

## IPO ESSAY: FAIRNESS, PLURALITY, AND FREEDOM

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### Abstract

The article examines the status of the IPO essay, starting from the thesis that the essay is a neutral form that does not favour or disadvantage any particular group of students and that allows everyone complete freedom of writing. The discussion yields two findings: firstly, the essay is not a neutral form, since students are required to adhere to specific rules in their writing. The basic regulations governing the essay are contained in the IPO Statute in the form of criteria of evaluation. Further provisions are laid down in the IPO Essay Guide. The Guide specifies in greater detail what is expected of students in their essay writing; however, these specifications seem to be one-dimensional. The article seeks to propose a more complex understanding of the philosophical essay based on various essay writing guides which focus on the essay as representing not merely a form of knowledge examination, but also a school of thought and a realm of freedom. Thus, the second conclusion arising from the article is the thesis that the philosophical essay is by essence linked to the freedom of the subject; however, this is not a complete freedom, but one that should be regarded as relating to philosophical socialisation and qualification.

**Key words:** IPO, essay, freedom, rules, emancipation

The article by Marc Foglia in this issue highlights key issues and presents important considerations relating to the status of the IPO essay, thereby inviting anyone interested in the topic to continue with the discussion. This article should be seen as a response to that invitation, even if it only focuses on a part of the issues raised in Foglia's article.

First of all, let us turn the spotlight on the role of the IPO. The IPO is not merely an international essay writing contest for secondary school students. Even though, it may be an achievement in itself to see philosophy elevated to an Olympic discipline in the modern world, the IPO is in fact much more than a competition. It has a positive impact on the reputation of philosophy in various education systems and contributes to improving the quality of teaching philosophy. The IPO is also an opportunity for students and philosophy teachers from around the globe to come together by virtue of philosophy and for the purpose of philosophy and to forge friendships through philosophy. At the same time, the IPO is also a realm for joint reflection. Hence, this article does not primarily focus on conveying new knowledge as much as it aims to open up and expand the realm for joint reflection about the IPO and for the benefit of the IPO. If philosophy is an activity that constantly questions the self-evident, then the IPO

should also be open for reflections on its foundations. These foundations also include the essay written by students competing in the Olympiad, which is why I believe it is important to expand the realm for these reflections. Therefore, this article does not seek to yield any final verdict on this matter, but rather aims to follow on from the reflection that inspired it and hopes to inspire others to contribute to the discussion.

### **1. The neutrality of the essay and fairness of the IPO competition**

The abovementioned article begins with a description of the status of the IPO essay:

The essay is a smooth, open, and consensual form. Under the term ‘essay’, no particular form is imposed a priori on the contestants. [...] The consensus around the essay stems from the desire of all the participants, whatever their country, to have a common denominator, which would give no advantage to this or that national form of teaching. We believe in the neutrality of the essay as a form. As a smooth one, perhaps even as a non-form, the essay leaves aside the cultural and national asperities of philosophical writing. (Foglia 2020: 130)

This description of the neutrality of the essay is in itself not a neutral description, or to put it in other words, it is not a description of what the essay is but rather a description of the status ascribed to it in the framework of the Philosophy Olympiad. As pointed out by Marc Foglia himself, the status of this “hypothesis concerning the essay” is contentious, not least for two reasons. The opening phrase “the essay is a smooth, open, and consensual form” suggests that the essay is a form that does not impose any requirements on students, since it provides every student with complete freedom in expressing the content he or she wishes to present. Looking at the essay from this perspective, essay writing does not require any specific preparation or training that would equip students with a grasp of essay writing rules. The essay is not subject to any particular rules and as such allows complete freedom of writing.

It seems as if this conception of the essay is a prerequisite for ensuring the impartiality of the form in which students compete at the IPO. If the essay imposed specific requirements on the student, such requirements could potentially be culturally specific, putting certain students in a privileged position. Students from cultures where essay writing is introduced to school children at an early age would have an advantage over those living in cultures where this type of essay writing is not taught. In this case, the essay would be culturally specific and would not represent a neutral playing field where students from various cultures could freely meet. Marc Foglia therefore makes the following claim:

The consensus around the essay stems from the desire of all the participants, whatever their country, to have a common denominator, which would give no advantage to this or that national form of teaching. (Foglia 2020: 130)

This means that the consensus is not rooted in fact but actually stems (to a certain extent) from a desire. Desires can obscure one’s view of reality and give rise to bias; hence, the consensus

on the essay is not necessarily rooted in fact and may stem from an illusion. It should be added at this point that the wording “we believe” is ambiguous, as it is not quite clear to whom the “we” refers. The “we” does not appear to be empirical, referring to the actual participants at a specific Olympiad; rather, it seems to be a “we of principle”, i.e. a requirement imposed by the IPO as an institution to which everyone who identifies themselves with the Philosophy Olympiad as a meaningful project must adhere. An individual is allowed to have misgivings regarding the neutrality of the essay, but as soon as they participate in the Olympiad, they subscribe to the collective “we” that constitutes the Olympiad and allows it to live on.

Yet the neutrality of the essay (possibly) being a prerequisite illusion is not the only possible interpretation of the consensus to which Marc Foglia refers. The reasoning can also be reversed. In this case, what makes the IPO possible is not that everyone believes in the neutrality of the essay (regardless of the facts), but an IPO essay that is in fact a specific type of essay designed to be neutral as a form. This means that the IPO essay must be constructed in such a way that it does not favour any cultural or national tradition or any method of teaching philosophy.

It would follow from the above that the IPO essay is not a matter of tradition but in fact something new: a specific type of essay defined as an IPO essay which is a *novum* and differs from the various essay writing traditions. As such, it is neutral and provides the students competing in the Olympiad with a level playing field. While it is true that nothing can be found in official IPO documents to support this thesis of the IPO essay as a novelty, there is also nothing there that would preclude it.

The conception of the IPO essay as a *novum* is one possible answer to Foglia’s question whether the form of an essay can provide a fair competition model for the Olympiad. Marc Foglia himself does not give a clear answer to the question he asks in the introduction. He argues that the essay is not a realm of complete freedom, that the essay has a tradition, that students should therefore be taught how to write an essay and that the current essay evaluation criteria have serious shortcomings. All four claims are substantiated with convincing arguments with which the author of this article can only agree. However, Foglia does not address the question implied in his initial query: is an essay that imposes specific requirements and is more closely related to certain cultural traditions (and certain traditions of teaching philosophy in upper secondary education) than others in fact a form that allows for fair competition among students.

What follows below is an attempt to combine the two theses, namely that the essay is a fair form despite the fact that it has its tradition (or even traditions) and a stronger presence in certain cultures than in others. The point of departure shall be that demanding “neutrality” may be setting the bar too high and that a lower standard would be sufficient to ensure a fair competition. One possibility would be not to require the complete neutrality of the essay, but to only prescribe a minimum common core for the IPO essay. To put it in other words, students would be allowed to write various types of essays but all essays would have to include a common core designed as the lowest common denominator of the various traditions from which the students originate. This conception presupposes that all philosophical traditions feature certain common elements which can be included in the essay. The IPO essay would thus be the lowest common denominator of all the various cultures, traditions, and methods of teaching

philosophy.

However, the approach described above would itself be based on assumptions that are questionable. The first assumption is that any “national philosophy” is uniform and homogenous rather than plural, dynamic and contradictory; the second is that students are only influenced by philosophy rather than the general culture of any country, which is in itself never homogenous or static. Furthermore, what is also assumed is that the essay is a clear and unequivocal notion. Yet even a brief consideration shows that the essay has undergone a complex evolution since it was first introduced by Montaigne. This evolution has resulted in a plurality of essays, so Montaigne’s essay can no longer be seen as the model for the ultimate essay but merely as one of the numerous forms of the essay, i.e. the personal essay.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of the above, it is not even immediately clear which type of essay is involved when speaking about the IPO essay. Although every student and every teacher bring to the table a certain preliminary understanding of the essay (as well as of what philosophy is and how it should be taught), this does not mean that these preliminary notions must be the benchmark for the IPO essay. Plurality can hence be found both among the students writing the essay and originating from different cultures as well as among the different forms of the essay. The IPO Statute that governs the content of the IPO does not deal explicitly with the nature of the essay which may give the impression that it is taken for granted; nevertheless, the Statute does contain criteria of evaluation which can be considered as a manifestation of a certain implicit conception of the essay.

Before delving into the definition of the essay found in the Statute, there is one more possible solution to the issue of the neutrality of the essay to consider. Even if it is conceived as the lowest common denominator of all traditions, the essay is not necessarily a neutral form. But what is sufficient to ensure fair competition at the Olympiad (which, as will be shown later, is a very specific competition) is that the essay be a form that is equally alien to all students. A precedent for using alienation as a mechanism for ensuring fairness already exists within the IPO: at the IPO, students are not allowed to write their essay in their mother tongue but in one of their foreign languages. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar requirement could be imposed when it comes to the form of the essay: the IPO essay does not necessarily have to be a form common to all cultures, it could just as well be one equally alien to all cultures. Given that the essay as a form is much more common in certain cultures than in others, this use of the alienation principle is not really a viable option. However, there is another possibility: the alienness of the essay to the students. It could be argued that the philosophical essay is not a natural form of writing, nor does it resemble the essays in other school subjects. All students must learn to master it at some point just like a foreign language; in this sense, it is equally alien to all students. Hence, no student can have an advantage over the others, since writing a philosophical essay puts all of them face to face with an alien form, they must gradually become versed in. In the light of this interpretation, what makes the IPO possible is not the illusion that the essay

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<sup>1</sup> “The personal essay is what most people mean when they consider the essay as a genre. It has the characteristics usually mentioned in defining the essay generally: an informal style, a casual, meandering structure, a conversational tone, the clear imprint of the author’s personality, and a tendency toward subjects Phillip Lopate (1994) has dubbed “the familiar and the domestic, the emotional middle of the road.” Most of the great essayists have been masters of the personal essay, from the genre’s founder Montaigne onward.” (Werner 1997: 1386).

is a neutral form, nor the novelty of the IPO essay as a form, but the fact that the philosophical essay is equally alien and unnatural to all participants.

As shown above, the argument that the philosophical essay is equally new to all students could provide a solution to the initial issue of the neutrality of the essay. However, further consideration shows that that is not an adequate definition of the IPO essay. It may fulfil the requirement for fairness, giving all students a level playing field (in principle) and not putting any competitor in a privileged position; however, theories focussing on knowledge evaluation emphasize that any knowledge examination must be valid in *terms of content*.<sup>2</sup> In general, this means that an examination in any subject must actually test the knowledge (and skills) acquired by the student in the course of that subject. In the case of the Philosophy Olympiad, this would mean that the essay should in fact test all the relevant philosophical knowledge. So, the question is: is the knowledge required for the IPO essay and shown by students in their essay writing really essential philosophical knowledge? Does the essay truly attain all the key goals of philosophy in upper-secondary education? Regardless of whether the IPO essay is a novum or a cross-section of different traditions, this may perhaps ensure a fair evaluation, but it is no guarantee of the validity of the evaluation. Obliging students to express their philosophical ideas in an obscure form may put all students in an equal position, but it is a position that is equally senseless for all of them. Therefore, the link between the essay and philosophy (or the link between the form of the essay and the form of philosophy or, to take it a step further, the question whether the essay as a form encourages philosophising or hinders it) is an issue of vital importance. Before addressing it, let us focus on the formal definition of the essay within the IPO.

## **2. The definition of the essay in the IPO Statute and the Guide**

Certain information on the nature of the essay can be found in the IPO Statute entitled *Regulations concerning the organization of the International Philosophy Olympiads*. The Statute as a formal document does not contain any justification as to why the Olympiad takes place in the form of an essay writing competition, nor does it provide any definition of the content and form of the essay; however, it does contain instructions regarding essay assessment criteria. These allow us to deduce what is expected of an essay, so it could be said that the assessment criteria serve (to some extent) as a replacement for a definition of the essay. In the section entitled *The Competition*, item C entitled *Grading the essays* lists five criteria of evaluation, namely: relevance to the topic, philosophical understanding of the topic, persuasive power of argumentation, coherence, and originality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to classic test theory, good assessment has two characteristics: reliability and validity. In the case of IPO what is important is *inter-rater reliability* (consistency across evaluators) and *content validity* (Schaughency, Smith, van den Meer and Berg 2012).

<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out that the Philosophy Olympiad is a competition that differs significantly from the Olympic Games in sports. In the Olympic Games, there can only be one winner, whereas in the Philosophy Olympiad, several essays (and their authors) can take first place; the same goes for second or third place. Not only is it not known in advance, which essay will take first place; it is also impossible to predict how many essays will take it. This means that an essay ranked in first place is not simply better than all the others; it merely exhibits one aspect of excellence, of which there are many. This is also what sets the Philosophy Olympiad apart from the Mathematical Olympiad. In the Mathematical Olympiad, it is also not uncommon for several students to share the first place, but that usually means that all of them managed to successfully solve the given mathematical problems.

This list is all the *Statute* has to say on the nature of the essay: it enumerates the criteria with no explanation as to why these criteria are relevant, why there are five of them, or what these criteria actually mean. It is not much, but the IPO statute is also not the document that should provide a detailed definition. But the problem is not the lack of a definition in the Statute, but the fact that there is no other document of formal validity where a detailed definition could be found. In his article, Marc Foglia refers to an interpretation of the evaluation criteria developed by Floris Velema for the IPO in 2017 (Foglia 2020: 132), but this interpretation is not available on the IPO website, so it has no formal effect.<sup>4</sup> This also means that at the level of official documents, the status of the essay and the evaluation process are defined in a very rudimentary manner.

Nevertheless, these criteria do reveal some characteristics of the essay. Firstly, the essay is based on philosophical understanding, which means that it is not an essay in general but a philosophical essay. Secondly, the evaluation criteria require that the essay serve a communicative purpose, given that it needs to be persuasive. What is also required is that the essay be based on argumentation. Argumentation is closely related to the “persuasive power” which brings the philosophical essay closer to the field of rhetoric. However, the demand for coherence points out that the logical validity of deductions and conclusions is also an essential element of the essay and the grade. The criterion of originality refers to the fact that the students are not only expected to present the well-established positions of others but must offer a personal contribution of their own. And that is all.

Further details on the IPO essay can be found in the *Essay Guide* (Murphy 2017). The status of this document is somewhat unclear, as it is published on the IPO website in the section entitled *Philosophy Resources* which could give the impression that it has no official validity. However, it bears the title *IPO Essay Guide* and it was produced by the *IPO Essay Guide Committee* (established at the IPO in 2015) after consultation with the formal bodies of the IPO, so it can be considered at least as a semi-official document.

The IPO Guide on the philosophical essay appropriately begins with a short definition of philosophy:

Philosophy is often defined as inquiry, more specifically inquiry into matters of profound

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In the Philosophy Olympiad, however, the best essays arrive at very different conclusions, since it is the path that led (the subject) to that conclusion that matters.

<sup>4</sup> The grading rubric defines each of the evaluation criteria in further detail by means of descriptions of five achievement levels for each criterion of evaluation. In this process, all five criteria are assigned the same importance (that is, it is considered that they have the same weight), they all bring the same number of points and are (considered) independent of one another. However, there is also an alternative to this analytical approach to evaluation criteria, i.e. the holistic approach where descriptions do not refer to individual criteria but the essay as a whole. The holistic description of an *excellent essay* in the *International Baccalaureate Programme* quoted below serves as a good illustration: “The response is well structured, focused and effectively organized. There is appropriate use of philosophical vocabulary throughout the response. There is clear identification of the view(s) of philosophical activity presented in the unseen text. Effective references are made to the text. The student draws explicitly on their personal experience of philosophical activity, using well-chosen examples or illustrations to support their points. There is clear analysis of both similarities and differences between the student’s personal experience of philosophical activity and the view(s) of philosophical activity presented. The response contains well-developed critical analysis. All, or nearly all, of the main points are justified. The response argues to a reasoned conclusion.” (IBO 2014: 47)

interest to humanity – truth, knowledge, reality, meaning, social justice and the mind. Art and literature also look into these questions, but only philosophy examines these subjects directly, logically, and in depth.

This definition is quite general and formal and appears to be an introduction to further reflection. But the *Guide* leaves it at this definition and moves on to the philosophical method:

In either form, the critical components of any philosophical inquiry have always been to craft a thesis, usually related to one of these subject areas, and persuade a listener or reader to accept one's thesis through honest, logical, and thorough argumentation.

After this brief and concise definition of philosophy and the philosophical method in the Introduction, the next section of the Guide provides the reader with a series of recommendations on how to write a good philosophical essay. This instrumental task is an appropriate goal for a text with the subtitle *How To Write a Philosophy Essay. A Guide for IPO Contestants*.

It should nevertheless be pointed out that the Introduction does not appear to be entirely philosophical. Reading it from the philosophical point of view, it fails to address (or at least to address explicitly) a number of issues. Let me only list a few: Why are philosophical topics relevant for humanity? Why would anyone want to write a philosophical essay about these topics? Why is the essay the most suitable form for persuading other people?<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the Guide as a whole is well-designed and very humble in its ambitions. It defines itself as being merely one of numerous guides and makes no claims of originality, stating that “Its principles have been inspired by over two dozen guides written by professors of philosophy from around the world.” (Murphy 2017: 53) However, a brief look at the authors of the listed resource documents shows that most of them work in English-speaking countries. In this respect, the Guide makes no effort to encompass and present the existing plurality of perspectives on the philosophical essay. Furthermore, the titles of most of the referenced texts contain the phrase “philosophical paper”. The reference for the drafting of the *Guide* is not the theory of the essay, the history of the essay, reflections on the essay as a genre, or the teaching of philosophy, but existing guidelines for writing texts that are related to the education and work of professional philosophers (or future professional philosophers) in the academic world.

Admittedly, the Guide makes no pretence of doing any of the above. It only promises to provide guidelines on essay writing rather than an in-depth reflection on the nature of the essay. It promises to provide instructions (a tool) that will help students with their essay writing and this tool is exactly what it delivers<sup>6</sup>, as proven quite clearly by the content of the text. The main

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<sup>5</sup> Reading the Guide from the philosophical point of view and analysing how much plurality it allows with regard to the definition of philosophy and the philosophical method may well be controversial. It should perhaps be pointed out that the description of the method does not merely refer to “persuasion” but to “honest, logical, and thorough argumentation”. However, even this disclaimer cannot conceal the implicit assumption that the purpose of the essay is to persuade the reader rather than to merely present or discuss a perspective, inviting the reader to consider his or her views on the matter at hand.

<sup>6</sup> It can definitely be said that the Guide is a very well-conceived and clear essay writing guide that is without a doubt a valuable aid to students preparing for the IPO.

body of the text contains the “framework on how to write a philosophy essay” (Murphy 2017: 54) which consists of eight steps: *Know your audience. Organize your thoughts. Structure your essay. Write your introduction. Argue your position. Consider counter-arguments. Craft a conclusion. Revise, edit and rework your essay.* The Guide thus provides a systematic overview of the instructions given to students by teachers teaching them how to write an essay.

This points to an important element that determines the role and place of the essay today. At least in the USA, the essay has become a vital element of the educational process and in the course of the massification of higher education, the USA have become the dominating provider of university education. Most of the authors to whom the *Guide* refers work in the USA and all of the texts referenced in the Guide were written in English. It could therefore be said that the understanding of the essay today is primarily the result of its role in the study process rather than its long history.

The Guide is a good tool and as such only contains what is absolutely essential. It does not claim to provide the only relevant guidelines (“it outlines one method”, Murphy 2017: 52), but given that there is only one IPO Guide, these guidelines (may) acquire the status of official guidelines. This is why it would make sense (at least for teachers) to have an additional document that would elaborate on what the Guide merely presupposes and include what was omitted from the Guide. For philosophers, it might be quite interesting to see what was excluded from the text from the draft to the final version. To give an example: in the “methodological practice of Socratic philosophizing”, Martens identifies five methods of “methodologically integrative philosophizing” (Martens 2009: 499), namely *phenomenological (observing and describing)*, *hermeneutical (understanding someone)*, *analytical (testing the assertions)*, *dialectical (contradicting and disputing)* and *speculative (using imagination to find a different point of view)*.<sup>7</sup> From Martens’ perspective, focusing solely on the “conceptual-argumentative analysis” reduces the scope of philosophical reflection. As mentioned above, the Guide opens with a definition of philosophy but confines itself to a mere presentation without digging any deeper; it adopts the same approach when it comes to the philosophical method. This brevity of the Guide is understandable since it is conceived as an aid for novice students and the results of the underlying reflection are therefore presented in the form of clear recommendations. The Guide does not seek to explore issues, present alternative views, advocate its perspective, or rebut potential objections. It does not have to comply with the elements set out in the Guide itself as elements of a good essay. It would therefore make sense to upgrade it with additional texts that will examine the nature of the philosophical essay from a more exploratory perspective rather than for the sole purpose of drafting essay writing guidelines.

### **3. The essay as the application of knowledge, a catalyst of reflection, and a realm of (free) thinking**

The embeddedness of the essay in the education system is typical not only of the USA but can also be found in other countries such as France, the difference being that in France this type of text is referred to as a *dissertation* rather than an *essay*. All students of *lycées* must pass a *baccalauréat* which includes a mandatory *dissertation philosophique* as one of the more

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<sup>7</sup> The brief outlines of the methods given in brackets are taken from Marsal 2009.



demanding elements.<sup>8</sup>

However, the purpose of these texts is not only the examination of knowledge, even though they may sometimes only be used to that effect. An example of an essay with limited ambition is described in the essay writing guide for the IELTS test (*The International English Language Testing System*):

In order to be able to write good essays it is first of all essential to make sure that you understand the purpose of the task. It may seem obvious: the purpose is to test your ability to write essays for university or college in English. (Duigu 2002: 19)

In this case, the aim of the essay is clearly testing. It serves no other purpose; students will only write it so others can evaluate their competence. What will be checked in the course of this test of the students' essay writing ability is also clearly defined in advance:

Candidates are assessed on their ability to: present the solution to a problem; present and justify an opinion; compare and contrast evidence, opinions and implications; evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument. The topics are of general interest and it makes no difference what subjects candidates study ... The main emphasis is in fact on your ability to think and argue appropriately about a common issue. This is because university students need to be able to analyse and discuss problems and solutions, and evaluate and express opinions. University study is not simply about presenting facts. (Duigu 2002: 2)

Here, the essay is a form allowing the candidate to *show certain skills* which can then be assessed and graded. The same could be said of the IPO essay: it is a way for the contestants to show a certain understanding of philosophy and certain general skills so that they can be evaluated. Skills cannot be evaluated unless they have been manifested and the essay thus becomes a tool for making these skills (and knowledge and understanding) evident and accessible for evaluation. However, even in education, the essay is used more broadly and does not always serve merely as a display of skills. Certain authors even see it as *the very core of education*:

Essay writing is at the heart of education. Whatever you study, at some point you will be asked to write an essay. And if you aren't, then you probably won't ever weave together the different strands of what you've learnt. In humanities subjects – Literature, History, Philosophy and so on – students are judged on their essays. (Warburton 2006: 7)

As Warburton puts it, it is “essay writing” and not simply the essay that “is at the heart of education”. One of his justifications for this claim is that students are judged on their essays.

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that the texts referenced below are not analysed in detail. They are mentioned as examples illustrating the scope of the essay rather than to provide a comprehensive analysis of how the essay is construed in each of the texts.

Hence, being “at the heart” could mean that essay writing is important because evaluation is so vital. But it can also mean more: anything that is subject to evaluation is relevant and given that essays are assessed and graded, this can only indicate that essays incorporate the essence of a certain field. The essay is not only about knowledge and understanding; what is specific of the essay is the effective application of understanding. But Warburton emphasizes another crucial aspect:

Getting down to writing is very important. It is often in the act of writing that the subject comes into focus for the first time. I’ve had the experience in the middle of an examination of suddenly understanding the connections between different parts of a syllabus in a way that eluded me throughout my revision. Writing is a kind of thinking. (Warburton 2006: 8)

Not only is the essay a means for the author to prove that he or she knows something so well that this knowledge can be put to use; the writing of the essay as such is a thinking process. Hence, the essay can be considered a thinking aid. From this point of view, it is not merely a tool allowing one to show off their knowledge but also a tool that facilitates thinking. Venturing even a step further, it could be said that the essay is in fact thinking itself – not merely a training method for better thinking, but a form in which thinking develops. The rules that must be observed in essay writing are not just a necessary evil for others to be able to understand the text but are constitutive of thinking.

In the light of the above reflection, the essay loses the status of an evaluation tool for thinking and becomes a catalyst of thinking. This is true of the essay in general, but when it comes to the philosophical essay, there is even more to it. In philosophy, the essay can have a Socratic dimension.

Reflecting on this, it may be useful to build on Jonas Pfister who considers philosophical writing to also be related to a personal dimension.<sup>9</sup>

Certain French authors even take a step further in this direction by assigning qualities to the *dissertation* that go beyond the emphasis on thinking and linking the *dissertation* to the formation and transformation of the subject. For them, writing a *dissertation* is not just a matter of a subject thinking in philosophical terms and using philosophical reasoning to navigate through life and thinking: “philosophising means re-learning to see the world with new eyes” (Russ and Farago 2006: 20). The aim of the *dissertation* is the “formation of the mind” and the acquisition of “dynamic and autonomous thinking” (Russ and Farago 2006: 23). The transformation occurs as soon as the subject enters the realm of thinking and starts moving freely through it. The boldest of definitions even go so far as to link the writing of a dissertation to a “spiritual exercise” (Russ 1992: 76), in the course of which the student establishes a dialogue with him- or herself. Reflection (upon oneself) hence equals transformation (Russ 1992: 76).

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<sup>9</sup> “The same reasons that speak in favour of a philosophical diary in class also hold true of writing essays: it requires reflection and allows the writer to find reassurance and, depending on the topic, also their identity.” (Pfister 2016: 285)

These conclusions are consistent with the thesis that essay writing entails not only learning to philosophize, but also offers the subject a realm of freedom. A good starting point for this discussion is the perspective developed by the Dutch theorist in the field of philosophy of education Gert Biesta (Biesta 2010). Biesta classifies the aims of education into three domains. The first domain entails socialization, i.e. the acceptance of the rules and norms of a society. The second domain is qualification in the sense of acquiring knowledge and skills that can be put to use in the labour market. The third domain is emancipation<sup>10</sup> which refers to the fact that students should acquire the ability to express themselves, to take a stand, to think things through for themselves. It is my belief that the philosophical essay offers a realm of freedom that is closely related to the emancipation of the subject.<sup>11</sup>

If the philosophical essay does in fact include an element of emancipation, this should also be reflected in rules governing the writing and grading of essays. The *IPO Guide* puts no explicit emphasis on this element; however, the instructions for evaluating essays included in the *IPO Statute* allow for this possibility. Originality, which is one of the five criteria of evaluation, can definitely be seen as a realm of freedom allowing the subject to create something new. In order for the subject to do so, creating something new must be permissible under the essay writing rules. The creativity in question is naturally not creativity in the absolute sense, but creativity within given bounds. In the context of the essay, this means that the essay is a realm in which the student can think and go where his thoughts take him. This is creativity in the sense that the essay entails both adherence to rules as well as the freedom provided by these rules. The freedom to reflect upon the world we are part of and to examine how this world defines us as well as the freedom to start something new. The fact that originality is one of the evaluation criteria for essays allows us to view the IPO essay not only as a realm of philosophical socialization (into philosophical tradition and culture) and qualification (acquiring philosophical skills) but also a realm of emancipation and the subject's freedom. The essay is thus once again linked to the freedom mentioned by Foglia ("a thought free from any pre-established rule, of a spontaneity without any particular hindrance", Foglia 2020: 131); however, this is not a complete freedom, but one that should be regarded as related to (philosophical) socialisation and qualification.

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<sup>10</sup> Biesta occasionally refers to the third domain using the terms individuation and subjectification.

<sup>11</sup> It is obvious that the essay is related to socialization and qualification, but it is not so clear whether it also has any relation to emancipation. To put it in other words: socialization into a type of discourse, which the essay certainly is, requires the knowledge and respect of rules (of essay writing). Emancipation would also open up the possibility to use the essay not only to reflect upon and question certain well-established general beliefs, but to also to question and challenge certain essay writing rules.

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