

Reading Philosophy - "Preface to Philosophy," by Mark B. Woodhouse

Going hand in hand with doing philosophy is the art of reading philosophy. What you read in philosophy naturally provides much of the material with which you can become critically involved.

What counts as philosophical work depends of course on what counts as philosophy. What counts as philosophy is itself a complex question for which there are no absolutely fixed answers. Similarly, there are no hard and fast rules for telling whether a book is or is not a work of philosophy. Philosophy books can be found outside the philosophy sections of libraries, and philosophical arguments can be found outside philosophy books. That a book does not have 'philosophy' in its title is no reason to suppose that you will not find interesting philosophical ideas in its pages.

There are many ways to avoid reading original selections of philosophy, if you really wish to. But there are two reasons why it is not in your best interests to do this. First, there is a tremendous sense of personal satisfaction and fulfillment to be had by engaging philosophers directly in their written works. You are forced to turn in upon yourself and to explore attitudes and abilities you may never before have suspected. In this sense, reading original philosophy is (or can be) an exercise in self-realization. Secondly, by taking the direct route to the philosophers themselves, you will as a rule gain a depth and lastingness of knowledge that surpasses the superficial understanding reached by way of the shortcuts. Taking shortcuts – for example, turning to an outline of philosophers' principal views – often reduces to a process of memorizing facts that you may or may not understand, and quickly forget. Direct, critical examination of the philosophers themselves is a process that tends to become a part of you. And there is no need to emphasize that the direct approach pays handsome rewards when it comes to getting the most out of your philosophy course.

Preparing to Read Philosophy

Reading philosophy can be one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences of your college life. But there are a few obstacles along the way for which you should be prepared. The ideas that philosophers propose and examine can be unusual enough, but the situation is often complicated by the way they express their thoughts. What has come down to us ranges widely from collections of notes prepared by students, to private meditations, to arguments in the style of geometrical proofs, to dialogues, to straightforward prose. You may find not only difficult worlds but also complicated sentences, sometimes written in the style of another age.

Philosophers often take a great deal for granted in their readers, as regards both intellectual background and the ability to read well. Usually they expect their readers to be fellow philosophers or intellectuals. The feeling that philosophical writings ought to be instantly understandable may persist because we like to think of ourselves as amateur philosophers. But even amateur philosophizing takes work and practice. And doing this will inevitably involve you in reading works of philosophy, many of which were written

in a way to/which you may not be accustomed. The following are a few points to keep in mind as you get started.

- First, when you sit down to read, give yourself enough time to get into the material – at least an hour, preferably more. As should be clear by now, philosophy involves much more than just soaking up words; you need to go beyond the words to penetrate the ideas themselves. The "twenty-minute scan" approach to a chapter in a history or sociology text, say, may work for those areas sometimes. In philosophy it is worthless. Better not to read at all than to read too hastily in philosophy. Moreover, because reading philosophy requires much concentration, you should choose a time when other matters are not weighing heavily on your mind – to the extent this is possible in college life.
- Secondly, reading philosophy is easier when you keep the momentum going, rather than using a stop-and-go approach. In practical terms, this means reading a little philosophy well each day, rather than cramming a lot in whenever you can. Of course, keeping the momentum going is good for any subject. However it is more important to do so in philosophy because of its unusual and sometimes more difficult nature. If you let too much time pass between readings, you will feel that you are always starting over again.
- Thirdly, keep a good dictionary handy, as well as a glossary or two of philosophical terms. The dictionary will not help much with technical philosophical terms, but it will be very important in clarifying other unfamiliar terms that may be sprinkled throughout a philosophical piece – terms like 'intrinsic,' 'omniscient,' 'ineffable.' For special philosophical terms in the piece you are reading, a glossary should be of some help. But glossaries cannot possibly cover all the terms you will come across, not do they cover all of the terms' varied meanings.
- Finally, as much as possible, keep your personality removed from the material you are reading. In philosophy, personal likes and dislikes take a back seat to giving and examining reason. You are not entering a private debate to be won or lost; you are looking for the truth, or the closest thing to it. If you happen to have any particular attitudes about the subject you are reading, you had best bring them to the surface and reflect on them for a few minutes. The purpose of doing this is not to establish a standard against which to test the reading, to decide for example, "I'm religiously oriented, so what this philosopher says will be judged accordingly." Rather, the purpose is to help neutralize any biases or inclinations that might unconsciously color your reading, either in favor of or against the author.

Reading for Understanding

The cardinal rule in reading philosophy is to read each work or selection at least twice. Each of these readings should be directed at a different goal. The first should be directed at understanding, the second at criticism. We shall discuss the goal of understanding in this section and the goal of criticism in the next. Reading for understanding begins with an open mind. Since you are attempting in this reading simply to grasp meaning, you

should give the author every chance to make that meaning clear to you. There are four ways to reach this goal: (1) develop a preliminary understanding; (2) employ the principle of charity; (3) read actively, and (4) relate passages to relevant ideas. We shall discuss each of these methods in turn.

Develop a Preliminary Understanding. Your first task in developing a preliminary understanding is to get a grip on the work or selection as a whole. What is its general perspective? You must see not only the trees but also the forest, and seeing the forest now will help you to see the trees later. Very often the author will have given clues to help you. Such clues may include introductions and tables of contents in books and introductory paragraphs or sections in articles – even the titles of the works themselves. You should read with particular care the introductions where authors may explain, for example, their point of views or the scope of their work. Anthologies are a special case, since their introductions are written by editors, not the authors themselves. You should not necessarily regard the editor's introduction as stating absolutely what each of the pieces involves. For it is possible for an editor (or anyone) to miss, or misrepresent, one or more of the key ideas in someone else's work. Even the title the editor selects for the piece can have certain connotations that the author might wish to have avoided. Editors, can, of course, be very helpful in introducing you to a piece. The advice here is merely that you proceed with caution.

As a second preliminary step, ask yourself how you might argue for the author's thesis. Suppose the author claims that God does not exist. What arguments can you imagine for anyone's claiming this? Have you learned of some arguments from other sources? If so, how might they be used to defend the author's thesis? Taking such a sympathetic stance may be difficult, even impossible when you don't know anything at all about the subject. It may even be distasteful to you and perceived as "dangerous" in some circles. Yet stepping into the author's shoes is worthwhile for two reasons. First, it will help open your mind so that you can better understand the author's claims. Secondly, it will help you appreciate the author's work when you have understood it. There is no easier way to misunderstand someone than to being by thinking, "I know what the author is going to say, and I'm certain it can't be true – no matter what reasons the author gives." Your concern in the first reading is with understanding, not with truth. "Still," you may say, "there are times when I simply cannot deny what I feel about a certain philosophical thesis, no matter what the reasons are." Very well. It is not suggested that you pretend to be somebody you are not. In those cases where you feel very strongly, put that feeling to work; let it motivate you to understand as clearly as possible the author's ideas. Suppose that you have had an abortion and are now reading a piece that is generally antiabortionist. Chances are, you will want to refute this thesis and the arguments supporting it. To do this fairly, you will need to understand exactly what it is you are attempting to refute. And so you should want to understand the ideas all the more clearly. Feelings and attitudes may motivate us to be logical and clear-headed, but in philosophy they should not be used as a substitute for either.

A third preliminary in understanding an author consists in getting tips about the author from your instructor. Most philosophers have distinctive styles and strategies in making

their points. Knowing about these approaches in advance will help you when you plunge into your reading. For example, the central character in most of Plato's dialogues is his teacher, Socrates, into whose mouth he puts most of his positive philosophical ideas. It is easy to misread Socrates if you do not know about his frequent use of irony – saying one thing and meaning the opposite. For instance, in one dialogue Plato has Socrates heap praise upon one character's ability to make lots of money and his belief that making money is the most important part of life. However, the point of giving such praise is to express the view that moneymaking is one of the least important pursuits in life. Knowing about Plato's use of irony in advance would help you in reading his dialogues.

All of this is well and good, you may say, but in general terms exactly what should we be looking for in developing a preliminary understanding? The answer is threefold. (1) You should have a general idea about the problem (or problems) and subject matter the author is dealing with, and whether they are the same thing. For instance, the problem maybe one of justice; the subject matter, fairness. Are they the same thing? (2) You should have some idea about the conclusions that will be defended – for instance, that justice and fairness overlap but are not identical. (3) You should have some idea about how the author intends to proceed. Does the author argue by describing cases that seem to involve fairness but not justice? Of course, these three areas may often be complicated and the answers to your questions far from clear-cut. But you should strive to develop some understanding in each of these areas nonetheless.

Employ the Principle of Charity

Having developed some preliminary understanding, you should use what is called the principle of charity as you read a work. Observing this principle, you should at first construe the text in the most favorable reading. When the text admits of different interpretations, or seems to make little sense in places, or appears contradictory in others, then you should read it in a way that helps make sense and avoids inconsistencies – in short, you should give it the interpretation that would make the author most correct. The principle of charity requires that when you encounter such difficulties in a text, you should assume at first – though you need not in the end – that the fault lies with you, and that it is you who have failed to understand something.

When confronted with passages that seem to make little sense, it is all too easy to conclude that the author is wrong, or foolish, or whatever. Fairness and prudence, however, require that you hold off your critical reading until later. Since you primarily want to understand at this point, you should give the author every benefit of the doubt. Of course, if there are glaring problems, such as a flat contradiction or invalid inference, you should make a note of it, so that you can return to consider it later. If you give the author the benefit of the doubt now, your criticisms later will be all the stronger, being based on the best possible interpretation of what he says now.

For some practice, let's examine a passage from the British philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) and a mistaken criticism that it generated.

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word, all sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... [Yet] what are the aforementioned objects but the little things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? And is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?

This passage from Berkeley, as well as his whole defense of subjective idealism, is remarkable; it states in effect that so-called material things cannot exist unless they are perceived. Now it is very easy to misinterpret Berkeley, to level criticism too hastily. Picking up on such claims as "We only perceive our own ideas," the British writer Samuel Johnson is reputed to have set aside his copy of Berkeley, walked outside, kicked a stone, and declared, "Thus, I refute Berkeley." Did he? Nothing Berkeley says in this passage or elsewhere suggests that stones, chairs, food, houses, mountains, are not compact, hard, or solid. Did Johnson think that Berkeley held that material objects are nothing more than ghostlike entities, that he should be able to walk through walls? If so, he did not give Berkeley the benefit of the doubt and try to make sense of his remarks in the light of his whole work. If Johnson had been more charitable, so to speak, he would never have produced such a misinformed "refutation" of Berkeley.

Reading Actively

Reading philosophy actively means that you are continuously involved in understanding or examining the material at hand. You are not a passive observer, hoping the words will somehow speak for themselves. Reading philosophy is definitely not like reading a newspaper or a history textbook. We shall consider three ways of reading philosophy actively for understanding. First, you should make every effort to keep a set of reading notes, or journal, as you read, in whatever format is most convenient for you. Such notes will preserve a record of your understanding, questions, critical remarks, and possible misunderstandings. It will be potentially helpful for class discussion, term papers, and tests, as well as for your own learning experience. Your notes should begin with a general statement on what the work is all about. This will be based upon the preliminary clues already discussed. You should leave some room on the page for possible revisions as you proceed, for your interpretation may change considerably as your understanding deepens. Each major paragraph and section of the work should be represented in your notes, sometimes with a sentence or two and sometimes with a longer exposition. The first and last sentences of the paragraphs and sections will often contain the key points. Now, there is an important qualification in this procedure. If it is to be successful, you must enter all the key ideas in your own words, with the exception of exact definitions stated by the author. It is a sure sign that you have not understood the author very well if the only way you can express ideas is in the author's words.

To understand something is to be able to relate it to something else, to other words, facts, ideas, and actions. IF you cannot relate a passage to anything – that is, if you cannot state the underlying meaning in your own words – you haven't understood very well. This is the acid test of philosophy, whether you are studying for a test, writing a paper, or reading a work. Of course, you are not necessarily expected to write out the author's point as well or as elegantly as the author. But this is not important now. What is important is that you begin to state ideas in your own words.

Obviously, not everything the author says will be of equal importance. There may actually be quite a bit of sidetracking off to this or that little detail. In general, however, you should be on the lookout for five related items for your journal:

1. Definitions: "By 'morally right' I mean..."
2. Distinctions: "In order to see why philosopher X is mistaken, we should keep in mind the difference between actions done by oneself and actions done for oneself."
3. Conclusions or main themes: "If my arguments are sound, it would appear that religion is not necessary to give meaning to life."
4. Arguments: "If God is dead, and morality is based on religion, then anything is permitted." (Not a sound argument).
5. Overall significance, from the author's perspective: "I may not have shown that materialism is true, but I have at least given reasons for supposing that dualism is false."

Of course, your journal will contain other kinds of information, too; but if you read actively and purposively, looking for definitions, arguments, and so forth, then your understanding will be increased, and your notebook will be more than just disconnected sentences. For practice, let's read through the following passage from the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre:

Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism...But what do we mean by this, if not that man has a greater dignity than a stone or table? For we mean that man first exists, that is, that man first of all is the being who hurls himself toward a future and who is conscious of imagining himself as being in the future. Man is at the start a plan which is aware of itself, rather than a patch of moss, a piece of garbage, or a cauliflower.

Like most philosophical passages, this one will come more clearly into focus as you read further. Yet even in the space of a few short sentences, Sartre has covered quite a bit of ground. Your reading notes might include the following: "First principle of existentialism. Man is the being who makes himself. Man differs from other objects in that he (1) has greater dignity, (2) conceives of his future, and (3) is aware of himself. Sartre emphasizes self-determination, but what about environmental conditioning?" Of course, our own

notes might include more or fewer comments. Note, however, the quality of this journal entry. It has not only captured the main points in the paragraph but it has also ordered and posed them in a creative way that shows that the reader has worked at understanding, rather than merely repeated what Sartre said. In addition, in the last sentence of the entry, a critical question is raised that may require attention at a later time.

Should you not have the time to keep a notebook or set of reading notes, you may find it helpful to use a second, shorter method. This is the method of stating out loud the main points of key paragraphs, sections, and chapters. It is absolutely necessary that you say, rather than merely think, what the point is. Speak to a friend, a wall or mirror, anything, but say it aloud. Thinking it silently to yourself usually just does not work well unless you are already an advanced student of philosophy. Keeping it to yourself allows too much fudging with half-baked ideas and intuitions., often backed up with some often misplaced reassurance like “Oh well, I know what I mean.” When you hear what you are thinking, it will appear quite different to you and force you to be a little more honest with yourself. Try it and see!

Finally, there is the old standby method, that of underlining or “highlighting” passages and making marginal notes. It takes less time but tends also to be less helpful than the other approaches. This is because underlining in particular has a way of simply drawing one’s attention to a passage without requiring much intellectual involvement. Of course, with this method, as with the others, you will be looking for the key factors: definitions, arguments, overall significance. Keep in mind that too much underlining serves no purpose; it won’t magically transform those words into clear understanding. In particular, too much underlining is self-defeating, it blurs the contrast between what is important and what is secondary. And keeping that contrast in reasonably sharp focus will greatly aid the process of reading for understanding.

Relate Passages to Relevant Ideas

A final way of reading for understanding is to relate the passage either to other philosopher’s ideas or to logically connected thoughts in the work itself. This approach is implied by the other approaches we have considered. Using it effectively, however, assumes that you are already fairly well along in your study of a given philosopher or issue. So you would never use this strategy at the very beginning of your study of a whole new area of philosophy and you would always use it in addition to some other approaches. We shall now consider three rules of thumb.

The first way to relate a passage to other ideas is to attach a label to it, perhaps one of the isms you have already learned about it. Of course, labels are only general approximations, but they do help to stay in the ball park. Suppose that you are reading about the psychologist B.F. Skinner’s denial of human freedom. Well, in what sense is he denying freedom – that advocated by a Soft Determinist or that denied by a Hard Determinist? Which is Skinner? Perhaps he doesn’t fit neatly in either category. So you resolve to read further. Even if the

label you eventually decide on doesn't exactly fit, you are a little closer to understanding what Skinner is up to.

The second way to relate a passage to other ideas is the familiar one of comparing and contrasting it, usually with the ideas of other philosophers. Sometimes the ideas of a familiar writer outside philosophy are also good points of reference. You ask how a certain idea is similar to, or different from, a related idea. The approach is closely related to the method of labeling. For example, how does Aristotle's conception of substance differ from Plato's? Or suppose you are reading John Stuart Mill's defense of what the consequences of a morally right act ought to be. From your reading or from lectures by your instructor, you may know that Mill took over the utilitarian movement started by Jeremy Bentham. How, then, does Mill appear to be changing Bentham's conception of "the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number of persons?" Comparing and contrasting is always a good strategy to use in improving your understanding of a philosopher's work.

The third way to relate a passage is to try to place it in some type of logical perspective within the work you are reading. Providing a logical perspective involves placing an idea in a continuum. At one end of the continuum will be those ideas or arguments that seem to suggest or imply the idea in question. At the other end will be those considerations that seem to follow from or be implied by the idea in question. You need not be overly concerned with strict logic here. The more general question you will ask about the passage is this: "Within the text I'm now reading, where does this idea seem to be coming from, and where does it seem to be leading, if anywhere?"

How would you apply this strategy? Imagine, for example, that you are reading a passage by the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) and read of his rejection of the personal self. You read that whenever he "looks" for his inner self (soul), he cannot find it and concludes that it must therefore not exist. Taken by itself, this seems a strange claim. Hume cannot find himself, his "I?" Who is doing the looking? By placing the statement in context, it is easier to see what he is up to. For his claim follows from his general operating assumption that to every idea – in this case the idea of the self as a substantial thing – there must correspond an immediate impression in direct experience. And it leads to the claim that the self is not a "thing" in its own right, but a bundle of memories and experiences stretched out over time. So Hume is not denying that he exists, only denying that he exists as a certain type of thing, a soul. This still may not appear very plausible, but it does make more sense within its context or logical perspective. We should emphasize that none of the preceding rules of thumb can be mechanically or indiscriminately applied to a philosophical work with the expectation of immediate results. Each sentence and paragraph is not necessarily going to make sense right away – or even be very important. Reading a philosophy work for understanding is more like piecing together a puzzle than being presented with a completed painting.

Reading Critically

After you have completed your first reading or understood the selection as best you can (which may actually require several readings), you should read it again with a critical eye. To read critically is not to proceed sword in hand, ready to attack every statement that confronts you. Rather, it is to exercise your judgment in determining both what is important and whether the important points are correct or plausible. In the end, your judgment may be that the author is essentially right, or partially right and partially wrong, or simply altogether wrong. You do not read critically just to produce refutations. How does one read critically? Reading philosophy critically is doing philosophy. A review of the strategies described there will always be helpful. Here we need only pinpoint the most important questions you should have in mind during a critical reading. Briefly, they are (1) Are the main points clear? (2) Are the main points or conclusions supported with plausible reasons? (3) Are there weaknesses the author may not have considered, such as faulty assumptions? (4) How close does the work come to doing what it sets out to do? (5) Can you support your criticisms of the work with good reasons? To be sure, these are not the only questions you will want to consider. But they are the most important and will get you off to a good start.