Think • Vol 24 • No 70 • Summer 2025, 17–21

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235

There is No Such Thing as a Purely Logical Argument

*Mette Leonard Høeg**

Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: Mette.hoeg@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

Keywords: reason; logic; emotion; Parfit; psychology

Abstract

Philosophical writing always already entails poetics and rhetoric, even if the convention has been to try to reduce these dimensions in the effort to enhance the logic and clarity of an argument. Humans rely on aesthetics and narrative, to make themselves understood and to persuade and influence. A heightened awareness and more extensive use of these dimensions in philosophical and scientific writing could help facilitate deeper and more experiential ways for readers to engage with theoretical ideas, including the reductive theory of personal identity, as represented by Derek Parfit (which may have little psychological traction when presented in conventional scientific and philosophical discourses, which strive to be purely rational), and help release their emancipatory and consolatory potential.

It is common knowledge that rational insight and understanding of scientific facts do not necessarily lead to psychological change and shifts in intuitions in persons. In his article 'Grief and the Inconsolation of Philosophy' (2023), philosopher Dominic Wilkinson sheds light on this gap between insight and emotions as he considers the potential of philosophy to console us about human mortality. More specifically, he looks at how Derek Parfit's influential account of personal identity could provide psychological consolation in the face of the death of oneself and of others.

In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Parfit argues that personal identity is reducible to physical and psychological continuity of mental states, and that there is no further fact, diachronic entity or essence that determines identity. He also suggests there is potential consolation in adopting this perspective on identity and existence:

> Is the truth depressing? Some might find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed that my existence was such a further fact, I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. (Parfit 1984: 281)

Parfit's rejection of the essentialist understanding of the self can lead us to existential emancipation and flexibility, increased connection with our surroundings, the present moment and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235 Published online by Cambridge University Press



other persons, and reduced fear and worry about one's own future and death.

In his article, Wilkinson usefully distinguishes between 'rational consolation' and 'psychological consolation', the former referring to when 'philosophical analysis leads to the conclusion that it would be rational to care less about death than we currently do' (p. 3) and the latter to when 'philosophical reflection will actually lead us to care less about death than we currently do' (Wilkinson 2023: 4). He describes 'Parfitian rational consolation' for personal mortality as follows: 'Adopting a reductionist understanding of personal identity and a more timeless attitude, would mean that it is rational to care less about one's own death or that of others' (p. 6).

But, as Wilkinson points out, the claims of rational and psychological consolation may come apart: 'Obviously, it would be possible for philosophy to offer rational consolation, but to have little or no psychological traction. Equally, it is possible that a particular form of consolation might be psychologically effective, but like supernatural explanations, have no rational basis' (p. 4).

Wilkinson is sceptical that the Parfitian reductionist account of self has any such psychological and emotional traction. He refers to a recent empirical study on the relation between attitudes to personal identity/the self and attitudes towards death. Contrary to the prediction of the researchers conducting the study, the results indicate that those with a strong belief that the persisting self is an illusion (such as monastic Tibetan Buddhists) do *not* experience less fear of death than groups with a strong sense of a continuous and essential self.

Wilkinson accordingly argues that although the philosophical insights into death and time in Parfit's work provide reasons for fearing personal mortality less, it is unlikely the Parfitian philosophical consolation will actually have a psychological effect on persons in relation to mortality. And in terms of grief and fear in relation to the loss of others and loved ones, he finds it 'deeply implausible' that the philosophical perspectives providing reasons for grieving less could lead to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

actual consolation (arguing, additionally, that for certain reasons such a consolation may in fact be undesirable).

'[R]esults indicate that those with a strong belief that the persisting self is an illusion (such as monastic Tibetan Buddhists) do *not* experience less fear of death than groups with a strong sense of a continuous and essential self.'

While Wilkinson's line of argument appears sound and persuasive, it seems to me to rest on too strict a distinction between rationality and emotion/psychology and to entail a misleading reductive view of philosophical writing as 'pure' rationalism and logic.

If one looks to art forms with a strong philosophical dimension such as literature and fictional narrative, it seems clear that philosophical perspectives and rational argument can have psychological and emotional impact. Literature of course differs significantly from philosophy and arguably holds a special capacity for closing the divide between theoretical/rational insight and psychological/emotional state. Its affective, aesthetic, poetic and narrative features can make ideas, insights and hypotheses relatable for readers in ways that are beyond the scope of conventional philosophical and scientific writings, which mainly rely on rational argument. These features in literature, and other fictional narratives, allow for a much higher degree of identification and emotional and psychological engagement by the reader with the content being presented, including rational arguments and scientific and philosophical perspectives.

Literature can thus bring to light the beneficial and emancipatory potential in philosophical and scientific theories such as Parfit's account of self and identity by presenting these in poetic and existential terms, within a narrative framework, and illustrating their meaning and implications poetically with stylistic devices as well as performatively and dramatically through the acts, thoughts and speech of fictional characters. Compared to non-fictional and scientific forms of communication, literature offers readers a possibility to imagine more fully how these perspectives can be lived with and incorporated into an existential model and a way of life. We can experience the implications of accepting and identifying with certain philosophical notions and scientific ideas through immersion in a story and identification with its characters.

The narrative, aesthetic and affective dimensions of literature can thus lead to a bridging of the supposed gap between rational realization and psychological state. These dimensions are, however, not exclusive to literature and art. Devices conventionally associated with the literary domain can be meaningfully used in philosophical writing, and indeed often have been, especially in the continental philosophical tradition. There is a strong literary dimension to philosophy, and as works by thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Derrida illustrate, literature and philosophy cannot be clearly distinguished or strictly separated from each other.

The ancient Stoics, to whose engagement in consolatory philosophy Wilkinson also refers, also show awareness of these affective, poetic and narrative dimensions in writing and communication. In Seneca's letter of consolation to his mother Helvia, written from his exile on Corsica following an accusation of adultery with the Roman emperor's sister, the philosopher rhetorically self-consciously and strategically uses narrative and affective devices to engage the reader and for affective and psychological impact. The letter is distinctively performative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and literary, incorporating personal and private material, using storytelling to illustrate its points, implicitly referring to events in the contemporary context in order to engage the audience, activate sympathy and facilitate identification between the reader and the philosophical arguments.

On one level, Seneca explicitly argues that rational insight is the only thing that can offer persons real comfort and consolation, both in the face of one's own misfortune and in relation to the loss of loved ones. Studies of philosophy, he advises Helvia:

> Will … give you comfort and pleasure, and if they enter your spirit in good faith, sorrow and pain will never enter again, or anxiety, or the useless annoyance of unhelpful worry. Your heart won't be vulnerable to any of these feelings – it has long been closed to other faults. Studies are the surest protection, and are the only thing that can snatch you from Fortune's grasp. (Anderson 2015: 204 (ch. xvii, 5))

Seneca thus self-assuredly makes the case for the consolation of philosophy which Wilkinson disputes. But in proclaiming this, he does not himself simply rely on logic and clarity of argument. Employing poetic and metaphorical language, he is also trying to move the reader to identify and empathize with Helvia and emotionally attach to and invest in philosophy and reason.

In other words, the consolatory letter to Helvia is pervaded by rhetoric and poetics, reminding us how the art of persuasion and consideration of the efficacy of argument and discourse on readers have always been integral to philosophy. Seneca's text is written both to persuade his mother and his audience rationally and to impact them emotionally.

Writing always already entails narrative, aesthetics and rhetoric, even if the convention in science and some philosophical traditions has been to try to reduce these in an effort to enhance the logic and clarity of an argument and create transparency. But there is no such thing as a pure genre or a purely rational argument. Neutrality and objectivity can never be reached, only ever approximated. Every human communicative act is coloured by biases, beliefs and motivations – conscious or subconscious. All discourse is formed by the personal source it comes from and affected by the social context into which it is submitted, no matter how self-critical, conscientious and aware the communicator.

'There is a strong literary dimension to philosophy, and as works by thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Derrida illustrate, literature and philosophy cannot be clearly distinguished or strictly separated from each other.'

Humans rely on aesthetics and narrative, both to make themselves understood by others and to persuade and influence. Communication, persuasion and manipulation are not entirely distinct, but rather points on a continuum, and they all entail influencing. This can happen secretively and obscurely, as in some darker forms of rhetoric, propaganda and advertising where the communicator is trying to sway the audience for personal gain; and it can be done more transparently, consensually and contractually, as is the case in much literature and fiction where readers are invited to let themselves be affected by the narrative and aesthetic devices, immerse themselves, and try out certain philosophical and theoretical positions and perspectives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Actively using the aesthetic, poetic and narrative capacities of writing can allow for more extensive experimentation with rational philosophical and scientific theories and ideas and for more multifaceted exploration and testing of their psychological and existential implications. A heightened awareness of this in philosophy, and arguably in the analytical tradition in particular, might well lead to a narrowing of the gap between philosophical insight and psychological state, bringing about a move from intellectual to emotional engagement, from ideas to experience as it were. This could help readers to engage with philosophical and scientific ideas in a deeper way. Parfit's materialist and reductive theory of personal identity, which may have little psychological traction or seem outright alienating when presented in conventional genres and discourses, could achieve its emancipatory and consolatory potential.

References

Anderson, Peter J. (2015) *Seneca: Selected Dialogues and Consolations* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett).

Parfit, Derek (1984) *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Wilkinson, Dominic (2023) 'Grief and the Inconsolation of Philosophy', *Philosophy* 98: 273–96.

Mette Leonard Høeg

Mette Leonard Høeg is an Academic Visitor, Uehiro Oxford Institute, University of Oxford, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Interacting Minds Centre, Aarhus University, and a Research Fellow at the Centre for Eudaimonia and Human Flourishing, University of Oxford.

Cite this article: Høeg ML (2025) There is No Such Thing as a Purely Logical Argument. *Think* **24**, 17–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175625000235 Published online by Cambridge University Press