

## **Reading a Philosophy Text**

### **Philosophy 22**

### **Spring, 2011**

Students, especially those who are taking their first philosophy course, may have a hard time reading the philosophy texts they are assigned. Philosophy is written in a style that is somewhat different from the literary, scientific, journalistic, etc. writings with which the student is familiar. Older texts present even further difficulties, as the authors are writing for the people of their own time, who often had very different views of the world from those we have today. Here are some things to keep in mind when reading a philosophy text. Descartes's writings, and especially his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, will be used as an illustration of the points made here.

Students may feel the temptation not to read the texts at all, but to rely on lectures, lecture notes, secondary sources, etc. to learn the material they contain. But the texts are assigned so that the student will become familiar first-hand with the views of the philosophers. In this way, it is no different from a literature class. Some students even derive more pleasure from reading the great philosophers than from reading the giants of literature.

#### **Intended Audience**

The author usually has a specific audience in mind when writing a different piece. Different texts are often meant to address different audiences. For example, Descartes wrote numerous letters to other philosophers. When writing to those he trusted, such as Marin Mersenne, he was quite candid. Descartes wrote a collection of scientific pieces in French, hoping to get the attention of others who were working on scientific problems, calling for objections to be sent to the publisher so that he might answer them (*Discourse on Method*, Part Six). He wrote the *Meditations* in Latin with the intention of persuading the professors of philosophy and theology to adopt his point of view. He explicitly stated (in the Latin edition only) that his writing in Latin would prevent "weak minds" from misusing his philosophy. Finally, he wrote the *Principles of Philosophy* as a textbook for students.

Most of the great classics of philosophy were not written for students, but rather for learned scholars. This fact makes it more difficult for the texts to be understood by the student. It is the responsibility of teachers to explain the texts in a way that makes them accessible to students.

#### **Language and Context**

Much of the language in which the classical philosophy texts are written is somewhat obscure. One reason is that they use technical terminology with which the student

might not be familiar. Another reason is that the terminology that they use may be obsolete. For example, in the Third Meditation, Descartes's argument depends on the notions of a thing existing *formally*, or *objectively*, or *eminently*. He could presume that his readers would be familiar with these notions, but few modern readers have even heard of them, let alone understand what they mean.

These difficulties can be overcome by paying attention to editors' footnotes and to the explanations given in lecture. Do not hesitate to ask your teacher about the meaning of any concepts with which you are unfamiliar or which do not make sense to you.

Another reason that the language of a philosophy text may be obscure stems from the fact that language evolves over time. This is, ironically, less of a problem with authors who wrote in languages other than English, because translators usually render the works into modern English. Texts of authors such as Locke, Berkeley and Hume, who wrote in English, are reproduced in their original form, with perhaps updated spelling (as with the Ariew and Watkins anthology).

Another problem stems from the fact that our background knowledge today is quite different from what existed in earlier times. Philosophical authors often used examples from literature that is unfamiliar to us today, but which at the time was as well-known as popular movies are known today.

### **The Perspective of the Reader**

Virtually all philosophical texts advocate some point of view and reject opposing points of view. The reader, student or not, is apt to be more interested in a philosopher with whom he or she agrees. Philosophical authors, as well, tend to take certain kinds of views very seriously and to dismiss others out of hand.

Consider the readers of the *Meditations*. As noted above, the intended audience was the scholarly priests of the Catholic Church. Descartes wrote that he believed that the philosophical arguments he was putting forward would be of assistance to them. For example, he claimed that they would help to persuade non-believers to believe in God (Letter of Dedication).

Unfortunately, from Descartes's point of view, most of the philosophy professors (especially the Jesuits of the Sorbonne) to whom he directed his work either ignored it or attacked it. The reason seems to be that despite the alleged assistance it was supposed to render to the Church, it undermined a number of philosophical theses that were central to the point of view of the professors. Descartes himself was involved in disputes with them (for example, in the Seventh Objections and Replies to the *Meditations*), and his views were variously condemned even after his death.

Another offended audience was the Dutch Calvinists in the Netherlands, where

Descartes lived. One of his antagonists, Voetius, even tried to get Descartes arrested. Not only was Descartes viewed with suspicion because he was a Catholic, but he was also considered a materialist, based on the views spread by his self-appointed disciple Regius. (A materialist believes that the mind is to be identified with the body, some part of the body, some function of the body, etc.) Descartes fought vigorously against this reaction as well.

Some secular philosophers also found little to like in Descartes's *Meditations*, precisely for the reason that it explicitly rejects materialism in favor of the thesis that the mind and body are separable. In the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Pierre Gassendi teases Descartes by calling him "Soul, or whatever name you want me to address you by"). Descartes counters by addressing Gassendi as "Flesh," and he accuses him of misunderstanding "completely what rational argument involves."

Name-calling aside, there is an important lesson to be learned from these controversies. If one holds dogmatically to a certain point of view, then one will not be convinced by a philosopher's arguments, no matter how good they might be. Descartes accuses Gassendi of resorting to "debating skills" because he is unable to refute the arguments Descartes put forward.

You almost always use the same style, not attacking my arguments but ignoring them as if they did not exist, or quoting them in an imperfect or truncated form; and you string together various difficulties of the sort commonly raised by philosophical novices against my conclusions or against others like them—or even unlike them. (Fifth Set of Replies)

As a reader, a student should be attending to the arguments brought forward by the philosopher to convince the reader of the point of view being advocated. Arguments are the heart of the philosophical endeavor. One reason for this is that most of the positions taken by philosophers cannot be confirmed or refuted by ordinary experience or even scientific investigation. For example, Descartes claims to have proved in the *Meditations* that God exists and that the soul is distinct from the body. These claims are difficult to prove, and the arguments for them are rather difficult to comprehend. It is the job of the instructor to aid the student in understanding these arguments.

## Goals

One way of assessing the success of a philosophical text is in terms of how well it meets the goals that have been set up. Most of the texts from the early modern period contain introductory material that spells out a set of explicit goals (such as convincing the unbeliever of the existence of God). Here it must be noted that sometimes philosophers have "hidden agendas," goals which are not made explicit in the text. For example, Descartes confided to Mersenne that he sought to undermine the influence of Aristotle's philosophy by presenting an attractive alternative to it without explicitly

attacking Aristotle. The views of Aristotle were pillars of Catholic philosophy at the time. (This was a complete failure, by the way, as the Catholic scholars could see exactly what was going on.)

When we evaluate a philosophical work, we might ask whether the author's strategy is a good one. Descartes wanted the reader to go through the process of meditation that he described. He thought that if the reader were to do so, he or she would clear the mind of preconceived opinions that stand in the way of recognizing the truth of the claims he was making. (But it is doubtful that very many of his readers actually did that.)

The chief evaluative question is whether the claims made in the text are understandable and whether the arguments for them are strong. Ultimately, the general goal of any philosophy text (including this one!) is to convince the reader to the truth of what has been put forward. Of course, the reader may already be convinced, but even in that case, the reader can evaluate the strength of the supporting arguments.

## **Influence**

Yet another way of considering a philosophical text is in terms of its influence. In some cases, a novel idea is put forward, which stimulates further investigation by philosophers. For example, Descartes maintained that it was possible that he is the victim of deception by a being so powerful that it could stimulate in him illusory experiences that are indistinguishable from experiences one would have through the senses. Philosophers still debate whether this possibility might prevent us from knowing that there exists a physical world independent of our minds.

Many philosophical texts put forward novel arguments that are then scrutinized by philosophers through the ages. Unfortunately, most of the arguments of the *Meditations*, including those for the existence of God and the separability of the soul and the body, have not stood up well to criticism.

Sometimes there are puzzles internal to the text that never cease to intrigue students of philosophy. For example, it was suggested in the Second and Fourth Sets of Objections that Descartes had employed circular reasoning, now called the "Cartesian Circle." Whether Descartes actually did reason circularly is still a matter of scholarly debate.

In many cases, what benefits other readers most is the mistakes that the author is thought to have made. Most people nowadays believed that Descartes set far too high a standard for metaphysical knowledge (such as of the relation of the mind to the body or of the existence of God). He aimed for "perfect knowledge" which is immune from doubt. If the reader believes that Descartes has failed to show that there is such knowledge, he or she might conclude that we should not be looking for that kind of knowledge.

Another example is Descartes's view that the mind is acquainted first-hand only with the "ideas" that populate it. Philosophers such as Thomas Reid have argued that from this basis it is impossible to know whether anything besides one's self and one's ideas exist. Reid's prescription was that the "theory of ideas" be abandoned because it leads to skepticism and replaced by an alternative account of the objects of the mind.

### **Some Tips for Reading**

It should be clear by now that reading a philosophical text is no easy matter. But it can be done in a rewarding way. Here are a few tips to aid in comprehension.

- On first reading, skim the material lightly, looking for the basic position that is being put forward and the general shape of the argument(s) given in its favor.
- Listen to the lecture on the material, and read lecture notes or secondary sources such as those linked to the course Web page.
- Go back and re-read the material in detail.
- It may be helpful to take notes on the readings. Write down the main theses and arguments in your own words, and don't stop until you are satisfied that what you have written makes sense.
- Discuss the material with your instructor, your teaching assistant, your classmates, or anyone else you think might be interested in it.
- Do not expect to understand everything you have read: professional philosophers have failed to agree about these materials for centuries or even millennia.
- Concentrate on the points that have been covered in class. These are generally what you will be expected to write about in your papers and exams.

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