



HOW TO READ PHILOSOPHY

Mortimer Adler and Charles Van Doren

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3. THE MEETING OF OBJECTIONS: The philosophical style developed in the Middle Ages and perfected by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* has likenesses to both of those already discussed. Plato, we have pointed out, raises most of the persistent philosophical problems; and Socrates, as we might have observed, asks in the course of the dialogues the kind of simple but profound questions that children ask. And Aristotle, as we have also pointed out, recognizes the objections of other philosophers and replies to them.

Aquinas' style is a combination of question-raising and objection-meeting. The *Summa* is divided into parts, treatises, questions, and articles. The form of all the articles is the same. A question is posed; the opposite (wrong) answer to it is given: arguments are adduced in support of that wrong answer; these are countered first by an authoritative text (often a quotation from Scripture); and finally, Aquinas introduces his own answer or solution with the words "I answer that." Having given his own view of the matter, he then replies to each of the arguments for the wrong answer.

The neatness and order of this style are appealing to men with orderly minds, but that is not the most important feature of the Thomistic way of philosophizing. Rather, it is Aquinas' explicit recognition of conflicts, his reporting of different views, and his attempt to meet all possible objections to his own solutions. The idea that the truth somehow evolves out of opposition and conflict was a common medieval one. Philosophers in Aquinas' time accepted as a matter of course that they should be prepared to defend their views in open, public disputes, which were often attended by crowds of students and other interested persons. The civilization of the Middle Ages was essentially oral, partly because books were few and hard to come by. A proposition was not accepted as true unless it could meet the test of open discussion; the philosopher was not a solitary thinker, but instead faced his opponents in the intellectual market place (as Socrates might have said). Thus, the *Summa Theologica* is imbued with the spirit of debate and discussion.

4. THE SYSTEMIZATION OF PHILOSOPHY: In the seventeenth century, a fourth style of philosophical exposition was developed by two notable philosophers, Descartes and Spinoza. Fascinated by the promised success of mathematics in organizing man's knowledge of nature, they attempted to organize philosophy itself in a way akin to the organization of mathematics.

Descartes was a great mathematician and, although perhaps wrong on some points, a redoubtable philosopher. What he tried to do, essentially, was to clothe philosophy in mathematical dress—to give it the certainty and formal structure that Euclid, two thousand years before, had given geometry. Descartes was not wholly unsuccessful in this, and his demand for clarity and distinctness in thinking was to some extent justified in the chaotic intellectual climate of his time. He also wrote philosophical treatises in a more or less traditional form, including a set of replies to objections to his views.

Spinoza carried the conception even farther. His *Ethics* is written in strict mathematical form, with propositions, proofs, corollaries, lemmas, scholiums, and the like. However, the subject matter of metaphysics and of morals is not very satisfactorily handled in this manner, which is more appropriate for geometry and other mathematical subjects than for philosophical ones. A sign of this is that when reading Spinoza you can skip a great deal, in exactly the same way that you can skip in Newton. You cannot skip anything in Kant or Aristotle, because the line of reasoning is continuous;

and you cannot skip anything in Plato, any more than you would skip a part of a play or poem.

Probably there are no absolute rules of rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether it is possible to write a satisfactory philosophical work in mathematical form, as Spinoza tried to do, or a satisfactory scientific work in dialogue form, as Galileo tried to do. The fact is that both of these men failed to some extent to communicate what they wished to communicate, and it seems likely that the form they chose was a major reason for the failure.

5. THE APHORISTIC STYLE: There is one other style of philosophical exposition that deserves mention, although it is probably not as important as the other four. This is the aphoristic style adopted by Nietzsche in such works as *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and by certain modern French philosophers. The popularity of this style during the past century is perhaps owing to the great interest, among Western readers, in the wisdom books of the East, which are written in an aphoristic style. This style may also owe something to the example of Pascal's *Pensees*. But of course Pascal did not intend to leave his great work in the form of short, enigmatic statements; he died before he could finish writing out the book in essay form. The great advantage of the aphoristic form in philosophy is that it is heuristic; the reader has the impression that more is being said than is actually said, for he does much of the work of thinking—of making connections between statements and of constructing arguments for positions—himself. At the same time, however, this is the great disadvantage of the style which is really not expositional at all. The author is like a hit-and-run driver; he touches on a subject, he suggests a truth or insight about it, and then runs off to another subject without properly defending what he has said. Thus, although the aphoristic style is enjoyable for those who are poetically inclined, it is irritating for serious philosophers who would rather try to follow and criticize an author's line of thought.

As far as we know, there is no other important style of philosophical exposition that has been employed in our Western tradition. (A work like Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* is not an exception. It was originally in verse; but as far as its style goes, it is no different from other philosophical essays: and in any event we ordinarily read it nowadays in prose translations.) This means that all of the great philosophers have employed one or the other of these five styles; sometimes, of course, a philosopher tries more than one. The treatise or essay is probably the most common form, both in the past and in the present. It can range all the way from highly

formal and difficult works like those of Kant, to popular philosophical essays or letters. Dialogues are notoriously hard to write, and the geometrical style is enormously difficult both to write and to read. The aphoristic style is highly unsatisfactory from a philosophical point of view. The Thomistic style has not been used very much in recent times. Perhaps it would not be acceptable to modern readers, but that seems a shame, considering all its advantages.

Hints for Reading Philosophy

It is perhaps clear from the discussion so far that the most important thing to discover in reading any philosophical work is the question or questions it tries to answer. The questions may be stated explicitly, or they may be implicit to a certain extent. In either case, you must try to find out what they are.

How the author answers these questions will be deeply affected by his controlling principles. These may be stated, too, but that is not always the case. We have already quoted Basil Willey on the difficulty—and the importance—of discovering the hidden and unstated assumptions of an author, to say nothing of our own. This goes for any book. It applies to works in philosophy with particular force.

The great philosophers cannot be charged with having tried to hide their assumptions dishonestly, or with having been unclear in their definitions and postulations. It is precisely the mark of a great philosopher that he makes these things clearer than other writers can. Nevertheless, every great philosopher has certain controlling principles that underlie his work. These are easy enough to see if he states them in the book you are reading. But he may not have done so, reserving their treatment for another book. Or he may never treat them explicitly, but instead allow them to pervade every one of his works.

It is difficult to give examples of such controlling principles. Any that we might proffer would probably be disputed by philosophers, and we do not here have space to defend our choices. Nevertheless, we could mention the controlling idea of Plato that conversation about philosophical subjects is perhaps the most important of all human activities. Now this idea is seldom explicitly stated in the dialogues, although Socrates may be saying it when, in the *Apology*, he asserts that the unexamined life is not worth living, and Plato mentions it in the *Seventh Letter*. The point is that Plato expresses this view in a number of other places, though not in so

many words—for example, in the *Protagoras*, where the audience is shown as disapproving of Protagoras' unwillingness to continue talking to Socrates. Another example is that of Cephalus, in Book I of the *Republic*, who happens to have other business to attend to and so departs. Plato seems to be saying here, though not explicitly, that it is a betrayal of man's deepest nature to refuse to join, for whatever reason, in the search for truth. But, as we have noted, this is not ordinarily cited as one of Plato's "ideas," because it is seldom explicitly discussed in his works.

We can find other examples in Aristotle. In the first place, it is always important to recognize, in reading any Aristotelian work, that things said in other works are relevant to the discussion. Thus the basic principles of logic, expounded in the *Organon*, are assumed in the *Physics*. In the second place, owing partly to the fact that the treatises are not finished works of art, their controlling principles are not always stated with satisfactory clarity. The *Ethics* is about many things: happiness, habit, virtue, pleasure, and so forth—the list could be very long. But the controlling insight is discovered only by the very careful reader. This is the insight that happiness is the *whole* of the good, not the *highest* good, for in that case it would be only one good among others. Recognizing this, we see that happiness does not consist in self-perfection, or the goods of self-improvement, even though these constitute the highest among partial goods. Happiness, as Aristotle says, is the quality of a *whole* life, and he means "whole" not only in a temporal sense but also in terms of all the aspects from which a life can be viewed. The happy man is one, as we might say nowadays, who puts it all together—and keeps it there throughout his life. This insight is controlling in the sense that it affects almost all of the other ideas and insights in the *Ethics*, but it is not stated nearly as explicitly as it might be.

One more example, Kant's mature thought is often known as critical philosophy. He himself contrasted "criticism" to "dogmatism," which he imputed to many previous philosophers. By "dogmatism" he meant the presumption that the human intellect can arrive at the most important truths by pure thinking, without being aware of its own limitations. What is first required according to Kant, is a critical survey and assessment of the mind's resources and powers. Thus, the limitation of the mind is a controlling principle in Kant in a way that it is not in any philosopher who precedes him in time. But while this is perfectly clear because explicitly stated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is not stated, because it is assumed, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant's major work in esthetics. Nevertheless, it is controlling there as well.

This is all we can say about finding the controlling principles in a philosophical book, because we are not sure that we can tell you how to discover them. Sometimes it takes years to do this, and many readings and rereadings. Nevertheless, it is the ideal goal of a good and thorough reading, and you should keep in mind that it is ultimately what you must try to do if you are to understand your author. Despite the difficulty of discovering these controlling principles, however, we do not recommend that you take the shortcut of reading books about the philosophers, their lives and opinions. The discovery you come to on your own will be much more valuable than someone else's ideas.

Once you have found an author's controlling principles, you will want to decide whether he adheres to them throughout his work. Unfortunately, philosophers, even the best of them, often do not do so. Consistency, Emerson said, "is the hobgoblin of little minds." That is a very carefree statement, but although it is probably wise to remember it, there is no doubt, either, that inconsistency in a philosopher is a serious problem. If a philosopher is inconsistent, you have to decide which of two sets of propositions he really means—the first principles, as he states them; or the conclusions, which do not in fact follow from the principles as stated. Or you may decide that neither is valid.

The reading of philosophical works has special aspects that relate to the difference between philosophy and science. We are here considering only theoretical works in philosophy, such as metaphysical treatises or books about the philosophy of nature.

The philosophical problem is to explain, not to describe, as science does, the nature of things. Philosophy asks about more than the connections of phenomena. It seeks to penetrate to the ultimate causes and conditions that underlie them. Such problems are satisfactorily explored only when the answers to them are supported by clear arguments and analysis.

The major effort of the reader, therefore, must be with respect to the terms and the initial propositions. Although the philosopher, like the scientist, has a technical terminology, the words that express his terms are usually taken from common speech, but used in a very special sense. This demands special care from the reader. If he does not overcome the tendency to use familiar words in a familiar way, he will probably make gibberish and nonsense of the book.

The basic terms of philosophical discussions are, of course, abstract. But so are those of science. No general knowledge is expressible except in abstract terms. There is nothing particularly difficult about abstractions. We use them every day of our lives and in every sort of conversation. However, the words “abstract” and “concrete” seem to trouble many persons.

Whenever you talk generally about anything, you are using abstractions. What you perceive through your senses is always concrete and particular. What you think with your mind is always abstract and general. To understand an “abstract word” is to have the idea it expresses. “Having an idea” is just another way of saying that you understand some general aspect of the things you experience concretely. You cannot see or touch or even imagine the general aspect thus referred to. If you could, there would be no difference between the senses and the mind. People who try to imagine what ideas refer to befuddle themselves, and end up with a hopeless feeling about all abstractions.

Just as inductive arguments should be the reader’s main focus in the case of scientific books, so here, in the case of philosophy, you must pay closest attention to the philosopher’s principles. They may be either things he asks you to assume with him, or matters that he calls self-evident. There is no trouble about assumptions. Make them to see what follows, even if you yourself have contrary presuppositions. It is a good mental exercise to pretend that you believe something you really do not believe. And the clearer you are about your own prejudgments, the more likely you will be not to misjudge those made by others.

It is the other sort of principles that may cause trouble. Few philosophical books fail to state some propositions that the author regards as self-evident. Such propositions are drawn directly from experience rather than proved by other propositions.

The thing to remember is that the experience from which they are drawn, as we have noted more than once, is, unlike the scientist’s special experience, the common experience of mankind. The philosopher does no work in laboratories, no research in the field. Hence to understand and test a philosopher’s leading principles you do not need the extrinsic aid of special experience, obtained by methodical investigation. He refers you to your own common sense and daily observation of the world in which you live.

In other words, the method according to which you should read a philosophical book is very similar to the method according to

which it is written. A philosopher, faced with a problem, can do nothing but think about it. A reader, faced with a philosophical book, can do nothing but read it—which means, as we know, thinking about it. There are no other aids except the mind itself,

But this essential loneliness of reader and book is precisely the situation that we imagined at the beginning of our long discussion of the rules of analytical reading. Thus you can see why we say that the rules of reading, as we have stated and explained them, apply more directly to the reading of philosophical books than to the reading of any other kind.

On Making Up Your Own Mind

A good theoretical work in philosophy is as free from oratory and propaganda as a good scientific treatise. You do not have to be concerned about the “personality” of the author, or investigate his social and economic background. There is utility, however, in reading the works of other great philosophers who have dealt with the same problems as your author. The philosophers have carried on a long conversation with each other in the history of thought. You had better listen in on it before you make up your mind about what any of them says.

The fact that philosophers disagree should not trouble you, for two reasons. First, the fact of disagreement, if it is persistent, may point to a great unsolved and, perhaps insoluble problem. It is good to know where the true mysteries are. Second, the disagreements of others are relatively unimportant. Your responsibility is only to make up your own mind. In the presence of the long conversation that the philosophers have carried on through their books, you must judge what is true and what is false. When you have read a philosophical book well—and that means reading other philosophers on the same subject, too—you are in a position to judge.

It is, indeed, the most distinctive mark of philosophical questions that everyone must answer them for himself. Taking the opinions of others is not solving them, but evading them. And your answers must be solidly grounded, with arguments to back them up. This means, above all, that you cannot depend on the testimony of experts, as you may have to do in the case of science.

The reason is that the questions philosophers ask are simply more important than the questions asked by anyone else. Except children.

A Note on Theology

There are two kinds of theology, natural theology and dogmatic theology. Natural theology is a branch of philosophy; it is the last chapter, as it were, in metaphysics. If you ask, for example, whether causation is an endless process, whether everything is caused, you may find yourself, if you answer in the affirmative, involved in an infinite regress. Therefore you may have to posit some originating cause that is not itself caused. Aristotle called this uncaused cause an unmoved mover. You could give it other names—you could even say that it was merely another name for God—but the point is that you would have arrived at the conception by the unaided effort—the natural working—of your mind.

Dogmatic theology differs from philosophy in that its first principles are articles of faith adhered to by the communicants of some religion. A work of dogmatic theology always depends upon dogmas and the authority of a church that proclaims them.

If you are not of the faith, if you do not belong to the church, you can nevertheless read such a theological book *well* by treating its dogmas with the same respect you treat the assumptions of a mathematician. But you must always keep in mind that an article of faith is not something that the faithful *assume*. Faith, for those who have it, is the most certain form of knowledge, not a tentative opinion.

Understanding this seems to be difficult for many readers today. Typically, they make either or both of two mistakes in dealing with dogmatic theology. The first mistake is to refuse to accept, even temporarily, the articles of faith that are the first principles of the author. As a result, the reader continues to struggle with these first principles, never really paying attention to the book itself. The second mistake is to assume that, because the first principles are dogmatic, the arguments based on them, the reasoning that they support, and the conclusions to which they lead are all dogmatic in the same way. It is true enough, of course, if certain principles are accepted and the reasoning that is based on them is cogent, that the conclusions must then be accepted too—at least to the extent that the principles are. But if the reasoning is defective, the most acceptable first principles will lead to invalid conclusions.

We are speaking here, as you can see, of the difficulties that face a non-believing reader of a theological work. His task is to accept the first principles as true while he is reading the book, and then to read it with all the care that any good expository work deserves.

The faithful reader of a work that is essential to his faith has other difficulties to face. However, these problems are not confined to reading theology.

How to Read “Canonical” Books

There is one very interesting kind of book, one kind of reading, that has not yet been discussed. We use the term “canonical” to refer to such books; in an older tradition we might have called them “sacred” or “holy,” but those words no longer apply to all such works, though they still apply to some of them.


A prime example is the Holy Bible, when it is read not as literature but instead as the revealed Word of God. For orthodox Marxists, however, the works of Marx must be read in much the same way as the Bible must be read by orthodox Jews or Christians. And Mao Tse-tung’s Little Red Book has an equally canonical character for a “faithful” Chinese Communist.

The notion of a canonical book can be extended beyond these obvious examples. Consider any institution—a church, a political party, a society—that among other things (1) is a teaching institution, (2) has a body of doctrine to teach, and (3) has a faithful and obedient membership. The members of any such organization read *reverentially*. They do not—even cannot—question the authorized or right reading of the books that to them are canonical. The faithful are debarred by their faith from finding error in the “sacred” text, to say nothing of finding nonsense there.

Orthodox Jews read the old Testament in this way; Christians, the New Testament; Muslims, the Koran; orthodox Marxists, the works of Marx and Lenin and, depending on the political climate, those of Stalin; orthodox Freudian psychoanalysts, the works of Freud; U.S. Army officers, the infantry manual. And you can think of many more examples by yourself.

In fact, almost all of us, even if we have not quite reached it, have approached the situation in which we must read canonically. A fledgling lawyer, intent on passing the bar exams, must read certain texts in a certain way in order to attain a perfect score. So with doctors and other professionals; and indeed so with all of us when, as students, we were required at the peril of “failure” to read a text according to our professor’s interpretation of it. (Of course, not all professors fail their students for disagreeing with them!)

The characteristics of this kind of reading are perhaps summed up in the word “orthodox,” which is almost always applicable. The word comes from two Greek roots, meaning “right opinion.” These are books for which there is *one and only one right reading*; any other reading or interpretation is fraught with peril, from the loss of an “A” to the damnation of one’s soul. This characteristic carries with it an obligation. The faithful reader of a canonical book *is obliged to make sense out of it* and to find it true in one or another sense of “true.” If he cannot do this by himself, *he is obliged to go to someone who can*. This may be a priest or a rabbi, or it may be his superior in the party hierarchy, or it may be his professor. In any case, he is obliged to accept the resolution of his problem that is offered him. He reads essentially without freedom; but in return for this he gains a kind of satisfaction that is possibly never obtained when reading other books.

Here, in fact, we must stop. The problem of reading the Holy Book—if you have faith that it is the Word of God—is the most difficult problem in the whole field of reading. There have been more books written about how to read Scripture than about all other aspects of the art of reading together. The Word of God is obviously the most difficult writing men can read; but it is also, if you believe it *is* the Word of God, the most important to read. The effort of the faithful has been duly proportionate to the difficulty of the task. It would be true to say that, in the European tradition at least, the Bible is *the* book in more senses than one. It has been not only the most widely read, but also the most carefully read, book of all. 

Chapter 18 from their book, *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading* - Simon & Schuster 1972

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