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Towards a poietic approach to the history of 17th century philosophy

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This paper proposes a methodological approach to the history of philosophy, connecting the history of philosophy with the *theory of art*, an affinity which leans on a comparative examination of the *history of philosophy* and the *history of art*. The tradition of texts belonging to the *theory of art* addresses the rules and regulations of artistic production according to specific domains of production. Some of the art theoretical texts were written by philosophers (like Aristotle's *Περὶ ποιητικῆς* [c. 335 BCE] or Descartes' *compendium musicae* [1619]), but most were written by practitioners of the arts (for example Vitruvius or Alberti). The paper suggests that a fruitful affinity is found between philosophical methods and art-theoretical thought, notably when examining the history of philosophy in the early modern period. The paper examines what happens when we take the theory of art and put it into practice in the historical study of philosophy. In this framework, philosophy itself may be viewed as a poietical, productive activity (from the Greek *poiein*, *ποιεῖν*, to produce or to make), and philosophical works will be examined as realizations of newly formulated ideas aimed at solving specific, often already given, philosophical problems.

One should differentiate between art-theoretical thought and the philosophical domain of "aesthetics". As a philosophical domain, "aesthetics" was initiated not before the 18th century. As a philosophical domain, aesthetics was initially interested in examining the effects of artistic experiences on various audiences. In contrast, the conceptual framework of the theory of art, which was already written in antique times and reached an apogee in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, addresses the author of the work, and is interested to suggest normative and even prescriptive ways to realize a certain kind of work.

The poietic approach to philosophy has essential historical aspects. This is because *philosophy's past*, or *tradition*, make an inherent part of the philosophical work itself: it is not that the history of the philosophical art is merely "enriching" or "interesting": the philosophical art embodies a continuous, ongoing, constantly extending chain of productions of relations to that art's past. Philosophical poiesis finds new solutions to old problems; it continuously produces new ideas that result from variations in the relations between an act of production and its precedents. The poietic approach to philosophy concentrates on the production of the work and on the active producer of philosophical work: the philosopher. The philosopher, in this framework, is considered a generative agent, the one who produces the philosophical work, and the poietic historian's task is to trace back the ongoing process of development of that agent's tools. The poietic approach indeed necessitates the productive unit of an "author," serving as a realizer or a generator of the philosophical work; however, one can discuss what is included in the identity of that "author." For example, the "author" can consist as a cluster of philosophical workers or even what can be understood as a philosophical laboratory, or a philosophical workshop.

The philosopher's output is viewed in the first place as a *work*, that is, as a *product*, and philosophy itself is referred to as productive knowledge, that is, as a *techné* (τέχνη). The poietic approach to philosophy refers to philosophy itself as a tool-making activity. The poietic account of the philosophical work can include an examination of all the by-products of the philosophical worker, for example his or her writings, the philosophical tokens that she or he borrowed from other philosophies, his or her correspondences, the criticism that their philosophy was the object of, but also the various editions of their works, and even the material conditions or milieus within which they were active. The end of the paper argues that the poietic approach is especially suited to the study of *early modern philosophy*, leaning on direct quotes from René Descartes declaring his philosophical method as imitating the method of the architect.