

reading philosophy

It is often difficult for newcomers to philosophy to make sense out of some of the articles they are asked to read. The difficulties they may discover are often simply due your being unfamiliar with the writing styles of academic philosophers. As well, the styles encountered can be quite different depending on the author's intended audience, whether the article is a translated work, and even the century that the work is drawn from. The use of complicated phrases or sentences and the development of complex arguments requires that one develop an active reading skill. Here are a few tips on how to better understand philosophy papers.

Reading for understanding

First, skim over the article in order to get a general idea of what the author is trying to say. Pay attention to the title and subtitles as they will often inform you of the area of inquiry. Pay attention to the opening paragraphs since authors will sometimes offer summaries or overviews of their paper, or they will set the context of their paper (e.g., what area of concern their paper in, or what issue it will deal with, or even who it is in response to.) Then have a look at the conclusion and make a note of it: this is what the author wants to convince you of. Now, go back to the beginning of the paper and with the conclusion in mind, try and see how the author tries to take you there. . . In other words, think of the challenge as being akin to rereading a murder mystery novel: it was fun to try and figure out who the murderer was, but now that you know who the culprit is, it can be fun to see how all the clues that you missed fit together.

While reading each paragraph, the first and last sentences will often provide you with key elements of the author's thought process; here you may find a conclusion or premise of an argument or sub argument.

Making notes in the margin are useful. For example, you might put a couple of words beside each paragraph which highlight the topic of the paragraph. Don't simply underline every word since not every thing the author will say will be significant and or relevant to the main thesis. Look for stipulative definitions that the author gives, or the distinctions that she draws. Look for the use of other writer's ideas either as supporting evidence or a positions that the author is attacking. Premise and conclusion indicator words will help you. These words that indicate or signal that there is a reason (or premise or evidence, justification etc.) being offered in support of a viewpoint (or conclusion) include 'Because, Since, Due to, It follows from...', etc. Conclusion indicators include: "Therefore, Accordingly, So, Hence, Thus...'", etc.

Next, try to put the main arguments (the reasons and the conclusions) of the paper in your own words, if you can do this, then you probably have a good grasp of the intent of the author.

Evaluating what you've read

Here is one approach that you can use to evaluate the author's position. First, you will want to isolate the reasons that the author offers to defend his or her conclusions (i.e., the premises of the arguments) and you will want to consider whether or not they are rationally acceptable. This means, amongst other things, you will want to determine if the reason or premise is defended in a deductively sound or inductively strong subargument. For example is the premise successfully defended elsewhere by the writer (say, in another article) or by another person? Is it a matter of common knowledge or is it supported by a proper appeal to authority?

If for some reason you don't know if the premise is acceptable, and you don't have evidence to suggest that it is unacceptable then you may wish to provisionally accept it and move on to look at the author's other reasons.

The next stage of your evaluation will involve determining if the premises are positively relevant to the conclusion to be 'positively relevant' the truth of the premise will count towards the truth of the conclusion. For example, the premise: "It is sunny and warm today." is positively relevant to the conclusion: "I should wear shorts and a Tshirt if I want to avoid being uncomfortable today." whereas the premise: "All ravens are black." is not relevant to the same conclusion: "I should wear shorts and a Tshirt if I want to avoid being uncomfortable today." In other words, premises are relevant to the conclusion when they offer some evidence to support the conclusion. Finally, you may then ask whether or not the author has provided sufficient evidence for you to rationally accept the conclusion.

Additional suggestions for reading philosophical texts

Do the assigned reading - The philosophical texts simply are the content of the course; if you do not read, you will not learn. Coming to class without having read and listening to the discourse of those who have is no substitute for grappling with the material on your own. You can't develop intellectual independence if you rely for your information on the opinions of other people, even when they happen to be correct. Consider the context - Philosophical writing, like literature of any genre, arises from a concrete historical setting. Approaching each text, you should keep in mind who wrote it, when and where it was published, for what audience it was originally intended, what purposes it was supposed to achieve, and how it has been received by the philosophical and general communities since its appearance.

Take your time - Careful reading cannot be rushed; you should allow plenty of time for a leisurely perusal of the material. Individual learning styles certainly differ: some people function best by reading the same text several times with progressively more detailed attention; others prefer to work through the text patiently and diligently a single time. In either case, encourage yourself to slow down and engage the text at a personal level.

Spot crucial passages - Although philosophers do not deliberately spin out pointlessly excessive verbiage (no, really!), most philosophical texts vary in density from page to page. It isn't always obvious what matters most; philosophers sometimes glide superficially over the very points on which their entire argument depends. But with the practice you'll be getting week by week, you'll soon be able to highlight the most important portions of each assignment.

Identify central theses - Each philosophical text is intended to convince us of the truth of particular propositions. Although these central theses are sometimes stated clearly and explicitly, authors often choose to present them more subtly in the context of the line of reasoning which they are established. Remember that the thesis may be either positive or negative, either the acceptance or the rejection of a philosophical position.

Locate supportive arguments - Philosophers do not merely state opinions but also undertake to establish their truth. The methods employed to support philosophical theses can differ widely, but most of them will be expressed in one of the forms of logical argumentation. That is, the philosopher will (explicitly or implicitly) offer premises that are clearly true and then claim that a sound inference from these premises leads inexorably to the desired conclusion. Although a disciplined study of the forms of logical reasoning is helpful, you'll probably learn to recognize the most common patterns from early examples in your reading.

Assess the arguments - Arguments are not all of equal cogency; we are obliged to accept the conclusion only if it is supported by correct inference from true premises. Thus, there are two different ways in which to question the legitimacy of a particular argument: Ask whether the premises are true. (Remember that one or more of the premises of the argument may be unstated assumptions.) Ask whether the inference from premises to conclusion is sound. (Here it will be helpful to think of applying the same pattern of reasoning to a more familiar case.) If all else fails, you may question the truth of the conclusion directly by proposing a counterexample which seems obviously to contradict it.

Look for connections - Within your reading of a particular philosopher, notice the way in which material in one portion of the text links up with material from another. Consider the ways in which each philosopher incorporates, appropriates, rejects, or responds to the work of those who have gone before.

Make every possible effort to relate this philosophical text to what you already know from courses in other disciplines and from your own life experiences.

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