

10:00–11:30 What Is an Aphorism?

Does brevity define the aphorism?

Or is it defined by a special kind of truth-claim? Is it only sententious maxims or pithy quips that are entitled to be called aphorisms, or may other brief prose compositions also lay claim to it? What is the difference between a fragment and an aphorism? Is there a rhetoric of brevity? An examination of attempts by some modern continental philosophers and theorists (including Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes) to privilege the de-stabilising, unsettling and open-ended fragment over the oracular completeness of the aphorism, and briefly examine some of the philosophical assumptions behind this privileging.

Stephen Clucas: Reader in Early Modern Intellectual History, Birkbeck, University of London

When Very Little Is Required in the Classroom: On Teaching the Long-Winded Writer to Write Short

They come to write novels, stories, plays, and poems; what happens when a teacher insists students write aphorisms instead? Professor Levine explores the pleasures and dangers of using the aphorism as a crash course in grammar and style.

Sara Levine, Associate Professor, MFA in Writing Program, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago

The aphorism as philosophy

Aphorisms, at their best, embody at least three features of philosophy as an enterprise: the descriptive, the speculative and the inevitably open-ended. Their condensed, allusive style enables them to do so in a manner peculiarly suited to our contemporary tendency to see all attempts to formulate truths as, at best, provisional, unfinished, partisan. The tease at the heart of the aphoristic style – to express an enigma with maximum precision; to phrase a dogmatic utterance as question-begging; to reverse or dissolve hallowed distinctions between good and bad, true and false – is meant in deadly earnest. Since at least the mid-19th century, aphorisms have been a principal weapon in the West's peculiar urge to destroy all so-called 'totalizing' ideologies and systems of thought; to be ironical about just about everything except irony; and to laud the modesty of the partial, the experimental and the gestural over the grandiosity of the final, the canonical and the all-encompassing. And yet the modesty of the aphoristic style is largely spurious. Aphorisms do, indeed, make claims to 'totality', even if they merely point to it rather than attempt to state it. An interesting fact: in the modern West, aphorisms have flourished in the two philosophical cultures most dedicated to system-building – Germany and France – and have, by comparison, languished in the anti-systematic English-speaking nations. This raises the question: if the claim of the modern aphoristic tradition to abjure and undermine system-building is fake, is this fakery a strength or a weakness, a 'disguise' that is essential to the power of the aphorism, or a contemptible vanity inherent in the genre?

Simon May, College Research Fellow in Philosophy, Birkbeck, University of London; author of *The Little Book of Big Thoughts*

The aphorism as truth-vehicle — its successes and failures

Roger Scruton, author, philosopher, and research professor for the Institute for the Psychological Sciences

11:45–1:15 International Perspectives

German aphorisms

An introduction to the German Aphorists Convention and the activities of the Deutsches Aphorismus-Archiv Hattingen (DaphA), with a short aphorism video.

Friedemann Spicker, co-founder of the German Aphorism Convention and the German Aphorism Archive, and Jurgen Wilbert, author, aphorist and co-founder of the German Aphorism Convention and the German Aphorism Archive

Aphorisms in French

Philippe Moret, author of *Tradition et modernité de l'aphorisme*

Finnish aphorisms: Between poetry and philosophy

The Finnish aphoristic tradition, from humorous observations on life to dark comments on society.

Sami Feiring, chairman of the Aphorism Association of Finland

Serbian satirical political aphorisms

An introduction to the Belgrade Aphoristic Circle and Serbian satirical aphorisms, plus some thoughts on the challenges of visually illustrating aphoristic thought, using *Aphocalypse Now* — an upcoming feature-length documentary on Serbian aphorisms—as an example.

Boris Mitic, Serbian documentary filmmaker, director of a film about the Belgrade Aphoristic Circle

1:15–2:30 Lunch

2:30–4:00 Aphorisms: Practitioners' Perspectives

Don Paterson, Scottish poet and aphorist

All Work is the Avoidance of Harder Work: How Aphorisms Happen

We work on a poem or essay, we write it, create it. But we don't work on a word: We choose it, or it chooses us, or it occurs to us. Somewhere in between are the wisecrack, the one-liner, the aphorism: They may be the involuntary work of an instant. Or not. When they are not, revision may feel like rotation or recombination – or juggling. The same or synonymous words in slightly different order may be the difference between flat and sharp. As with chemical

compounds, shape is everything: The same atoms in different arrays may have utterly different properties.

James Richardson, American poet, aphorist, and Professor of English and Creative Writing, Princeton University

The Ideal Moments for Thinking Are the Intervals between One Thought and Another

The experience of the “empty mind” is the mission of Zen philosophy. To reach this state, Zen masters use the koan, a very strange and short question that surprises students and helps stop usual ways of thinking. Are Zen koans the ancestors of aphorisms? Can aphorisms open Western minds as koans open Eastern ones?

Fulvio Fiori, Italian author, playwright and aphorist

Aphorisms: witty, provocative, enlightening, helpful, kind

An exploration and demonstration of helpful aphorisms related to Hellinger’s work with family constellations, a form of therapy that explores an individual’s psychological growth within the context of his or her family relationships.

Bert Hellinger, German psychologist and aphorist

4:15–5:45 Aphorisms: Personal Perspectives

Optimists Write Badly: Are aphorists pessimists?

Aphorists are often charged with being the ultimate pessimists, because their sayings are often interpreted as negative or cynical. But are aphorists inherently pessimistic? A look at some of the most cynical aphorists, and how they might, in fact, be the ultimate optimists.

James Geary, author of *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism* and *Geary’s Guide to the World’s Great Aphorists*

A.C. Grayling: Topic to be confirmed

Author and professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London

In The Beginning Was The Joke...

John Lloyd takes the view that the universe is conscious and meaningful and that its underlying state of mind is cheerfulness. He argues that the upshot of this is that good jokes and good aphorisms (which are often the same thing) are a way of describing the universe quite as valid as quantum physics or relativity.

John Lloyd, producer of *Not the Nine O’clock News*, *Spitting Image*, *Blackadder*, and *QI*