

APHORISMS AND PHILOSOPHY: CONTEXTUALIZING APHORISTIC TEXTS - ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SUBJECT-MATTER

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ABSTRACT. *This article analyses two current beliefs about the subject matter and the text-context relation of aphorisms. It is commonly claimed that aphorisms are philosophical texts and that aphorisms are texts that function in isolation from any context. My hypothesis is that, instead of being descriptions of textual features, these beliefs act as conventions that prepare the field of reference for contextualizing texts and thus trigger a proper generic reading for certain kinds of aphoristic text. By helping to demystify some of the technical means of aphoristic writing (whose results are frequently described as concentrated or distilled wisdom), this hypothesis will highlight the importance of allusiveness for the current mainstream of aphorisms,. From the perspective of this article, aphorisms appear more as certain kinds of textual parasites, feeding off 'contextual wisdom', rather than being philosophical pills from the "wisdom of the ages".*

Keywords: Philosophy, literature, genre theory, cultural studies, aphorisms.

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AFORISMOS Y FILOSOFÍA: CONTEXTUALIZANDO TEXTOS AFORÍSTICOS: PRESUPUESTOS SOBRE TÓPICO-CONTENIDO

RESUMEN. *En este artículo se analizan un par de creencias actuales sobre tópico-contenido y sobre la relación texto-contexto del género aforístico. Es muy común creer que los aforismos son textos filosóficos y que son textos que funcionan aislados del contexto. Mi hipótesis es que éstas creencias que describen rasgos textuales, sino que son creencias que actúan como convenciones para preparar la contextualización de los textos y que predisponen a una lectura genéricamente apropiada de ciertos tipos de aforismos. Esta hipótesis resaltará la importancia de la alusión para el tipo más común de aforismo, desmitificando los medios técnicos de la escritura aforística (cuyos resultados son frecuentemente descritos como sabiduría destilada o concentrada). Desde la perspectiva de este artículo, el aforismo aparece más como cierto tipo de parásito de la 'sabiduría contextual', que como una píldora filosófica de la "sabiduría de los tiempos".*

Palabras clave: Filosofía, literatura, teoría de los géneros, estudios culturales, aforismos.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The popularity of some features of aphorisms (such as a “philosophical” content) causes them to be mistaken as objective attributes of the genre. As aphorisms have been used by lawyers and, since Hippocrates, by medical doctors to fulfil communicational needs of their professional practices, one can argue that different groups of users of the genre utilize it in their own particular ways –with their own particular uses and conventions. In this context, one could simply believe that new historical uses of the generic codes should enrich the genre by adding more variations to its functions. However, the continuity of all functions cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, it can be expected that some uses will become more popular than others at different times in the history of the genre - the existence of generic functions may depend on the needs of its historic groups of users. In other words, the current popularity of some features over other features is but an historical development of the aphoristic genre and we should avoid generalising current characteristics to the whole group of existing aphoristic texts.

This article examines two current common assumptions about aphorisms: *aphorisms are philosophical* and *they are texts that exist before or without context*. I will argue that such assumptions are, actually, conventions that help to decode the most popular type of aphoristic texts and have determined our current way

of thinking about the genre. I will also propose that these assumptions suggest a specific aphoristic text-context relation and that such a relation implies the importance of certain technical aspects of the aphoristic craft, over commonly held assumptions about aphoristic content.

2. SOME CURRENT BELIEFS ABOUT APHORISMS: INHERENT CONTENT AND ABSENCE OF CONTEXT

In July 2010, a general search for books of aphorisms on the website of Waterstone's Booksellers Limited produced 222 entries.¹ Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* aside, less than ten percent of the results of the search (fourteen entries) were not related to philosophical or literary matters. Twelve of those books related to medical issues and more than ninety percent of the entries could be classified within literature (mostly poetry), philosophy or, so called, (moral) wisdom.

This panorama tallies with what can be seen in anthologies of aphoristic texts. A review of collections by Gross, Auden and Kronenberg or L. P. Smith shows texts by authors such as Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, Hobbes, Emerson, Gracián, Bacon, Joubert, Valéry, Blake, Kafka, Kant, Nietzsche, Plato, Dostoevsky, Schopenhauer, Milton, Epicurus, Cervantes, Buber, Tolstoy, Jonson, Voltaire, Saint Augustine, Lichtenberg, Ortega y Gasset, Krauss, Santayana, Lec, Cioran and so on. Few scientists can be found among the quoted authors: in L. P. Smith's anthology there are none and in Auden's collection we can locate three - if one counts in the same category as Pasteur, thinkers such as Galen and Leonardo da Vinci. However, in Galen and Leonardo's case, the subject of the texts is not exclusively scientific.²

That these selections of aphoristic texts have been made without including the whole aphoristic field is obvious. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that collections like these do not even bother to typify their texts as either literary or philosophical, but merely as aphorisms. Such descriptive practice dismisses the existence of other groups of aphoristic texts, such as medical or legal ones, leading to the false impression that the whole generic group can be equated with only

¹ <http://www.waterstones.com/> [accessed 14 July 2010].

² These are the texts by those three authors:

- *Pasteur*: "In the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared minds" (347).
- *Galen*: "He cures most in whom most have faith" (212).
- *Leonardo*: "Vows begin when hope dies" (56), "Inequality is the cause of all local movements" and "Force is only a desire for flight: it lives by violence and dies from liberty" (98), "Nature never breaks her own laws" (99), "Where the spirit does not work with the hand there is no art" (292), "Experience does not err; it is only your judgment that errs in expecting from her what is not in her power" (326), "Small rooms discipline the mind; large ones distract it" (368) (Auden and Kronenberg 1964).

some of its humanistic branches. This reduction is not only to be inferred from the content of anthologies; it can also be found stated by highly competent users of the genre.³

In his book *The World in a Phrase*, James Geary proposes ‘The Five Laws of Aphorisms’; among these, the fifth establishes that “It Must Be Philosophical” (Geary 2005: 18).⁴ In the article ‘El aforismo o la formulación de la duda’, Ricardo Martínez-Conde writes that: “*El aforismo no es sino una forma filosófica cuya rotundidad y autonomía son el resultado del trabajo del pensamiento* [The aphorism is fundamentally a *philosophical form* which achieves resonance and autonomy by an effort of thinking]” (Martínez-Conde, 1999; my emphasis). D. Atlas writes: “the aphorism is a mode of philosophical discourse [...]” (Atlas 2005). In addition to this, it seems that the alleged philosophical character of the aphorism situates it apart from other similar kinds of texts; for instance, the writer of the book of aphorisms *Todo es una fuga*, Salvador Hernández Padilla, says when talking about the difference between aphorisms and witty phrases:

El aforismo es una especie de cápsula filosófica y tiene un mensaje más profundo que la frase ingeniosa. [The aphorism is a kind of philosophical pill which has a deeper meaning than a witty phrase].⁵ (García Hernández 2005)

It is worth saying that this concept of philosophy is not confined to the academic practice of the discipline. Furthermore, some of Foucault’s words suggest an uneasy relation between academic philosophy and aphoristic texts:

The actual history of Nietzschean thought interests me less than the kind of challenge I felt one day, a long time ago, reading Nietzsche for the first time. When you open *The Gay Science* after you have been trained in the great, time-honoured university traditions –Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Husserl – and you come across these rather strange, witty, graceful texts, you say: Well I won’t do what my

³ For a discussion on the topics of this paragraph, see my article “Aphorisms: Problems of ‘Empirically Based Research’” (forthcoming in *Orbis Litterarum: International Review of Literary Studies*).

⁴ Talking about this fifth rule for aphorisms, Geary also writes:

Like Bacon, he [Schlegel] believed this kind of fragmented philosophizing more accurately reflected the shifting, scattershot nature of thinking –and the experience of life itself. Aphorisms, he said, are the ‘true form of the Universal Philosophy’ and contained ‘the greatest quantity of thought in the smallest space’. [...]

Aphorisms are signposts along the route to becoming a philosopher. [...] Aphorisms are literary loners, set apart from the world because they’re like porcupines, bristling with prickly philosophical spines. (Geary 2005: 18-19)

⁵ This idea is partially echoed in an article published by James Fenton in *The Guardian Review*:

There is a difference between being witty –quick with the repartee and the insight – and having an aptitude for aphorisms. It may be that an aphorism is the product of much hard work, that it is tried out and revised, honed in the notebooks before being shown (if ever) to the public. (Fenton 2007: 15)

contemporaries, colleagues or professors are doing; I won't just dismiss this. What is the maximum of philosophical intensity and what are the current philosophical effects to be found in these texts? That, for me, was the challenge of Nietzsche. (Foucault 1988: 33)

In relation to aphoristic texts, the concept of philosophy rather seems to embrace a field of which a word such as 'wisdom' can be used without hesitation: "Our need for words of wisdom [...] is ancient, as old as "the wisdom of the ages" itself, which is why the aphorism is the oldest written art form on the planet". (Geary 2005: 20)

The wisdom of the wise and the experience of the ages is preserved, into perpetuity, by a nation's proverbs, fables, folk wisdom, maxims, aphorisms and quotations (William Feather*).

Why aphorisms? Because they're just the right size to hold the swift insights and fresh observations that are the raw data of the wisdom of ages. (Geary 2005: 9)

APHORISM, n. Predigested wisdom (A. Bierce⁶)

In this sense, it is not surprising to find that Raymond Williams' book *Keywords* has an entry of 'Philosophy,' in which one can read:

Philosophy has retained its earliest and most general meaning [...] At different times it has taken on subsidiary senses, as in the widespread post-classical sense of practical wisdom [...]. The common use of **philosophical**, in phrases like **taking a philosophical attitude**, is of this kind, and usually in practice equates **philosophy** with *resignation*. [...] **Philosophy** has also been a common name for any particular system of ideas, defined by a specific description. More common is the increasing use of **philosophy** in managerial and bureaucratic talk, where **philosophy** can mean general policy but as often simply the internal assumptions or even the internal procedures of a business or institution: from the **philosophy of selling** through the **philosophy of motorways** to the **philosophy of supermarkets**. (Williams 1983: 345-36; my emphasis)

In this context, the question of discerning exactly what 'a philosophical brief text' can be is a very difficult one. I imagine that the answer should not be related to a single idea of philosophy, but rather to an eclectic cluster of notions suitable for different groups of readers, for which texts by Wittgenstein or Joubert as well as the little thoughts in a gift shop or the words in Chinese biscuits could count as examples.

⁶ Every quotation marked with * is from the website *ANYARA - Aphorisms in the Light of Astrology: Thousands of wise, witty and inspiring quotations identified by the Zodiac sign of the author*, at <http://koti.mbnet.fi/neptunia/index.htm> [accessed 11 February 2006], in which no more references are provided.

It can be said that the knowledge of the aphoristic genre demonstrated by Gross, Auden and Kronenberg, Smith and Geary guarantees that the reason for the reduction of aphoristic topics to philosophical ones is something more complex than simple ignorance. The explanation, however, is not immediately obvious.

The mere existence of medical and legal aphorisms proves that the philosophical status of the genre is not an ontological fact, but rather an assumption of a group of users of the aphoristic communication, *i.e.* a cultural practice. I believe that such an ontological assumption is not a mere mistake, but a functional feature of a way of seeing aphoristic texts, a convention for contextualizing a certain type of text. I will argue that the fields of reference in which certain types of aphoristic text might make sense are identifiable by assuming that the genre is 'philosophical' (whatever that means) and not, for instance, technical. The reader of *philosophical* aphorisms 'knows' where to look for meaningful relations in order to contextualize contents. Logically, this assumption is only functional for one group of readers and their usual and canonical texts and, in order to sustain it, other types of aphoristic texts need, somehow, to be dismissed. Therefore, this textual feature should be seen as a narrower code (a convention) within the wider boundaries of the codes of the genre.

The hypothesis that proposes existing conventions⁷ as aids to particular readings of texts leads to one of the most interesting issues in the study of aphoristic texts: the relation between text and context. I would like to present this issue by using a general contrast between the relations of two different kinds of text and their contexts.

The similarities between aphorisms and other texts, such as proverbs, seem, paradoxically, to stress their differences in terms of the relation between texts and contexts. It may be argued that proverbs are texts which come after context, because they rely on conversational situations to make sense –being usually just a rhetorical addition to what has already been said. On the other hand, as a written genre, aphoristic texts occur outside of conversational contexts and, when one reads aphorisms, the aphoristic text itself might be the first and the last linguistic construction of the whole process. Furthermore, their brevity, surrounded by blank space, has produced the impression that they exist before, or even *without*, any context. In his article 'The Aphorism', Manfred Wolf writes: "Many celebrated passages [of Shakespeare] derive their power from what aphorisms do not rely on, their context. [...] aphorisms can, should, and do exist on their own" (Wolf 1994: 432). Frederic Munné provides another example of the same idea plus a logical pirouette:

⁷ 'Convention' is used here, and in the whole chapter, in the sense of "a stylistic or formal device, or element of subject matter, which is characteristic of a particular genre or period. [...] (Such use does not) cover the systems of rules or 'codes' that underlie the production of *all* meaning." (Duff 2000: x-xi).

Los aforismos de Nietzsche [...] son textos descontextualizados o sea des-contextos y por tanto multi-contextos [Nietzsche's aphorisms are text decontextualized, i.e. without-context, *therefore* (with) multi-contexts. (Munné 2001; my emphasis)]

In "The Rhetoric of the Aphorism", G. S. Morson tells us that aphorisms are a type of quotation and that they are not supported by context:

3. We may regard aphorisms, maxims, witticisms, and other short forms as particular genres of "quotation," and "quotation" as the general term for memorable short expressions. [...]

13 [...] As it becomes a quotation, a cited line must, so to speak, *learn to stand on its own, without the support of context*. (Morson 2006: 250-251; my emphasis)

P. E. Lewis, writing about the maxims of La Rochefoucauld, states: "Conclusion without introduction, *the maxim is a short-circuit*, the epitome of the *pensée détachée*, removed not only from any context but, in its inviolable literality from ordinary language itself" (Lewis 1997: 25).⁸

In a very influential essay –which is worth examining at length– Roland Barthes even imagines that aphorisms are texts separated from discourse (*coupée du discours*). He turns exclusively to the properties of their internal structure to elucidate such a peculiarity:

Non seulement la maxime est une proposition coupée du discours, mais à l'intérieur de cette proposition même, règne encore un discontinu plus subtil; une phrase normale, une phrase parlée tend toujours à fondre ses parties les unes dans les autres, à égaliser le flux de la pensée; elle progresse somme toute selon un devenir en apparence inorganisé; dans la maxime, c'est tout le contraire; la maxime est un bloc général composé de blocs particuliers; l'ossature –et les os sont des choses dures – est plus apparente: spectaculaire. (Barthes 1972: 71; my emphasis)

Barthes goes on to start a very interesting structural analysis of maxims, in which he describes their metrical characteristics, the closed *–fermée–* quality of their brevity, their semantic contrapositions and other internal relations. In order to explain how *the maxim* produces its meaning, Barthes focuses his attention on just the visible extension of the texts, "toute la structure de la maxime est visible,

⁸ Lewis continues:

A description (of the maxim in its external aspect) tends to consecrate, as it were, the fixity of the text in an essentially static context of isolation. Each maxim is unique, a text in itself, a stylistic gem immediately perceived as literature. The formal independence of each text within the work makes it necessary to relate the maxims on the basis of their internal structure, to look for a pattern or paradigm around which the text of each maxim is constructed. (Lewis 1977: 25-26)

dans la mesure même où elle est erratique”. He thinks that the structurally closed quality of maxims allows a very singular mental operation:

Dans la maxime, l’intellect perçoit d’abord des *substances pleines*, non le flux progressif de la pensée. [...] j’ai le sentiment (d’ailleurs profondément esthétique) d’avoir affaire à une véritable économie *métrique* de la pensée, distribuée dans l’espace fixe et fini qui lui est imparti (la longueur d’une maxime). (1972: 72; my emphasis)

He also thinks that the internal composition of the very singular elements that that structure embraces:

Quels sont ces blocs internes qui supportent l’architecture de la maxime? Ce ne sont pas les parties d’ordinaire les plus vivantes de la phrase, les relations, *mais bien au contraire les parties immobiles, solitaires, sortes d’essences* le plus souvent substantives, mais parfois aussi adjectives ou verbales, dont chacune renvoie à un *sens plein, éternel, autarcique* pourrait-on dire. (1972: 71; italics mine)

One can say that the route of this examination goes from outside to inside. It begins by noticing the visible extension of the structural machinery of maxims and then zooms in on its elements. Such elements are the key for Barthes’ answer. Consequently, his explanation of the great efficacy of the maxim identifies the extraordinary qualities of its internal components (*substances pleines*); which as well as being ‘sorts of essences’ are independent of grammar and syntaxes:

La maxime est un objet dur, luisant –et fragile – comme le corselet d’un insecte... De quoi est-elle faite, cette structure ? De quelques éléments stables, parfaitement indépendants de la grammaire, unis par une relation fixe, qui, elle non plus, ne doit rien à la syntaxe. (1972: 71; my emphasis)

Following the argument, we may conclude that the brevity of maxims supports closed structures that are cut off from discourse, structures that by establishing structurally hard and internal restrictions allow the boom of meaning: “la structure est là, qui retient la sensibilité, l’épanchement, le scrupule, l’hésitation, le regret, la persuasion aussi, sous un appareil castrateur” (1972: 71).

The influence of Barthes’ essay may be shown by the frequency with which it is quoted as an important reference in articles of divulgation. However, when I read this structural explanation for the first time, despite it seeming fairly impressive, I still could not suppress a rather childish suspicion in my head. It was really difficult for me to accept that the explanation of a rather impressive production of meaning was, paradoxically, due to that peculiar brevity –one which was cut off from a major discourse. (How could all that kind of magic be reduced to such a small and closed thing?).

My position is slightly different to the one sustained by Barthes, Morson and others. I do not believe that aphorisms are isolated from any context, but that some aphorisms do not rely on immediate linguistic context –that they instead, let us say, ‘invoke’ their appropriate contexts. Within the appropriate cultural context, their apparent contextual isolation can be perceived by their users as a signal to trigger a proper generic reading. Some words of a French scholar, in an article about the subject, give us a glimpse at the effects of blank space as a signal to readers of the genre:

Une maxime a-t-elle un contexte? Elle n'en a pas et elle les a tous: un événement, une personne, une autre maxime, toutes les autres maximes, la tradition aphoristique... C'est son ambigüité mais c'est aussi sa position première.
Dans le système de la langue tout a du sens. Même le silence. Dans celui de l'écriture, le blanc aussi signifie.
Le contexte de la maxime est ce blanc dans lequel viennent résonner toutes les autres. C'est dans l'oubli du savoir antérieur qu'une connaissance se forme; c'est sur fond d'absence qu'une perception se forme. Sur quelles absences la maxime et l'aphorisme s'appuient-ils? (Déchery 1995: 8)

To make use of my hypothesis that proposes that *for aphoristic texts, isolation from immediate linguistic surroundings functions as the appropriate context to trigger a generic reading*, we should introduce some distinctions for the treatment of the problematic concept of *context*.

In *Linguistic Criticism*, Roger Fowler distinguishes three types of context: *context of utterance*, *context of culture* and *context of reference*. According to him, context of utterance is “the physical surroundings or ‘setting’; the distribution of the participants vis-à-vis one another [...]; the channel employed [...]”. Context of culture is “the whole network of social and economic conventions, all the institutions and the familiar settings and relationships, constituting the culture at large, especially in so far as these bear on particular utterance contexts, and influence the structure of discourse occurring within them”. Context of reference is “the topic or subject-matter of a text. (The subject-matter which is referred to is often known in linguistics as the *field* or *domain* of a text.)” (Fowler 1996: 112-114).

The Barthesian belief that maxims are isolated from discourse or the idea of Manfred Wolf that “aphorisms do not rely on their context” can be described in different and more specific terms by using Fowler’s categories. Aphoristic texts have a rather unusual context of utterance among written genres - the blank space- which can produce the impression that they are texts *without* or, at least, *before* any context. Although, “It may be plausible to say that the context of *utterance* is peculiar in some literary genres [...] all discourse has a definite context of *culture*, which may –I would say ‘ought to’– be studied as an influence

on the linguistic structure of literary texts, and as a guide to their interpretation” (Fowler 1996: 114). On the other hand, accustomed to other types of context of utterance in which text is surrounded by more text, some critics may dismiss the codes of the aphoristic tradition. Understandably, when their attention is not directed towards the text but to its environment, their unawareness of the multi-layered complexity of relations of text-context might lead these critics to confuse their observation of an absence of any other text with an absence of any contextual surrounding. Once this ‘visual effect’ has produced such confusion, the explanation may take the form of two different hypotheses: aphoristic texts exist *without* or, at least, *before* context.

The existence of hypotheses which seem to be equating or reducing *context* to *visual linguistic surrounding* underlines the necessity of explaining relations between some aphoristic texts and their contexts. Such a necessity can be satisfied by pointing out the relation between context of culture and context of utterance and the relation between context of utterance and context of reference. Quite simply, the knowledge of the genre held by its users constitutes a cultural context in which aphorisms’ context of utterance becomes functional. For the users of the aphoristic tradition, context of utterance is not atypical and as soon as they scan the page, they ‘know’ what sort of text they are dealing with. However, their knowledge is cultural and, as the case of the above assumption (that aphorisms are philosophical) illustrates, it might be biased. To talk about the second type of relation, we must keep in mind that relations between context of utterance and context of reference always occur within the larger frame of a cultural tradition. Currently, the widespread convention that aphorisms are philosophical, establishes what sort of topics the texts are dealing with. The majority of contemporary users will assume that aphoristic subject matter is philosophical and they might look at that field as the context of reference in which texts should come into their full meaning.

As has been shown above, the type of aphorisms we are talking about is currently so dominant that it is relatively easy to become familiar with its conventions. Thus the process of interpretation is simplified: users customarily identify aphoristic texts as signs of an inherent philosophical content. Despite this, the link between aphoristic brevity and philosophical content is contingent and the currently accepted belief about aphoristic contents is just a characteristic of the way of seeing texts of a particular group. Nonetheless, when users are not conscious of the use that they are making of familiar conventions, it is relatively easy to mistake a cultural way of seeing something for the objective nature of such a thing.

3. A WRONG BELIEF BUT AN EFFECTIVE CODE: APHORISMS AS A PHILOSOPHICAL GENRE

It is difficult to think of a good reason for maintaining that some topics refuse absolutely to be communicated through textual brevity.⁹ However, evidence that some groups of users have benefited from it more than others, suggest that it does not suit all communicative purposes equally. Nevertheless, this cannot be related to certain essential functions of texts without further examination. Statements claiming ontological qualities for aphorisms determined by their subject matter are rather dubious. When a group of users employ textual brevity to communicate their particular messages, they develop a way of seeing it which is linked to the ways they use it. They modify textual brevity by fitting it into their own particular cultural contexts, determining its functional properties as a communicative channel. In other words, objective textual brevity is never experienced as it is, but apprehended within a tradition. If the brevity of Hippocratic texts was useful to facilitate memorization of information, current philosophical aphorisms might point to other aims. It may even be argued that their probable goal is to generate thinking; something quite different from producing repetition. All this points to the fact that the functions of (brief) texts are not determined by inherent properties or characteristics of those texts, but determined by the needs of a group of users.

If what has been said is true, however, statements about the *objective qualities* of aphorisms have a great value for this research. They can be seen not just as expressions of conventions of the tradition they belong to, but also as a clue to the functions that aphoristic texts perform for a group of users. Users' beliefs about what aphorisms *are* will match the texts' functions. In the case of philosophical aphorisms, for instance, we will need to examine the supposed philosophical character of texts to try to find out what are the functions of aphoristic texts accepted as philosophical. The question will still be complex, because the diversity of the themes associated with philosophy is vast – both from a diachronic and a synchronic point of view – and it might be expected that aphoristic functions will change according to the ideas of philosophy held by different groups of users. In

⁹ I am aware that I have been using 'textual brevity' and 'aphoristic texts' as interchangeable concepts up to this point, but a little explanation of their differences and similarities will be necessary from now on. I understand 'textual brevity' as a mere description of a visual impression regarding the size of texts – I acknowledge the fuzziness of such a description but I do not believe that a clear definition exists –, we can recognize aphorisms as brief texts as we can other kinds of text, such as slogans, proverbs, epigrams, fragments and so on. On the other hand, 'aphoristic texts' is a concept belonging to a smaller field which includes 'originally-intended-aphorisms' and 'aphoristic quotations' (see my article "Aphorisms: Problems of Empirically Based Research"). However, this concept embraces the idea of a generic tradition where the other does not necessarily do so – in other words, I am assuming that, at a certain point in their history, some brief texts have become 'aphoristic' for a group of users.

summary, I would argue that there are no general functions for aphoristic texts; furthermore, one could anticipate that even talking about *a philosophical function* for aphoristic texts would only be a rough generalization.

In this sense can be said that functional advantages of textual brevity will vary depending on communicative purposes. No exception should be made when talking about philosophical purposes (whatever this means). The issue of what sort of philosophical messages could be better communicated by using aphorisms is not a matter for this chapter; nonetheless, a sample of texts, written mostly by philosophers, will give some idea of the diversity of characteristics attributed to ‘philosophical’ aphorisms. For instance: texts with a kind of formal coincidence with truth, the space of a ‘speculation which overcomes ideologies’ (‘riflessione che supera le barriere delle ideologie’) or assertions of the wisest men:

Why we should bother at all with aphorisms – especially since they can be so frustratingly elusive, allusive, and inconclusive. The first reason, I suggest, is that it is these very qualities that truth itself seems to possess. (May 2005: xiv)

Frammento e aforisma nel loro bilicarsi tra letteratura e filosofia, individuo e collettività, si pongono oggi in ultima analisi come il *luogo* di un sapere *plurale*, di una riflessione che supera le barriere delle ideologie nella continua tensione al *essere* autentico dell’uomo. (Pavarini 1996: 565)¹⁰

10A couple of more quotations on this matter:

the writing in Aphorisms hath many excellent virtues, whereto the writing in Method doth not approach.

7. [...] for Aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connexion and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off; so there remaineth nothing to fill the Aphorisms but some good quantity of observation: and therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will attempt, to write aphorisms, but he that is sound and grounded. [...] Aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite me to enquire farther. (Bacon 1869: 172)

The aphorist does not argue or explain, he asserts; and implicit in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers. (Auden 1964)

As a matter of interest, one can read a very suggestive and lucid idea for organizing philosophical uses of aphorisms, in their relation to literature, in “The Aphorism as a Stylistic and Epistemological Ideal” by Josef Fruchtl:

The relation between philosophy and literature or, less specifically, between philosophy and art can be arranged in general according to three, and in particular to six, relationship patterns. The first is an *antagonistic* or *disjunctive* pattern [...]. The second general relationship pattern is that of *complementarity* or *compensation*. [...] The third general pattern is that of *dedifferentiation* or *diffusion* [...] the aphorism as a linguistically distinctive mode of expression [...] is not predestined to dedifferentiate or diffuse the domains, but can be equally employed for the antagonistic and complementary patterns of relations. (Fruchtl 1997: 171-172)

Understandably, the existence of diverse philosophical aphoristic texts constitutes a complication of the question, since it can be expected that such diversity implies the existence of different text-context relations – thus, the existence of different properties of aphoristic texts as a communicative channel. For instance, aphorisms from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* seem to have different relations with the immediate linguistic context than those from La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims*. Most *Tractatus* aphorisms rely on other texts from the collection; for example, the text 4.013 is a commentary on the previous one:

4.013 And if we penetrate to the essence of this pictorial nature we see that this is not disturbed by apparent irregularities (like the use of # and [flat in musical notation] in the score).

For these irregularities also picture what they are to express; only in another way. Therefore, text 4.012, being part of the context of utterance, is the logical reference of 4.013:

4.012 It is obvious that we perceive a proposition of the form *aRb* as a picture. Here the sign is obviously a likeness of the signified. (Wittgenstein 2002: 65)

Without denying the aphoristicity of the texts, the title of Wittgenstein's book is an explicit genre indicator which implies a structural frame for the collection of those brief texts. The same does not happen in *Philosophical Investigations* (assuming for a moment that these texts can be taken for aphorisms), because the idea of treatise does not precede the reading of the book; however, the numeration of texts proposes a reading order. In contrast, the writer of the *Maxims* does not seem to propose a specific reading order or ask the reader to identify the general frame behind his collection of texts; for instance, maxims 25, 26 and 27:

25 *Il faut de plus grandes vertus pour soutenir la bonne fortune que la mauvaise.*
One needs greater virtues to hold out against good fortune than bad. (8)

26 *Le soleil ni la mort ne se peuvent regarder fixement.*
Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily. (8)

27 *On fait souvent vanité des passions même les plus criminelles ; mais l'envie est une passion timide et honteuse que l'on n'ose jamais avouer.*
One often prides oneself on even the most criminal passions; but envy is a timid and shameful passion which one never dares confess. (8)

Furthermore, it would seem that: “*Chaque maxime est indépendante en droit et en fait (elle vaut pour elle-même et elle est citable) et n'a donc pas besoin des autres pour exister. Mais il y a une résonance de forme avec les autres maximes.*”

(Déchery 1995: 7). Therefore, the first type of aphoristic texts (Wittgenstein's texts) does not seem to exist as texts without or before context or as texts which invoke their contexts; in contrast, the *Maxims* seem to do so. In conclusion, the idea that aphorisms are somehow isolated from their context does not apply to the whole group of philosophical texts called aphoristic and, moreover, these books of aphorisms seem to be looking for different kinds of (appropriate) readings. In other words, it would seem that these types of text have different functions as communicative channels.

It can be said that the idea behind this argumentation is simple: any group of users provides and determines the uses of its aphoristic texts according to their cultural background. For instance, in the case of Hippocratic aphorisms, one could see that, to be fully meaningful, such texts would have been interpreted within a context constituted by uses and knowledge of a specific group of medical practitioners. On the other hand, for the case of philosophical aphorisms, the situation might be essentially the same, but a complication has to be added: in contemporary society, different readers may have a very different understanding of what philosophical aphorisms are -one can easily imagine a way of grouping readers with regard to such understandings. It should be added that each group constitutes for itself a (cultural) context for the uses of the genre. Considering this and with regard to philosophical aphorisms, one should expect that different groups would write texts with different characteristics, suitable for different communicative functions. I imagine that the same assumption (that 'aphorisms are philosophical') will have a different effect on the written production of professional philosophers than on that of, for example, people with no formal education and very strong religious beliefs.

4. SOME WORDS ABOUT FOWLER'S CATEGORIES AND SELF-REFERENCE

There is a different kind of complication which should be acknowledged here. It concerns the definition of the context's conceptual categories that we have been using. Fowler's model is convenient in that it shows the multi-layered complexity of the idea of context; however, one has to accept a certain fuzziness when his categories deal with some examples. For instance, Wittgenstein's texts would trouble expectations of a clear distinction between context of reference and context of utterance.

It has been said that context of reference is "the topic or subject-matter of a text. (The subject-matter which is referred to is often known in linguistics as the *field* or *domain* of a text.)" (Fowler 1996: 114). And, also, it has been said that context of utterance is "the physical surroundings or 'setting'; [...] the channel employed" (Fowler 1996: 112). The fact that one of Wittgenstein's aphorisms (text 4.013) refers

to another aphorism (text 4.012) from its own “physical surroundings or ‘setting’” shows that the contexts of reference and utterance of text 4.013 appear to be the same. The complication could be raised in any other case in which a part of a text has as its “topic or subject-matter” (or field of reference) its own context of utterance.

The last example suggests that there is a main complication to Fowler’s model when dealing with short aphoristic texts that refer to themselves. In cases like this it appears that the context of reference of a self-referential utterance is not only its general context of utterance, but the very utterance itself. Since paradoxes are very common among aphoristic texts, self-reference could seem to be a big enough issue to prevent us from using Fowler’s categories. For this reason, it is advisable to view such a complication from a different perspective.

When readers accustomed to the genre pick up a book of aphorisms, they necessarily bring expectations of the genre to the reading. For instance, they might expect paradox because they know it is habitual within the genre. In this sense, it is significant that, in different contexts, the same piece of language will be construed by users in different ways: ‘I am a liar’ written in a book of logic (or a similar text in a book of aphorisms) might have a different relevance to the reader than the same sentence written in the confessions of an unfaithful partner. By using genre indications and other paratextual means, these types of books alert readers to the relevance of their statements’ self-referentiality. In the other type of context, being fussy about logical features of any sentence of the confession would be the last idea to come into the mind of a deceived partner. In both cases, understanding of the context triggers an appropriate reading. However, it could be argued that, in the particular case of aphorisms, readers’ understanding the context(s) relies on assumptions that are previous to the act of reading itself. For example, it has been shown that the assumption which establishes the aphoristic texts’ field of reference (that aphorisms are philosophical) is previous to the reading process. On the other hand, if assumptions about features of the language of aphoristic texts (see below) are triggered by the book as a context of utterance, then readers have an idea about this type of context that, logically, precedes the reading process. In other words, the generic understanding of the contexts that an average reader of aphorisms holds, is culturally given and, therefore, prior to the reading process itself; in contrast, a betrayed partner could not say the same.¹¹

¹¹ This might count as part of the awareness that users have of genre called genre-consciousness. Duff defines genre-consciousness as: “The awareness of genre displayed by particular author or period: an awareness which has both a conscious component, manifest in the explicit use made of generic categories and terminology by writers, critics, booksellers, publishers, librarians and other cultural institutions; and an unconscious element, suggested by the attempts of many writers, readers and critics, especially in the modern era, to conceal or repress their dependence on genre. The forms which genre-consciousness takes, and the intensity with which it is experienced, are subject to both personal and historical variation.” (Duff 2000: xiii)

In general, generic assumptions provide a framework to read texts and, as the example of paradoxes suggests, one could argue that such a framework has to be functioning, even defectively, to allow (some pieces of) language to become problematic for a conceptual description such as Fowler's one. In the act of reading, self-referential aphoristic utterances do not become their own contexts of utterance, because the generic understanding of such a context is a prior condition to the relevance of self-reference. It is only, when discussing categories to organize and describe these generic assumptions, that one may be troubled by some particular texts. Without denying that his model provides a useful tool to gain awareness of the complexity of the subject, we can acknowledge the logical complications of Fowler's concepts.

5. QUANTIFYING TWO CURRENT ASSUMPTIONS TO DELIMIT THE SCOPE OF MY HYPOTHESIS

We can recapitulate the core of the analysis of this article by naming the two assumptions that, as generalizations for the whole group, have become erroneous beliefs about aphoristic texts:

- a) Aphorisms are philosophical
- b) Aphorisms exist isolated from any context

At this point, we can put things more accurately by adding a quantifier to both assumptions and rephrasing **b)**:

- a1) some aphoristic texts are philosophical
- b1) some aphoristic texts give the impression of being isolated from any context

My hypothesis that *assumption a)* is a convention to contextualize aphorisms, has to be adjusted to this panorama. The current mainstream of aphoristic texts includes the belief *aphorisms are philosophical* and obviously such an assumption aids the process of the contextualization of type **a1)** texts, but it works particularly well for texts which fulfil the conditions of both **a1)** and **b1)**. We can identify this (sub) group as:

- c) some aphoristic texts are philosophical *and* give the impression of being isolated from any context.

Since the majority of aphoristic texts are philosophical anyway (i.e., type **a1** texts), the hypothesis that assumption **a**) leads reading expectations to the proper aphorisms' contexts of reference is rather dull; but, when applied to texts **c**), it becomes more interesting: it enhances the peculiar *text–context of reference* relation of this particular type of aphoristic text. It is within the context of such a group of texts that assumption **a**) becomes an indispensable tool of interpretation.

A collection of aphorisms such as the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* helps to illustrate this point. These texts are philosophical but they do not give the impression of being isolated from other texts in their context of utterance. That should also explain why *Tractatus*' texts are usually not quoted out of the context of the book. As it occurs with treatises, to be meaningful, most of the sentences from the book need the other sentences. It can be said that the experience of reading Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is very similar to reading Spinoza's *Ethics* and, in generic terms, it is even comparable with readings of other philosophical treatises.¹²

In contrast, for aphoristic texts of the type **c**), assuming that they are philosophical makes a crucial difference of interpretation, because this belief determines readers' expectations in a specific direction. For instance, readers know that, in principle, these texts should not be seen as a channel for presenting facts or quantitative data: "Aphorisms are not bland generalizations about life, the universe, and everything". (Geary 2005: 15); nor do these texts carry memorisable technical knowledge or specific instructions; for example:

Sí, es necesario padecer; aun en vano, para no vivir en vano.

Yes, one must suffer, even in vain, so as not to have lived in vain. (Porchia 2003: 7-8)

Las certidumbres solo se alcanzan con los pies.

Certainties are arrived at only on foot. (Porchia 2003: 52-53)

In addition to this, the assumption that they should be read as independent from a bigger linguistic textual frame denies the possibility of these texts being

¹² For instance, Berel Lang's words about the point of view of the implied authors of philosophical treatises can be also applied to the *Tractatus*: "(the implied author of treatises) speaks of experience and evidence which is not distinctively his own even when he uses the first person. His voice is bracketed, neutralized: he speaks not for himself but as an observer, recounting descriptions of facts, the referents to which are quite independent of his own existence. He thus assumes that other observers will report on the objects of his attention as he does, once he has directed their attention to them; in his descriptions, the authorial 'we' often replaces the 'I' –not out of humility but in order to expand the writer's authority. [...] Often, first-person pronouns are eliminated altogether in favour of impersonal ones [...] or in favour of the passive voice by which the implied author claims a position vis-à-vis the objects of discourse identical to that of all possible observers: the facts of the matter speak for themselves, in no way determined by any action of *bis*" (Lang 1980: 452)

seen as part of a specialized methodology, based on rigorous rules of logic and coherence or as part of a consistent textual corpus. Furthermore, readers know that texts do not present an 'objective' point of view; on the contrary, they can expect discursive practices that allow authorial subjectivity: (Aphorisms) are deeply personal and idiosyncratic statements, as unique to an individual as a strand of his or her DNA (Geary 2005: 15).

Readers should be prepared to deal with figurative, elliptical or even ambiguous language; and, when looking for sense, the clue that, beyond the text, philosophical themes are the area under discussion, is not redundant, because it orientates their search. In other words, knowing the context of reference triggers cultural responses associated with such a field.

In summary, two functions of the assumption 'aphorisms are philosophical' can be identified. First, the assumption helps readers to see texts as belonging to a stock of traditions of thinking, beliefs and ideologies that are referred to by the word 'philosophical'. Second, it orientates the generic reading process towards establishing associations between texts and a stock of traditions. The first function is clearly an epistemological one: when readers assume that aphorisms are philosophical, they will see them in a specific way, as texts that somehow deal with the topics of philosophy. The second function is a semiotic one, it applies only to type **c**) texts and it triggers a generic reading attitude in which the reader is disposed to seek meaning within a system of codes and conventions - by using the text as a clue to find sense and by looking for the probable relations that the text establishes with the tradition that it can be associated with. In other words, the assumption helps to contextualize texts by announcing the existence of important, although not evident, relations between these texts and their context of reference; *i. e.*, it is an assumption that suggests how to use this kind of text.

6. DISTILLED OR BORROWED WISDOM? THE TECHNICAL MEANS OF APHORISMS

On another level, all this suggests that if we are to understand how type **c**) texts work, we might not only focus on their supposed content ("The wisdom of the wise and the experience of the ages"), but also on technical means to establish relations between texts and their contexts of reference. The idea of the aphorism as pure and concentrated wisdom is one that currently enjoys a considerable popularity.¹³ The emphasis of such an assumption has also stipulated an aura of

¹³It could be argued that the current aura of wisdom around aphorists has been promoted by the confusion of categories (that has mixed up different types of epistemic texts, such as proverbs with aphorisms) and by Nietzsche's strident opinions about his work:

He who writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, he wants to be learned by heart.

wisdom or authority for aphoristic creators¹⁴ and it has strongly determined the focus of hypotheses about their creative work. For instance, in “The Rhetoric of the Aphorism,” G. S. Morson speculates about sources and creators and rhetoric of the aphorism:

3. One does not speak an aphorism, one voices it. It seems to come partly from outside oneself. The dark god of light speaks through us as he speaks through the Delphic oracle. In many cases, the speaker, like the Pythoness, does not quite seem to grasp the significance of what he says. (Morson 2006: 260)

The Wisdom appears to someone who senses it as exceeding his understanding and perhaps as doing him no good. Oedipus assumes that wisdom can be used: this is why he is a man of action. But the deepest truths are too mysterious to act upon. Tiresias’ aphorism: “Wisdom is a dreadful thing when it brings no profit to its possessor. I knew this well, but forgot”.

An aphorism is not so much proclaimed, as posed. Oedipus learns: the wisdom was there, but it hid itself. It is now partly visible, but ultimately still obscure.¹⁵

The extraordinary character of the aphoristic writer is also suggested in the

In the mountains the shortest route is from peak to peak: but for that you must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks: and those to whom they are addressed should be big and tall of stature. [...]

Who of you can at once laugh and be exalted?

He who climbs upon the highest mountain laughs at all tragedies, real or imaginary.

Courageous, untroubled, mocking, violent – that is what wisdom wants us to be: wisdom is a woman and loves only a warrior. (Nietzsche 1977: 17)

¹⁴ It is significant that in “Hard lines with a Slow burn”, an interview with an aphorist, Susan Mansfield writes:

Don Paterson begins by apologising that he doesn’t talk in sentences. I tell him not to worry, nobody does. (Mansfield 2004)

¹⁵ Morson continues as follows:

5. An aphorism’s source sometimes seems to partake of mystery. We know almost nothing of Lao Tzu (Old Master, a name that is not his true name), who is shrouded in mystery. Pascal’s thoughts are traditionally the product of his “nights of fire,” in which he was seized by a truth beyond himself. Wittgenstein intimates that his basic ideas have come to him outside of rational discourse, so that they cannot be communicated except to someone who has experienced the same truths. [...]

8. We also sense it to be fitting that collections of aphorisms are often made by others. Pascal did not assemble the *Pensées*, nor Heraclitus his fragments, nor Lao Tzu the *Tao Te Ching*. It is as if the author were constantly engaged in interminable probing, or lost in the mystery, and so could not return for a complete statement, which therefore had to be assembled, with no great authority, by others.

9. [...] The aphorism is spoken by a dark God in the incomplete language of mystery. [...]

10. Because it is about what cannot be known, the rhetoric of the aphorism is often negative: the way that can be spoken of is not the true way; “pure and perfect sorrow is as impossible as pure and perfect joy (Tolstoy).” (Morson 2006: 260-261)

article “Paradox in the Aphorisms of La Rochefoucauld and some Representative English Followers,” in which Harold Pagliaro writes:

The best remembered aphorists have *contrived to state new truths* in brief and telling ways. Less fascinated than most authors with leaf, twig, and branch, they strike immediately for the pith. Almost every reader of their work first pays tribute to this concentration of effort with the repeated shock of joy and enlightenment that marks his response. It seems likely that such writers try *to achieve a compression of statement* that corresponds to the instantaneous character of their insights. Like Dante, they are stirred by the hope of *economizing glimpses of eternity* into single-worded statements; unlike him, they never quite despair of doing so. (Pagliaro 1964: 42; my emphasis)

In contrast to the common belief that writing aphorisms is an act of compressing wisdom, highlighting the importance of manipulating text-context relations in aphoristic texts (type **c**), would suggest that the use of techniques of reference should be researched as a key aspect in comprehending such texts. Although one could think that we are only switching attention from content (wisdom) to the technical means of aphoristic communication, this perspective of research is indeed opposed to current ideas about the genre. For instance, if we do not postulate wisdom as the inherent content of aphorisms, then the concept of allusion can (and should) become more important than a metaphor such as distillation or the ideas of reduction or compression, which have frequently been used to describe the writing process of aphoristic texts. It is clear that concepts like ‘distillation’ suit the preconception of the genre as concentrated wisdom within a small format; and from this perspective, it makes sense to think that the key problem, when crafting aphorisms, is how to obtain the essence of wisdom so that it can be poured into a small flask:

Aphorism, a statement of some general principle, expressed memorably by *condensing* much wisdom into few words [...]. (Baldick 1990; my emphasis)

But, if allusion is an important part of the solution, the craft of the aphorist, instead of being a kind of purification of knowledge, would seem rather to have something of a pirates’ occupation: hooking and exploiting the wisdom of others. On the other hand, the idea that an important creative skill of aphorists is to link texts and background of reference, differs appreciably from the idea that the aphoristic craft is a process of reduction in which compressing a text is more important than creating it. Making relations by using aphoristic codes and conventions seems to be a parasitic ability, though a less simple one than a mere compression of text. Thus, without denying in principle the aphorist’s wisdom, loose statements about it should be guarded against, keeping in mind that a

creative manipulation of second-hand knowledge can impress unduly. It may be important to make clear that my intention here is not to underrate aphoristic writers' qualities, but to avoid hasty generalizations about their knowledge and abilities, that can be created by overpacked words such as wisdom, truth or thinking.¹⁶ Furthermore, it can also be expected that an enquiry into aphoristic means of reference will help us to rethink some general beliefs about aspects of the relation between aphorisms and truth (see below) and, also, about some texts' reading effects.

In general, aphorisms are considered the expression of a general truth:

Aphorism, a terse statement of a truth or dogma; a pithy generalization, which may or may not be witty. The proverb (*q.v.*) is often aphoristic; so is the maxim (*q.v.*). A successful aphorism exposes and condenses at any rate a part of the truth, and is an aperçu or insight. [...] The aphorism is of great antiquity, timeless, and international. [...] the common stock of wisdom and knowledge everywhere has scattered these nuggets of truth in the writings and sayings of many civilizations. (Cuddon 1977)¹⁷

This popular belief has to take into account the frequent contradiction of aphorisms' truths. As has been noticed by some, it is not difficult to find aphorisms that patently contradict with each other; William Mathews says: "All maxims have their antagonist maxims; proverbs should be sold in pairs, a single one being but a half truth".*¹⁸ On account of this, it could be argued that if there is not a consistent

¹⁶ It is difficult to agree with generalizations in any event; for instance, what the Finnish aphorist Yrjö Kivimies' states about the genre: "Creating aphorisms is a danger for culture, because it turns us away from deep and far-reaching thinking, that culture is based on."¹⁸ Such a statement seems to me to be a simplification as dubious as its contrary, the famous Nietzschean text about the eternity of aphorisms:

To create things on which time tries its teeth in vain; to endeavour to achieve a little immortality in form, *in substance*— I have never been modest enough to demand less of myself. The aphorism, the apophthegm, in which I am the first among Germans to be a master*, these are the forms of 'eternity'; my ambition is to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book - what everyone else does *not* say in a book... (Nietzsche 1998: 75)

* Other translations of this sentence emphasize the sense of superiority over temporality: "in which I am the first master among Germans".

¹⁷ See also:

A pithy observation which contains a general truth (Pearsall 2002)

Any principle or precept expressed in few words; a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import; a maxim. (OED 2000)

An aphorism is a pithy statement or maxim expressing some general or gnomic truth about (human) nature. (Wales 2001)

¹⁸ This observation is valid for other brief texts of epistemic content:

Proverbs often contradict one another, as any reader soon discovers. The sagacity that advises us to look before we leap promptly warns us that if we hesitate we are lost; that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but out of sight, out of mind. —Leo Rosten.*

Almost every wise saying has an opposite one, no less wise, to balance it. —Santayana, *Essays*.*
Proverbs contradict each other. That is the wisdom of a nation. (Lec 1962)

body of knowledge to which type **c)** aphoristic texts can refer, but a stock of traditions of thinking, beliefs and ideologies, incompatibility should be expected. Moreover, the incompatibility will be of different kinds; for instance, it would not only relate to the situation of deciding between the appropriateness of one of two opposed statements (as in the case mentioned by Leo Rosten, see previous note), but also to the case of two general statements that exclude each other for any particular situation (for instance, one suggesting that, for human beings, the existence of god is a disgrace and another claiming that, on the contrary, it is the best of luck). In the first situation of incompatibility, there is a problem of application; in the second one, the opposition is of an ideological nature. Logically, if different systems of beliefs coexist as a field of reference, then there is not a consistent whole which could grant coherence between aphoristic texts. It could be said that this argument seems to be superfluous, when one remembers that, usually, generic texts do not have to express a homogeneous system of thinking just because they are classified within the same genre. However, the emphasis on the contradiction of some aphoristic texts is a sign for the need for an explanation. Furthermore, it shows an aspect of the current way of seeing this kind of text -in which the idea of truth and the idea of coherence that usually follows it-, are part of the common assumptions.

7. CONCLUSIONS

I believe that our cultural way of seeing, determines the current understanding of aphoristic texts. Therefore, in this analysis of beliefs about the subject-matter of aphoristic texts, I have given preference to a belief that enjoys great popularity (that aphoristic subject matter is inherently philosophical) over a particular hypothesis (for example, Stern's idea that the degree of integration of subject-matter with form, provides a criterion of the aphoristic identity (Stern, 1963: 196-198)). Thus my working question is not one with an ontological emphasis, such as *what are aphorisms*, but with an epistemological one, such as *what are aphorisms for us* (as

*Umberto Eco, of contradictory aphorisms, tells:
(Pitigrilli) drew up lists of maxims by different authors, which certainly contradict each other, and yet seemed always to express an established truth [Inoltre egli elencava massime di autori diversi, certamente contraddittorie tra loro, e che purtuttavia sembravano sempre esprimere una verità assodata]*.*

One only deceives oneself out of optimisms (Hervieu).

One is more often deceived by diffidence than by confidence (Rivarol).

People would be happier if kings were philosophers and philosophers were kings (Plutarch).

The day I want to punish a province I will have it ruled by a philosopher (Frederick II).

(Eco 2004: 68) and *(Eco 2002: 76)

a group of users). This perspective determines an approach in which the important point is not what aphoristic texts are essentially themselves, but how they work for their users –*i.e.* how users make *some* aphoristic texts work. It has been shown that consensus about a common way of seeing aphoristic texts has been mistaken for the objective characteristics of the aphoristic genre. Nonetheless, my critique does not aim to deny the value of commonly accepted perceptions, but instead looks to draw attention to the danger of making conjectures by confusing our habitual ways of thinking with the *nature* of things. Furthermore, I assume that clarifying such habits is a necessary prelude to any agreement about this subject.

There are different types of aphorism and, therefore, the statement ‘aphorisms are philosophical’ is a sweeping generalization that ignores the variety of this generic tradition. As the abundance of one species does not allow us to take it as the whole genre, one could try to save this proposal of characterization by arguing that the philosophical aphorism is a branch of a group of so-called aphoristic texts in which one can also find, for example, the technical aphorism. A version of this way of seeing aphorisms, implies the assumption that their communicative functions relate intrinsically to spheres of specific activities; thus, if there are communicative functions of science, literature and philosophy, then we should have scientific aphorisms, literary aphorisms and philosophical aphorisms (*see* Stern, 1963). Unfortunately (besides the objection that this way of classifying a communicative genre, which replicates our current division of fields of knowledge, is as provisional or/and artificial as such division), this proposal has disadvantages. The difficulty in answering the question *what is philosophy* relates to some of them: it is easy to imagine complications when making distinctions between the philosophical field and other fields (for instance, between philosophy and literature) and within the philosophical field itself; thus, it would be difficult to reach general agreement on what is and what is not a philosophical aphorism and to establish distinctions between different types of philosophical aphorisms. In addition, it can be the case that different fields of knowledge share similar communicative functions, for instance didactic functions, making it somewhat clumsy to label didactic brief texts as a philosophical or as a literary genre because of their content, when such texts seem to be functionally the same. In other words, a dismissive claim such as ‘the aphorism is philosophical’ is as similarly awkward as saying ‘the essay is a philosophical genre.’

The fact that aphorisms have currently been identified with the label from a field of knowledge, could explain some flaws in the ongoing theoretical discussion on the genre. As I hope this article has shown, on a semiotic level, it also explains how the label ‘philosophical,’ although very vague, is very effective as a convention to decode most of the aphoristic texts currently read and produced. In this context, ideas related to the most popular types of text have been generalized

to the whole generic group. As this generalization suits current publishing interests very well, goes unchallenged, and is even promoted by expert users of the genre (such as editors and writers), one can expect that it will survive its exceptions helping the decoding process of the mainstream of aphoristic texts and, of course, overshadowing a clearer understanding of the whole subject.

As an afterthought, it can be added that the word “philosophical” applied to brief, so-called aphoristic texts hints at the history of a generic textual tradition of epistemic contents, which actually goes beyond boundaries of past and present philosophy. Since La Rochefoucauld, modern and contemporary developments of aphorisms have changed or weakened the epistemic characteristics of the genre - see, for example, the *Maxims* and Don Paterson’s *The Book of Shadows*. However, such historical background to the genre constitutes a resource for aphorists and they can take advantage of it to communicate with their audience - either to write according to their generic expectations or against them: the practical understanding of writers of aphorisms allows them to manipulate -and change - codes of the genre. Such a process of change has made most critical definitions of the genre anachronistic. It is not surprising that those who rely on them to wholly understand aphorisms, are usually amazed at the unsurpassable complications of theorizing about the genre (see, Eco, 2004: 62-64).

Finally, turning to the first belief analysed in this chapter - that *aphorisms seem to exist without or before context* -, we have seen that such an idea comes from a poor understanding of the text-context relations, which allows the confusion of the visual surroundings of an aphorism with its context. From a general perspective, this idea is also related to another common belief about aphoristic texts that *aphorisms are self-contained*¹⁹ (another generalization that dismisses texts with another text-context of utterance relation, such as *Tractatus*’ aphorisms -and which would be the theme of another analysis). Studied on its own, the belief that *aphorisms exist without or before context* would seem plausible, but when it is set among common beliefs on the genre (such as codes and conventions), it becomes naïve. Quite simply, for those who read aphoristic texts, the belief that *aphorisms are philosophical* provides that missing context: the philosophical one.

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¹⁹ See for instance: “Now we assume that the aphorism is distinct and self-contained – that it is a prose genre of its own; and by ‘self-contained’ we mean nothing more mysterious than that as it is printed on the page it requires no further words, on that page, before or after it, to achieve its effect, which is an illumination of mind.” (Stern 1963: 194)

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