PHIL 101 **Spring 2021**

Class Handout: Reading Philosophical Texts

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Philosophical writing is argumentative writing.

Philosophers undertake to investigate specific philosophical problems or issues, and their writing is generally concerned with

- exploring the nature of that problem or issue,
- proposing a solution or view (why I believe this is true, not why I have this belief),
- arguing in support of that solution or view.

Sometimes philosophical writing aims to defend a positive view or theory; sometimes it aims instead to offer a critique of a view proposed by another philosopher or a view that is commonly held; often philosophical writing will offer critiques of opposing views, as well as a defense of the author's positive view.

Philosophical reading tends to go slowly, and it requires a lot of attention to detail.

To understand philosophy articles well, you need to read them more than once.

Some general suggestions:

- Identify the general problem or issue that the author is discussing.
- Identify the specific theses or conclusions (the solution or view) that the author intends to argue for or defend.

  Usually philosophers will indicate early on in an article the general issue they are discussing and the specific position they aim to defend. (When reading a book, you would want to identify the overall issues discussed in the book and the theses it aims to defend, and do the same for each chapter.)

- Identify the arguments given by the author to support his or her theses or position. That is to say, what does the author tell you in order to justify his or her position? What premises - that is, what information, evidence, or considerations - are given to support which conclusions?
- Figure out which claims support which other claims.

  > The body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible.
  > The mind is completely different from the body.

- Often, philosophers use words with precise technical meanings; sometimes they will even introduce new vocabulary - new technical terms. Identify the author's definitions of any technical terms or central concepts, because what an author means by his or her terms may not be what you would mean or what is commonly meant.

- Identify where the author is considering objections to his or her view and arguments; what replies does he or she offer to the objections? Signpost: one might object by saying that...
- Each time you read or reread an article, check to make sure you have correctly identified the main points and arguments. You might practice by reconstructing the author's arguments - write out the conclusion (the thesis the author wants to support), then write out the premises (the evidence or considerations given to support the conclusion). Words or expressions that signal when a conclusion is being drawn include the following: therefore, consequently, hence, it follows that. Words that signal premises include: since, if, because, all, some, none.

  > A second reason to believe that what relativism holds is the great difficulty we often have in knowing what is the morally right thing to believe or do.

- Don't just try to remember, understand. "iiagdt"
- Make abstractions concrete.

  > The movement of something depends "on the kind of impulse it gets from what sets it in motion, or again, on the nature and shape of this latter thing's surface."
  >
  > The movement of a rock depends "on the kind of impulse the rock gets from a hand that pushes it, or again, on the nature and shape of the hand's surface."

- Once you have identified the author's position and the arguments he or she gives for that position, you can begin to evaluate the position and arguments - you can begin to construct objections of your own.

  > The oppressed, within a seriously unjust society, can be fairly criticized when they fail to fulfill their basic moral duties to others, including their duty to contribute to reforming their society.

  Steps for evaluating an argument:

  1. Identify the conclusion
  2. Identify the premises
  3. Supply any unstated or missing premises on which the argument relies
  4. Do the premises, assuming they are true, support the conclusion? I.e. Is the reasoning good?
  5. Are the premises true or plausible?

- Read English as much as possible.

Reading Practice: Descartes' meditation II.

1. Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am): discovery of a certain and unshakable truth.
2. What am I?
   (a) A rational animal? No: uncertainty regarding the meaning of "rational" and "animal"
   (b) A bodied soul? No: indistinct apprehension of my bodily existence
   (c) I am (finite) substance: mind.
      - Principal attribute of mind: thinking
      - Modes of thinking: doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, sensing
3. Intuition of the piece of wax: what can be clearly and distinctly grasped?
   (a) Nothing by sensing the wax: a flux of changing impressions.
   The wax remains singular, the appearances change fluidly.
   (b) Through the imagination?
      - The wax "takes on an even greater variety of dimensions than I could ever grasp with the imagination";
      - The wax remains singular in all the innumerable representations
   (c) Is the wax perceived by the mind alone? - apprehending the unchanging substance underlying variegated appearances
      - An inspection on the part of the mind alone
         i. can be an imperfect and confused judging
         ii. can be a clear and distinct judging
      - "What I thought I had seen with my eyes, I actually grasped solely with the faculty of judgment, which is in my mind."
4. Even bodies are not perceived by the senses or by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone, then nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind.

References

[1] Connie Rosati, *Some Suggestions for How to Approach Reading a Philosophical Artical or Book.*