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SIX WAYS TO READ A PHILOSOPHER

Philosophical writings are not for reading through; they are for reading down into. That is why the contents of philosophy courses—unlike the contents of say, mathematics or biology courses—are not stratified by difficulty or complexity. In mathematics, one masters multiplication and division before geometry and algebra, geometry and algebra before trigonometry and calculus. In biology, one dissects an earthworm before a frog, a frog before a mouse. But in philosophy, one learns to crawl, to walk, and to run over the same landscape. In philosophy, one begins where one ends—with Plato and Aristotle, with Descartes and Hume—indeed, with the whole galaxy of great philosophers, their writings, and their concerns. What varies through one's development as a student of philosophy is not the objects of one's encounters but the form and depth of one's encounters. The writings of a philosopher can thus be read in many ways. Here are six:

1. *You Can Read a Philosopher for Conclusions*

This is perhaps the most common first-time approach for the beginning student or philosophical layman. You read a person's

work to find out *what* he or she thinks. You assemble a list of views and opinions. If investigation ends here, what comes out is the taxonomic (labeling) style of studying philosophy. One assigns everybody to the appropriate "isms"—realism, idealism, empiricism, rationalism, existentialism, utilitarianism, intuitionism, logicism, nominalism, and so on. The possibilities for classification and subclassification are endless. There is some point to getting a handle on these groupings. It gives one a rough overall map of the philosophical terrain. For someone who is interested in a piece of philosophical writing mainly as a cultural or historical artifact, as an episode in the history of ideas, this approach may well suffice. But for a student of philosophy, it's only the beginning.

2. *You Can Read a Philosopher for Arguments*

Probably the next step is to attempt to press beyond the content of the conclusions, the theses and views which a philosopher accepts, to an appreciation of the structure of reasoning underlying and supporting them. Here you read a person's work to find out not just what he or she thinks, but *why* he or she thinks it. One beneficial by-product of this approach is the insights it yields concerning the connections among a philosopher's views, the ways in which the various conclusions hang together or fail to hang together, support or undermine one another. A careful reading of a philosopher in this way, for the purpose of exposing and articulating the structure of the reasoning, is an essential foundation for any further approach to philosophical works. But it is a foundation which can be built upon in various ways.

3. *You Can Read a Philosopher in the Dialectical Setting*

Every philosopher enters our great historical conversation at some specific time. Every philosopher has predecessors and teachers, colleagues and opponents. The discussion, the meeting of arguments with arguments, is already well under way. One thing

you can do with the raw materials obtained from your reading for conclusions and for arguments is to attempt to sort out the dialectical contribution which a philosopher proposes to make. How have the central concerns and problems of the discussion been conceived, and what new way are we given for looking at them? What new questions are asked? What false trails are marked and blocked? A major work by a great philosopher is a stone dropped into a pool of concepts and problems. To read a philosopher in the dialectical setting is to examine the ripples that such a splash creates, and to mark the ways in which they cancel and reinforce the many other sets of ripples stirring the surface of the pool. A philosophical problem is changed by the touch of a great mind. What it was before, and what it has become, are the concerns of our third style of reading. If reading for conclusions is reading for what a person thinks, and if reading for arguments is reading for why he or she thinks it, then reading in a dialectical setting is reading for *how* that person thinks—and this is the most difficult of the three tasks.

But so far we have called only upon the reader's exegetical and interpretive skills—the ability to think oneself into a philosophical view, to understand it, to reconstruct the reasoning supporting it, and to discern its implications in its dialectical setting. As in the writing of philosophy, however, there is scope for more than exegesis and interpretation.

4. *You Can Read a Philosopher Critically*

The conclusions are there. The arguments are there. Once you understand them, then, you can proceed to assess them. This is the critical reading of philosophy. To do it, you need to enter into a dialogue with the book. To each of a philosopher's positive views or claims you can set the critical questions. Is it true? Does it follow? The answers which you come up with, however, are more than a test of the philosophical viewpoint at issue. Significantly, they put your understanding of that viewpoint to the test. For you need to appreciate more than what the philosopher says and why he or she says it. You need to have a grasp, too, of what the philosopher *would* say in response to your exploratory probes and critical thrusts. Only when you achieve this sort of imaginative and

sympathetic understanding of a philosophical stance can the critical attitude yield more than superficial quibbles. Only then can your critique bear importantly on what is essential to the view. So you need to understand not just what and why and how a philosopher thinks. To read critically, you must also discern, what *turns* on the view at hand. And, of course, you will not be the first to try. So,

5. *You Can Read a Philosopher Adjudicatively*

To approach philosophy in this fifth way is to multiply immensely the demands placed upon your analytical skill, extrapolative insight, and critical acumen. An adjudicative reading approaches a philosophical work in its dialectical setting as a critical reading approaches it in isolation. The aim here is not merely to appreciate the novel turns which a philosopher has given an old problem, but to attempt to gauge the import of the contribution, to assess the philosopher's understanding and criticism of his or her predecessors and contemporaries, and to evaluate the fruitfulness of the new questions and methods, and of the new directions they give to philosophical inquiry. To accomplish this requires something quite like a carefully controlled schizophrenia, for you must move sympathetically within a diversity of philosophical viewpoints—often developed through strikingly different expository idioms and embodying radically divergent conceptions of philosophical methodology. You must attempt imaginatively to take the role of each of the original participants and to rethink the dialectic in its entirety from *all* these viewpoints. For what is wanted is more than an appreciation of the new insights to be gained. No less important is that old insights not be permanently lost. The adjudicative reader thus cannot approach the dialectic as a partisan, for the concern is with the isolation and preservation of all that is of lasting philosophical value. And this sets the stage for our final possibility.

6. *You Can Read a Philosopher Creatively*

When you can approach a philosophical work in this sixth way, you will have crossed a major conceptual watershed. You will have

made its author's problems your own. No longer will you engage a piece of philosophical writing as an academic exercise. You will be on a quest. There will be something about people and their relations to the universe which you need to understand, some conceptual tangle which resists your unraveling. When you turn to the great philosophical figures of the past, then, it is with the aim of exploring a wider range of conceptual options than you are capable of evolving on your own, and it is with the goal and hope of eventually finding a way to your own resolution of the puzzles that haunt you. More than this, however, cannot easily be said. For creative reading of philosophy resists codification no less than creative authorship. And so I have again reached the limits of what is teachable.

RETROSPECT

A handbook of this sort can have only limited value. Philosophy is a practice, and its mastery is the mastery of a cognitive skill, not the assimilation of a body of facts. The practicing philosopher is a conceptual craftsman. Ultimately, then, philosophy, like any other craftsmanly pursuit, can be mastered only through the doing of it. The beginnings of such mastery evolve only gradually out of a long series of failed attempts. Behind every masterwork of cabinetry lies an ancestry of wobbly bookcases and skewed sideboards. So it is, too, with philosophy.

A few hours before his death, Socrates offered some reflections on pain and pleasure.

What a queer thing it is, my friends, this sensation which is popularly called pleasure. It is remarkable how closely it is connected with its conventional opposite, pain. They will never come to a man both at once, but if you pursue one of them and catch it, you are nearly always compelled to have the other as well, they are like two bodies attached to the same head. I am sure that if Aesop had thought of it he would have made up a fable about them, something like this: God wanted to stop their continual quarrelling, and when he found that it was impossible, he fastened their heads together, so wherever one of them appears, the other is sure to follow after. That is exactly what seems to be happening to me.