

How to Read Philosophy

All philosophical reading should be directed by a plan. This is especially true of the materials used in history of philosophy courses. The student should not attempt to read these materials without guidance. "Books are tools, which wise men use to suit their own ends," it has been said. Women can use these tools, and the materials used in this course are pre-eminently tools for teaching and learning. Some general advice about reading philosophy can be given here.

One of the difficulties beginning students in philosophy have is that they do not know how to approach the reading of a philosophical essay. Philosophical writings should always be read with certain questions in mind, and they almost always should be read more than once, for a single reading seldom brings them into focus. "In all ... philosophical studies," according to G. E. Moore (perhaps with some exaggeration), "the difficulties and disagreements, of which its history is full, are mainly due to a very simple cause: namely to the attempt to answer questions, without first discovering precisely what question it is which you desire to answer." Of course, to discover just what problem a philosopher is trying to solve is not always easy.

In studying philosophy, the student is not usually expected to absorb and memorize large amounts of material. This deadens the capacity for reflection, and leaves no zest for it. And reflection here is of the essence. The student should read a selection carefully and thoroughly, several times, asking the following questions:

- (1) What question is this philosopher trying to answer?
- (2) How did the question arise, *i.e.*, Why is s/he trying to answer this question?
- (3) What answer does s/he give?
- (4) Why does s/he give this answer instead of some other one? *I.e.*, What reasons

does s/he have for the answer at which s/he arrives?

(5) Is the answer s/he gives a good one? Does it really answer the question?

In other words, one should always try first to determine the *point* of a selection, to decide *what* the author is trying to prove. Then one should consider *why* s/he is trying to prove that point. Third, one should ask: How does s/he go about proving it? *I.e.*, What reasons or arguments does s/he give? What evidence or supporting examples does s/he give? Finally one may raise the critical questions: Are his or her reasons good ones? Does s/he really prove his or her point? Has s/he considered and answered all the objections that might bear the other way? Has s/he overlooked any facts s/he should have considered?

One should therefore first read through an assignment fairly rapidly in an attempt to get a general picture of what it is about, not worrying at first about details. Then one should read it again, more slowly, attempting to fit the details into the general picture. Reading a philosophical essay intelligently is analogous to assembling a jigsaw puzzle: It is much easier to put the separate pieces together if you have an idea of what the picture is about. You should not feel discouraged if at first this seems difficult. Often it is difficult. But nothing really worthwhile comes easy. Lewis Carroll once said:

When you come to any passage you don't understand, *read it again*; if you still don't understand it, *read it again*; if you fail, even after *three* readings, very likely your brain is getting a little tired. In that case, put the book away, and take to other occupations, and next day, when you come to it fresh, you will very likely find that it is quite easy.

It is remarkable how often a procedure like this works. However, you will be well

advised not to be stopped by just *one* passage. If you come to a passage you don't understand, read on a bit; maybe the context will make it clear. Also, be prepared to revise your general idea of an author's point and strategy when you start to fit the details together. Your first general impression may require revision on your way to a comprehensive understanding of a piece of philosophical writing.

These remarks provide only some general hints to help students with reading and grappling with our materials. They will not take the place of the student's own reflection. Nor will they take the place of discussion, which is often invaluable in clearing up a point and helping one settle one's own ideas.

(Adapted from the Preface of M. G. Singer & R. R. Ammerman, *Introductory Readings in Philosophy*; New York: Scribner's, 1962.)