

# How to Read a Philosophical Text and How to Write about it

## What is philosophical inquiry?

Students toiling away on the treadmill of academic exams and assignments often learn to survive by showing *knowledge* - By assimilating as many relevant facts as possible and then dutifully reproducing them in tests or essays. But such a method seldom works very well in philosophy, because philosophy is not primarily a factual subject. Of course, just as with any worthwhile subject, you need to study hard and to familiarise yourself with the material; it is about standing back and reflecting on it. What is more - and this is perhaps unique to philosophy - it is about reflecting on how the results of your reflections affect your overall worldview.

That may sound rather grand, or even pretentious. But part of what makes philosophy different from other disciplines is that it looks past the particular to the universal. For example, instead of asking 'how does this particular chemical produce this reaction?', it raises abstract questions such as 'what is it to produce or cause a change in the first place?' or instead of asking 'why did this particular historical literary figure choose to act in this way?', it asks 'what do we really mean when we say that an action was freely chosen?' And not content with asking these abstract and general questions, philosophers often go on to raise even more universal ones, for example about whether all of reality is subject to causal principles, and if so whether the list leaves any room for genuine human choice. Philosophy is very different from the specialised academic disciplines, insofar as it characteristically takes up a *synoptic* perspective: it aims for the 'big picture' that keeps in view how the different parts of our understanding fit together or clash. Philosophical inquiry often zeroes in on very precise and carefully defined puzzles, but at its best it never loses sight of the grand fundamental questions about the ultimate nature of reality and our human place within it.

Inquiring into such abstract general questions may come more easily to some than to others, but all of us to some degree have an inbuilt propensity for philosophical reflection.. If we always remained totally immersed in our particular pursuits and never took time to stand back and reflect on their wider significance, we would merely be clever animals. To be human is to have an enduring desire to try and make sense of it all, to fit our lives into a wide scheme of understanding. In much of our lives, to be sure, we may be just too busy with the urgent demands of survival and making our way in the world. But sooner or later the uniquely human urge to philosophise will make itself felt.

In all philosophy texts, you will find many different styles of philosophising and many distinct philosophical outlooks. But in all of them you will find that questioning spirit of philosophical inquiry which seeks to look beyond the particular involvements of human existence towards more universal and abstract patterns of understanding. There are no easy rules of thumb for how to read the texts or to write about them, though it is hoped that some of the suggestions that follow may be helpful.

## Exegesis and Criticism

The two indispensable components of a good philosophy essay, particularly if we are talking about an essay on one of the great canonical writers, are *exegesis* and *criticism*. *Exegesis* involves expounding or setting out what you take to be the main elements of the position taken up in the text you are studying. These are some of the questions it may be worth asking yourself. What is the author trying to show? Can you paraphrase or summarise it as clearly as possible, leaving out any irrelevant flourishes and concentrating on what is of central importance? Can you explain any unusual or technical terminology? Can you understand what is at stake - *why* the issues discussed are supposed to be important? It's no bad thing here to imagine yourself trying to explain to a class for a discussion group, in the simplest possible terms, (a) what you think is being said in the text, and (b) *why you find it interesting*. If you can't summarise the author's position reasonably clearly, you probably need to read it again, if necessary with the aid of any introduction provided, or some of the

other recommended commentaries. And if you can't explain why you find it interesting, your essay will probably end up having a flat or routine flavour to it. There is no substitute for getting involved.

This brings us to the second indisputable element in a good philosophy essay, namely *criticism*. In producing a philosophical essay (and this applies to philosophical writing or discussion of any level), one is not merely aiming to report on the material, or summarise the findings (important though it is that these things are done clearly and accurately). As the Socratic method showed many centuries ago, philosophical inquiry is always to some extent a dialogue - a dialogue in which you are the one of the partners. There is no substitute for entering into the argument, reflecting on how you stand in relation to the claims advanced, and exactly why you find some of them persuasive or where you think they are going wrong. In doing this, you will not just be reporting on other people's philosophising, but you will be philosophising yourself. This is the true excitement of philosophy, and the key to success in reading a philosophical text and writing about it.

But criticism is not just a matter of staying 'Oh no, I don't agree with that!' For example it's not an effective criticism of a philosophical position to say 'This author is obviously a believer, but I am an atheist so I disagree with them', or 'this author is obviously a materialist but I disagree with them because I believe there are immaterial entities'. You are welcome to disagree, but you must give *reasoned grounds* for disagreement, and those grounds must be based on detailed scrutiny of the writer's arguments. The same applies if you end up supporting a given writer. Good criticism in philosophy can include providing supporting arguments as well as offering objections (and indeed one of the most effective ways of proceeding can be to construct a possible objection to a given position, and then go on to offer a possible reply on the author's behalf). But however you proceed, you always need to offer reasons for your position, keeping the original text in view, and making sure that your reasons bear directly on the position taken up by the author under discussion.

## Assessing the Argument

The two components of a philosophy essay just referred to, exegesis and criticism, allow you to demonstrate two important skills. Exegesis requires you to show *scholarship* - the skill of carefully, conscientiously, and accurately expounding the key points in a text. Criticism requires something rather different, the ability to *reflect* on the text, *engage* with it, and develop your own carefully reasoned *response* to it. But what exactly *is* it that we are expounding and criticising? To answer 'the text' does not get us very far. A historian's text maybe a manuscript or other documentary record, which is examined for accuracy and authenticity. A literary critic's text maybe a novel or a poem, which is examined for style, or imagery, or compositional technique. But what a philosopher is for the most part doing in scrutinising a philosophical text is assessing the *argument*.

The term 'argument' in this context does not of course have the meaning it often has elsewhere, namely that of a dispute or disagreement (though there are plenty of philosophical disagreements); it refers instead to a process of reasoning. So often in philosophy, the idea goes back to Plato, who put what has become a famous phrase into the mouth of Socrates: 'wherever the argument, like the wind, tends, there we must go.' Being blown about by the wind may seem a random or haphazard process. But Plato's point in saying that we 'must' go in a certain direction is not that we are passively *forced* along given path, as being blown along by a gale might suggest. Rather, he means that there are certain constraints that determine what it is to follow a valid line of reasoning, constraints that we are required to follow, like it or not. To be sure, we may not in actual fact always observe those constraints in our thinking: people often make mistakes in argument, and reason badly. But there is nonetheless an authentic way, a way we *ought* to go, a way we can on reflection recognise as valid, independently of where we might like to go. To borrow another metaphor, used many centuries later by the German logician Gottlob Frege, the laws of logic could be said to be like boundary stones which our thought 'can overflow' but not dislodge'.

The Greek word for 'argument' is *logos*, from which we get the English word 'logic'. A good argument is not just a series of thoughts, but a logical sequence, where the final step or conclusion follows logically from what has gone before. Argument is said to be valid if, once you grant the truth of the *premisses* (the assumptions or starting points of an argument), the conclusion must follow. Thus, in a time-honoured example, if your two premisses are that (1) all humans are mortal, and (2) that Socrates is human, then it follows that (3) Socrates is mortal. This very strong form of argument is called a *deductive* argument, meaning that the conclusion can be logically *deduced* from the premisses. And this in turn means that anyone who accepts the premise is asked to accept the conclusion on pain of contradicting themselves.

To assess a deductive argument, you have to do two things. First you have to assess whether it is *valid*: does the conclusion follow as a matter of logical inevitability from the premisses? This is a purely formal matter, and in many cases it can be quite straightforward. In the above example about Socrates being mortal, the form of the argument is 'if all As are B, and x is A, then it follows inevitably that x is B'. This pattern or reasoning is universally valid whether we are talking about Socrates and mortality or any other objects or properties whatever; so if all Swans are white, and Fluffy is a swan, it follows that Fluffy is white. Notice, however, although this latter argument is perfectly valid, just as in the Socrates case, its starting point is questionable. Few if any of us would concede the first premiss (that all Swans are white), since we know that there have been cases of black Swans. So validity in argument is not the only thing that matters. We want our arguments to be valid, but we also want the *premisses to be true*. And only then will we say that the argument is not just valid but acceptable or *sound*: the premisses are true, and the conclusion logically follows. Often in philosophy some of the most interesting questions arise not about the validity of an argument but about whether the premisses are true.

So although formal logical skills are important in philosophy, they are not the whole story. Indeed, philosophical arguments as they occur in the great canonical texts, are very seldom set out in simple deductive patterns like that in the Socrates example just mentioned. The arguments are generally more complex, and they have to be extracted from the flow of the writing, with the implicit premisses teased out and examined, and the possible vagueness and ambiguity scrutinised. And in deciding whether a given premiss should be accepted in the first place, one often has to reflect carefully on just exactly what is being claimed, and what implications it has for the rest of one's worldview.

### **An Example from Berkeley**

To consider just one example of how one might set about expounding and criticising a philosophical argument, let us take a passage from a well-known text by the idealist philosopher George Berkeley - his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, first published in 1710. Berkeley's aim was to argue that nothing exists independently of a mind. Here is part of what he says:

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world, yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. What are the aforementioned objects but the things that we perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? And is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?

The first task is to get behind the rather elaborate phrasing of Berkeley's eighteenth century English and extract the basic train of thought, which is actually quite straightforward. In the first sentence, Berkeley talks about 'houses, mountains, rivers', in short, the ordinary objects around us. And he

refers to the widely held or prevailing opinion that they exist independently of their being perceived ('they have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived'). Now think about this: do you share this prevailing opinion? Do you think houses and mountains have 'real existence', distinct from their being perceived? The obvious answer is that yes, we all do share this view: we think the houses and rivers are still there, twenty-four hours a day, as it were, whether or not we are there to look at them or think about them. Indeed, if all human beings and other sentient creatures were suddenly to vanish from the earth, the mountains would still be there, would they not?

But what is Berkeley saying about this 'prevailing' opinion, this ordinary common sense view of the real independent existence of mountains, rivers and houses? He says it is a *strangely* prevailing opinion: widespread though it may be, it is *odd* (Berkeley seems to be saying) that people accept it. And he goes on to say that once we start to question it ('whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question) we find it is obviously absurd (it involves a 'manifest contradiction'). Why? Because, says Berkeley, all these aforementioned objects are things we 'perceive by sense' (that is, by seeing, hearing, touching, and so on). And, he goes on, 'what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations?' He puts it as a rhetorical question, but he means to state it plainly and outright: *we only perceive our own ideas or sensations*.

By the time we have reached this point, we are in a position to see where Berkeley is going. Obviously, ideas and sensations depend on the mind of the perceiver. Ideas and sensations can't exist independently, outside of a mind. So if (as Berkeley is asking us to accept) we only perceive our own ideas and sensations, then *what we perceive cannot exist outside a mind*. So the 'sensible objects' - the mountains, houses, rivers, etc., that people think of as existing independently 'out there' - cannot after all exist except as ideas or sensations in the mind.

I hope this gives some idea of how you might set about the first task of a philosophy essay - the task of exegesis, of unpacking an argument, teasing out the train of thought, breaking it down into its stages. A lot of philosophical writing involves this kind of analysis, which in its original Greek sense means untying, or unravelling. Unpacking a whole text in this way would take a very long time and Berkeley has a lot more to say than is contained in the paragraph above. But part of your job in a philosophy essay is to be *selective*, to work out which particular passages to concentrate on as containing the key arguments, or as representing the crucial elements of a given position.

What about the other component of a good philosophy essay, namely criticism? Here you would need to stand back from what Berkeley is saying and ask which are the crucial premisses on which his argument depends and whether they are plausible. Probably the most controversial element in the train of thought unpacked above is Berkeley's claim that we only perceive our own ideas or sensations. Is this true? When you look at a mountain or a house or a river, what are you perceiving? The obvious answer is - the mountain, the house, the river. We do not normally say that we see ideas of houses, sensations of rivers; we say that we see houses and look at rivers. So is Berkeley forcing a card on us - softening us up to accept his immaterialist view of reality? It's true of course that we couldn't perceive any of these objects around us unless we were equipped with sense organs that respond to the relevant stimuli. So sense-perception is a causally complex process. But should this lead us in the direction of his Berkeleyian idealism (that only ideas and minds exist)?

These are the sorts of questions to think about. Commentaries and textbooks may help you to formulate your critical responses to the text and to make them as precise and rigorously supported as possible. The goal is to move beyond mere opinion or personal reaction and to produce a careful and well-argued case in support of your position. But remember that in philosophy there is seldom if ever a final solution to the perennial underlying questions that the great writers like Berkeley are grappling with. In this particular instance, there are deep issues about our conception of reality: do we really understand what we mean when we think of material objects 'out there', being there *anyway*, independently of our own perceptions and understandings of them? If so, what are such

objects like' in themselves'? Does this question even make sense? Once we begin to reflect on such matters we may start to appreciate Berkeley's disquiet about the 'absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived'. If you think the mountains and rivers and trees are 'there anyway' whether anyone is around to perceive them or not, what does this 'being there anyway' really amount to?

## **Making the Subject Your Own**

You cannot be expected to delve into all of the reflective questions just mentioned in a short philosophy essay, and inevitably you will have to be selective (just as you have to be selective about which bits of the text to focus on). But the key to enjoying the exercise (and as with any worthwhile activity in life, if you enjoy it you're more likely to do it well) is to commit yourself, to enter into the argument, to make it your own, to develop your own reactions. Of course when you are beginning a subject it can be annoying to be asked 'what is *your* view'? One may be tempted to reply in exasperation, 'I don't *have* a view yet!'. But in the very process of unpacking a philosophical argument, teasing out its assumptions and putting them under the spotlight, you will inevitably be engaging with it, and moving towards developing a response of your own.

But do not worry that the issues seem confusing at first, or if your own thoughts about them seem confused. Thoughts do not clarify themselves by whirling around on their own: they become clear, above all, through being put down on paper (or on screen). So despite the advice so often given to essay writers, to make a plan or summary of your essay before you begin writing, it is often best to start straight in with the process of analysis and exegesis. In unravelling the arguments and trying to lay them out as clearly as possible in written form, ideas will coalesce, and your own position will, if all goes well, emerge.

Despite the great value of careful analysis in tackling a philosophy project, one also needs to remember that no problem was ever dealt with solely by breaking it into smaller and smaller components. It is always worthwhile trying to keep an eye on the wider perspective, how the position you are examining fits in or fails to fit in, with your picture of reality as a whole. In the Berkeley example, as will be clear if you go on to study this particular extract in detail, his view that nothing really exists outside of a mind (or minds) is intimately connected with his theistic or God-centred outlook - an outlook that Berkeley takes to be incompatible with the independent existence of unthinking matter. As Berkeley sees it the divine mind, the mind of an 'Eternal Spirit' encompasses all that there is, and the notion of material stuff or substance, existing out there independently, or on its own, makes no coherent sense.

Don't be afraid to think about how this viewpoint matches, or fails to match, your own outlook. In philosophy we should always strive to be open minded, but none of us ever comes to a philosophical text 'cold' or is able to assess it from a standpoint of pure impartial reason; we always bring preconceptions and baggage of one sort or another to our reading. But it is in the tension between our preconceptions and the challenges of the text that something interesting and worthwhile often emerges.

## **Give It Time**

Let me end with a brief word about technique. When I was a student, life sometimes seemed to be one long 'essay crisis', and completing a paper or assignment always seemed to be a rush. In fact, working under time pressure may actually have an upside, for sometimes wrestling with a difficult philosophical problem day after day only makes it seem more intractable. But one thing worth remembering is that you are best placed to judge the clarity of what you have written if you put it aside and come back to it later. It's easy enough to skim over a finished essay and think it's all fine; but when one re-reads it after a night's sleep, or better still a couple of days later, one will often see

flaws and obscurities ('What on earth did I mean by *that*?'). A second read of a paper may help you to see it through the eyes of the person who will eventually assess it, and the process of stepping back from what you wrote yesterday will almost certainly lead to improvements. This is a point that probably applies to all successful writing, but it is particularly applicable to philosophy, much of which involves cultivating a sense of critical distance, and engaging in a dialectal process of objections and replies (even when, as in the process of essay writing, the dialogue is between yourself today, and your earlier self who drafted the paper yesterday).

But ultimately one learns by doing. In relating the texts you study to wider questions about the nature of reality and our human place within it, you will be following a road that has excited and inspired many before you. It is not always an easy road but all fine things are hard, as the philosopher Spinoza observed at the end of his own masterpiece, the *Ethics*, written some fifty years before Berkeley's *Principles*. We cannot all be a Spinoza, or Berkeley. But we can all enter into the struggle to come to terms with the human condition and our relation to the world around us. And the best and most productive way to enter into that struggle is by looking in detail at the great texts that have come down to us, expounding the arguments you find there, and working out your own critical responses. I hope these brief introductory remarks have encouraged you to set out on this road, and that as you move forward you will increasingly come to see just how creative and rewarding a process philosophising can be.

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