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## Comments on Sharon Rider's Paper

Csaba Olay

*Eötvös Loránd University*

*Eötvös Loránd Research Network*



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**Institute of Philosophy**  
Research Centre for the Humanities  
Hungarian Academy of Sciences

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## About the author

**Csaba Olay** is currently professor and Head of Department of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), he is researcher of the Eötvös Loránd Research Network, and President of the Committee of Philosophy (Hungarian Academy of Sciences). Having studied philosophy, mathematics, and physics at Eötvös Loránd University, he obtained his PhD in philosophy at University of Freiburg (Germany). He has been teaching at Eötvös Loránd University since 2001, where he was appointed as full professor in 2015.

His main research areas include 19-20th century continental philosophy, hermeneutics, Heidegger, Gadamer, Hannah Arendt, and Frankfurt School. He has published books and articles, among others *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Phänomenologie der ungegenständlichen Zusammenhänge* (Königshausen & Neumann 2007); (with Tamás Ullmann) *Kontinentális filozófia a XX. században* [Continental philosophy in XXth century]. (L'Harmattan 2011), and edited collections of essays in these fields, among others (with Jean-Claude Gens) *Charles Taylor - Interpretation, modernity, and identity. Charles Taylor – Interprétation, modernité et identité.* (Le Cercle herméneutique 2014).

## Abstract

My comments try first to identify the core problem of Sharon Rider's paper, and discern then some bundles of questions. Rider's main objective is to propose a profound analogy between philosophy and poetry/literature, and also between the ways how we should interpret them. She formulates the dilemma of whether philosophy is science or literature, and falls immediately on the literature horn of the dilemma which seems to be somewhat simplified. Furthermore, Rider doesn't develop in detail why philosophy could not be science, she only mentions in another context the self-reflectivity of philosophy, although arguments in favor of the contrary position abound. In addition, she claims that form and content are inseparable in philosophy, but it is hard to see how the category of form can be applied to philosophical works in a similar sense as to literary works. Rider makes a too sharp distinction between two positions which can be characterized as follows: philosophy is either science, having proper methods, or philosophy is rather like poetry, having a singularity similar to artworks. If there is an intermediary position then it would be desirable to reserve it for philosophy.

## **Csaba Olay: *Comments on Sharon Rider's Paper*<sup>1</sup>**

It is a great honor and a nice opportunity to make comments on Sharon Rider's interesting paper with the title "Unsettling Ideas and the Force of Style". In what follows I try first to identify the core problem of the paper, and I discern then some bundles of questions that will be addressed one after another. I'm particularly happy to comment on Sharon Rider's instructive ideas, since at some points I deeply agree, while at others I strongly don't.

The basic question of Sharon Rider's paper concerns the idea "that philosophy is, can or should be a special science", and this idea, she thinks, "is not proven on conceptual grounds [...] and it is difficult to see how it could be." (p. 7) Taking this insight as a point of departure, Rider's main objective is to propose a profound analogy between philosophy and poetry/literature, and also between the ways how we should interpret them.

Let me begin with the first comment on Rider's negative insight or refusal of the scientific character of philosophy. Although I agree with her diagnosis to the extent that the scientific character of philosophy cannot be taken for granted, I think the question deserves further considerations and specifications. Rider's strategy is to formulate the dilemma of whether philosophy is science or literature, but then she immediately falls on the literature horn of the dilemma. In this form, the question seems to be somewhat simplified, and I don't see and miss a careful reflection of what is at stake with this problem. I would like to indicate briefly some aspects of this complex problem.

The rise of natural science as a powerful intellectual factor of modernity cannot be denied. Being a more ancient intellectual enterprise than natural science, it was an obvious possibility for modern philosophy to try integrating modern science and, more generally, the idea of science in itself. In various ways, we see this endeavour both in modern rationalism and empiricism. Taking modern natural science as a model of philosophy in a very broad sense means that knowledge will be conceived of as generally valid, experimentally or empirically justifiable propositions. Consequently, it is expected that philosophy should develop methods or methodologies able to deliver such results. In this manner, the suggestion easily arises that philosophy should be science or even a second-order science which supersedes usual science concerning rigor or fundamental character. Immanuel Kant, Edmund

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference "Registers of Philosophy V," April 13, 2019, Budapest, organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The referenced work also appeared in our "Registers of Philosophy" series, see: [https://fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Working\\_papers/2019\\_04\\_sharon\\_rider\\_unsettling\\_ideas\\_and\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_style.pdf](https://fi.btk.mta.hu/images/Working_papers/2019_04_sharon_rider_unsettling_ideas_and_the_power_of_style.pdf)

Husserl, and David Hume represent such an understanding of philosophy, whereas the question can be delayed whether these authors are still today attractive in terms of this intention of their philosophical enterprise or not.

In parenthesis, I would like to mention that there is a financial aspect of the status of philosophy, too. With regard to financing, science is better off than humanities or social sciences which often appear to decision-makers as luxurious activities. We see in psychology an instructive example where there is an inner debate about where the discipline belongs to – whether it is a natural science or a part of the humanities –, and a clear advantage of the first option is the higher hopes to get financial support.

Sharon Rider doesn't develop in detail why philosophy could not be science, she only mentions in another context the self-reflectivity of philosophy. However, arguments in favor of this position abound. I see in addition to self-reflectivity at least two essential, traditional tasks of philosophy that can hardly fit a scientific layout of philosophy: first, the endeavor to grasp the world as a whole (totality), second, the relevance for life. Let us turn briefly to these points.

To begin with self-reflectivity, in Rider's view, it is the distinctive feature of philosophy. Philosophy, she says, is "discourse about discourse, or thinking about thinking" (p. 8). We could say that there is no real sense in the term "meta-philosophy" if self-reflection belongs to the enterprise of philosophy. In contrast to, for example, the possibility of meta-biology, philosophy needs no meta-discipline external to herself. Now, the important question in our context might run as follows: what are, if any, the stylistic consequences of self-reflexivity? There seem to be no clear indications of how self-reflection should take place. Furthermore, with the rise of modern natural science, the problem becomes acute, since sciences have no clear form for reflexivity.

The second point is the attempt to contemplate the world as a whole. This intention contradicts to specialization as an essential feature of modern science. The specialized inquiry was not always a characteristic of science, e.g. in Galileo's times or for Leibniz. But at the latest from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on scientific research is taking place in a spiral of specialization which was famously described by Max Weber in his *Science as a Vocation* in 1917. In our context, it is important that specialization presupposes the division of intellectual labor and replaceability guaranteed by methodological verification. That scientific experiments should be repeatable secures for us that everyone arrives at the same results so that anyone represents every other human being in doing the scientific experience. It is clear that philosophy is of a different kind since there is no consensual, commonly acknowledged method to proceed

along. Philosophy, as I would say, has never given up the pretension of accountability, but not in the sense of standardized justifiability or methodological verifiability. At this point, it has to be emphasized that if philosophy pretends to be accountable in a broad sense, then it is an argument against treating philosophical works as literary ones. This “rationality” of philosophy cannot and, I think, should not be renounced.

A further point can be clarified if we take into account that philosophy from the outset attempted to grasp the world as a whole or, to put it otherwise, the world as a totality. We can also say that philosophy doesn't discuss a special field; it is not a limited inquiry, but rather an account of the whole of human experience. The project and its particular difficulties can be illustrated by Aristotle's and Hegel's version. Aristotle develops three conceptions of a “first philosophy” (*proté philosophia*), one of which investigates beings as being. The global character of this research lies in its generality, as opposed to specific inquiries. As to Hegel, his dialectics is essentially a method to grasp totality: it is not only one point of view, rather the enumeration and systematization of all possible points of view which would be one-sided in themselves.

These two versions don't really show how the description of the world as a totality could be realized. From the perspective of specialized science, doubts could even be formulated whether the description of totality can be taken seriously at all under today's conditions. The situation, however, is not so simple what we can illustrate with two remarks. First, in many cases specialized scientific research is simply impossible because it is not possible to arrive at mathematically quantified analysis and description. In these fields of inquiry, we either remain silent or accept that our claims are basically disputable in terms of pluralistic methodologies. Secondly, and more importantly, we cannot always dispense with a totalizing perspective. Our life cannot be regarded as an uncoordinated sum of specialized performances. The task of leading our own life is inevitable, and it cannot be managed with specialized expertise. Human life is a web of aspects which needs an overall orientation, a totalizing look at the whole.

Having looked at these arguments which show that philosophy can hardly be a science, it is important to underline that these arguments don't give up the claim that philosophy should be a kind of description. Even if philosophy is not empirical, scientific research, it is somehow about the world and our life in the world.

Let's turn now to how Rider establishes the analogy between philosophy and literature. Somewhat surprisingly she claims that form and content are inseparable in philosophy, or in “works of thought” (p. 6). It is hard to see how the category of form can be

applied to philosophical works in a similar sense as to literary works. Surely there are significant philosophical works with expressive or literary forms that convey certain insights. Plato's dialogues, Kierkegaard's complicated authorship, Nietzsche's Zarathustra are clear examples of meaningful forms. But this does not suggest such diversity and density of forms of expression which is characteristic of literature.

Rider puts forward the idea that "the true work of thought is actually thinking put on paper, rather than 'any mere statement about thinking, or any mere abstraction from thinking.'" This approach makes philosophy something essentially performative, where the performative character cannot be adequately captured by linguistic formulations. Even if it would be the case, the descriptive task of philosophy remains in the background. To put it otherwise, what seems to be missing from this description is the idea of philosophy as a search for truth – truth understood in a different manner than in poetry, truth as something we claim to give an account of. In general, it has not become really clear what philosophy would consist of. The comparison with literature, poetry, and sometimes with literary criticism doesn't help, in fact, to contour the enterprise philosophy.

There are two further points I would like to comment on. The first is the interpretative strategy to discern and to consider the "governing attitude" of a philosopher: "The 'governing attitude' of a work of philosophy is whatever it is that the philosopher in question 'has on his mind': his doubts, reservations, hesitations, uncertainty, confusions, concerns, perplexities and ways of dealing with these are all part of this, and their relation to one another is not that of a standard formula." (p. 6-7) Rider is right, for sure, that a philosopher cannot be reduced to a point of view or perspective; there can be more careful readings that try to develop deeper intentions of a thinker. A famous example is Fichte's approach to Kant. Even in Kant's case, his major objective was to set philosophy or metaphysics on the secure path of science with the help of the Copernican revolution. Today, we don't think that Kant's intention could have been realized, and even an interest in transcendental philosophy has other motivations.

The second point is the emphasis Rider put on close reading which she thinks to be more important than arguments. I would like to connect this requirement of attentiveness to a crucial point, to the openness towards philosophical works. Thinkers like Hans-Georg Gadamer or Walter Benjamin warn against prefabricated categories and interpretations which make real experiences impossible.

My last remark concerns the concept of style. In contrast to the promise of the title – "power of style" – Shannon Rider hasn't made clear what style would mean. We can, of course, take "style" as an overall term for the literary form, without any further specification.

It deserves noting that German philosopher Manfred Frank devoted a longer essay to the problem of style in philosophy. Frank ascribed significance to style for similar reasons as Rider did, for he claimed that the individuality of the author manifests itself in his or her style. To sum up, I'm sympathetic to Rider's attempt not to reduce philosophy to scientific and/or empirical investigations. I agree with the claim that it is far from being trivial that philosophy should and could be scientific. But I'm not convinced that avoiding this reduction should lead to abandonment of the idea that philosophy has argumentative power. I think Rider makes a too sharp distinction between two positions which can be characterized as follows: philosophy is either science, having proper methods, or philosophy is rather like poetry, having a singularity similar to artworks. If there is an intermediary position then it would be desirable to reserve it for philosophy.

