us start with the first criterion “relevance to the topic”. This criterion implies that the student has understood the quotation. On this basis, the student must identify a thesis and develop an argument. The first criterion suddenly ceases to be clear: In relation to relevance, does the criterion refer to the analysis of the quotation, the quotation being the touchstone of the relevance of the essay as a whole, or the development of an argument from a thesis, which has been extracted from the quotation? “The essay is fully in line with the chosen theme,” one also reads with regard to the first criterion. It is not clear whether the student should give priority to an analysis of the quotation, or to the discussion of a thesis that he or she has established from the quotation. The jury’s differences of interpretation of the first criterion explain differences in expectations. How to judge the relevance of the argumentation proposed by the student? Should one continue to refer to the quotation, or should one look only at the thesis extracted from it?

It is not clear whether it is the student’s task to understand, interpret and discuss the quotation’s author’s thought, or to use the quotation to discuss a thesis or a question the student has formulated. In other words, how much value can and should be placed on accuracy of interpretation and fidelity to the quotation? *Is the quotation only a pretext, the real starting point of the essay being the question formulated by the student?*⁶ Another ambiguity arises: *Is the true starting point of the essay the question, or is it a thesis that the student formulates in response to the question and submits for examination in the argument?* At the IPO 2019 in Rome, on the jury of which I was a member, a student spotted a question that was probably familiar to him in Donna Haraway’s quotation,⁷ and then returned to an argued course that he or she had probably learned. The members of my jury gave a low mark to this essay, which was primarily based on the recitation of knowledge. However, one member of the jury found the essay admirable from the perspective of the philosophical culture he was referring to. This is a sign of ambiguity about what can be expected of a good essay. If one considers that the essay is a discussion of a thesis resulting from the proposed quotation, based on a question chosen by the student contestant, why would this essay not receive an excellent grade?

“A philosophical essay [...] starts with a question”, says the IPO Guide (Murphy 2017: 53). However, the contestant is *confronted with a quotation and not with a question*, which somewhat blurs the object of the initial consensus. As things stand, the students must develop for themselves the question that they will attempt to answer from the quotation. Does this imply that they must be able to disentangle and choose between possible meanings? What degree of latitude do we leave the students to choose the question they will try to answer, as in the previous concrete case? Indeed, the students enjoy considerable latitude to choose an approach in relation to the topic and how they will develop their arguments.⁸

⁶ On this issue, I personally share the opinion expressed by Gadi Prudovski and Marjan Šimenc at the e-IPO 2020 conference: if the quotation is treated merely as a trigger, that can be seen as a form of disrespect. It should be a kind of “conversation” (Gadi) or “dialogue” (Marjan) with the author.

⁷ Topic IV: “All readings are also mis-readings, re-readings, partial readings, imposed readings, and imagined readings of a text that is originally and finally never simply there. Just as the world is originally fallen apart, the text is always already enmeshed in contending practices and hopes.” Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York (NY), Routledge, 1991, p. 123-124.

⁸ “This freedom is legitimate”, recalled Jonas Pfister during the e-IPO, “insofar as it is compatible with the first

This is all very well, but it is not unreasonable to consider that there is also something arbitrary about this approach. The urgency of a four-hour essay is not conducive to a thorough examination of the quotation. Moreover, since each quotation may give rise to a good handful of questions – a “swarm”, as Socrates would say⁹ – it gives an idea of the range of possibilities facing the students and the jury. If the hypothesis is correct, then we should see each year that the essays are totally different from one another and praise this as a magnificent example of the extreme diversity of human thought. But we can also worry a little about this: the amplitude between two essays is so great that it would seem rather vain to try to compare them with each other. The evaluation of the essays could then be discouraging. I cannot make a general statement, as France’s participation in the IPO is very recent. However, the hypothesis that I am propounding corresponds to reality, as experienced by the French jury since 2018. To sum up: *the place of the analysis of the quotation in the essay, as well as the link between the quotation and the question formulated by the student, are the first two important sources of ambiguity.*

Do good essays consist in discussing theses that the students have posed themselves? The IPO Guide endorses this interpretation: a good essay is an essay written “in defense” of a thesis extracted from the quotation. “In its essence, a philosophical essay is a well-reasoned defense of a thesis” (Murphy 2017: 57).¹⁰ However, the wording of this expectation may give rise to a legitimate *caveat*. If the jury assesses the relevance of the essay by reference to the quotation, it will appreciate the students’ work through their concern for a thorough understanding of the author’s thought and the link between it and the question formulated. This is what the second criterion of the “rubric” specifies: “Philosophical Understanding of the Topic.” We can then ask ourselves if the thesis maintains a rather distant relationship with the quotation but is well defended, will the resulting essay be better than another essay mainly concerned with interpreting the quotation correctly, showing that several interpretations and questions are possible, trying to establish their respective strength and determining which one should be preferred? Personally, I would give a better mark to the essay that had taken the second path, notwithstanding the fact that it did not correspond to the traditional idea of the essay as an argument deployed on the basis of a thesis. To sum up: *the place of the thesis discussed by the student constitutes a third source of ambiguity.*

The essay does not theoretically have a predetermined shape. Is it then necessary to entrust the students with the elaboration of the form of their essays? This is what the guide suggests: “The next step is to decide on a clear structure for your essay” (Murphy 2017: 56). It would seem as though it were up to each contestant to decide what form she or he will give to the essay. However, this advice does not seem realistic. Will a contestant be able in four hours to invent such a formal structure by him or herself? Or is this advice not somewhat hypocritical, as some students already have an idea of the correct form of the essay in mind? Isn’t the idea that the form of the essay could be invented, decided or chosen by the students, part of a myth of an absolute origin of thought? In reality, our pupils must have *learned how to write an essay*

criterion of relevance.”

⁹ Plato, *Meno*, 72a: “I seem to be in great luck, Meno: while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you to have a whole swarm of them.”

¹⁰ Murphy refers to Peter Horban’s *Writing a Philosophy Paper*.

in order to be able to write a *good* essay.¹¹ This is a pedagogical mission that goes far beyond the framework of the IPO. The essay does not impose any *a priori* form but contains many expectations. *Let us avoid leading the contestants to believe that the essay has an entirely free form, which does not need to be learned and practised.* The essay is a complex form of philosophical expression, codified by the expectations of a jury, involving an effort of appropriation on the part of the contestants. This creates inequalities between those who have been trained in essay practice and the others who have not. There is no alternative to coaching students to write essays. In that respect, as Gadi Prudovski pointed out at e-IPO 2020, the essay is always an intellectual counter-education.¹²

It would probably be futile to hope to fix once and for all the method of writing and evaluating essays in a list of perfectly coherent criteria. However, not to pursue a methodological reflection on the essay would be to entrust oneself to the arbitrariness of one another's assessments and to the influence of the different national teaching traditions. Hoping in the end that personal and/or national arbitrariness might be compensated mechanically, or calculated by virtue of an algorithm, would be tantamount to renouncing the work of reason – the last straw for philosophy teachers! A recommendation that I would like to make at the end of these thoughts is the following: *as members of the IPO jury, we must continue to make more explicit the expectations of a good essay.* Indeed, this work of clarification is far from over. It has its place *a priori*, before the competition, but also *a posteriori* in the exchanges between members of the jury during the evaluation process.

Let us summarise the difficulty: Under the appearance of a smooth, neutral, and open form, the essay hides an ideal scenario that remains marked by deep ambiguities. These can give rise to legitimate hesitations among students, and to divergent assessments among jury members. Ideally, the students analyse the quotation and derive a question from it; then, having identified a thesis related to the question, they submit it to examination in the form of an argument. An objection to this ideal scenario is that it is precisely an ideal and that in fact the jury will tolerate deviations, perhaps even see in them marks of originality. However, on the one hand, I would like to recall that the essay seems to be a highly standardised form of philosophical expression. The information about this ideal form of the essay must be fairly shared – which it clearly is in the context of IPO.¹³ On the other hand, the formal ideal of the essay remains a source of confusion for both students and jury members because of profound ambiguities.

In conclusion, I will recall the main ambiguities concerning the form of the IPO essay at this stage, ambiguities that we can hope to resolve in the future:

(1) Analysing the quotation: Is this interpretational work of value in itself? Is the

¹¹ During the e-IPO 2020, Thor Steinar Grødal outlined the principles of essay training, which is often absent from national curricula. The student is led to ask the following questions: What is the problem? What is the background to the problem? What are the pros and cons? Can I defend a position?

¹² “With the essay, you can’t cheat: you have to put yourself in the situation of being an adult and no longer a child”, Gadi Prudovsky pointed out. “The essay is yours, you are in the driver’s seat”. From this point of view, the essay can be considered as a legacy of the ideal of the Enlightenment, e.g. in Kant (“sapere aude”).

¹³ The information provided by the IPO about the essay is accessible: formal expectations of the essay are explicitly presented in the IPO Guide, available online and downloadable; the current evaluation criteria are defined in the “regulations” on the IPO website; *last but not least*, the award-winning essays are fully available on the website.

quotation, at best, a starting point, or, at worst, a mere pretext for an argument? One way to limit ambiguities would be to formulate the topics in the form of questions. However, confrontation with an author's thought does have value in itself.

- (2) **Wording of the question: How much value do we place on it?** Can the student extract the question from the quotation without displaying a minimum of arbitrariness, given that any quotation gives rise to a wide range of interpretations? How much time should the student spend formulating the question from the quotation? What is then the expected style of questioning: Is it to deepen the questioning throughout the essay? Or is it to ask the question, as one would immerse oneself in a cold bath before coming out of it reinvigorated, as Nietzsche once said,¹⁴ to move on to more serious things?
- (3) **Position of the thesis: Is it related to the question or to the quotation?** Is it a question of first discussing the appropriateness of the thesis, the thesis being the basis of the jury's assessment? Or, without falling into any fetishism of the thesis, of giving oneself the freedom to examine other theoretical possibilities related to the quotation?

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¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, book V, § 381: "For I approach deep problems like cold bath: quickly into them and quickly out again."