

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Oct '14

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 788



TWO APPROACHES TO THE AUTHORS OF THE GREAT BOOKS

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In certain of his dialogues, especially in the *Gorgias* and the *Sophist*, Plato is at pains to distinguish between the philosopher and the sophist or between the philosopher and the kind of rhetorician who is at heart sophistical. In his view, the criterion that separates them is the relation in which they stand to truth.

The sophist, according to Plato, attempts to win an argument regardless of whether the conclusion reached is true or not. So, too, the sophistical orator attempts to persuade an audience regardless of whether the action or attitude recommended is right or not. There may be many similarities between the method of the philosopher and the method of the sophist so far as the logical devices they employ are concerned. But they do not employ these devices for the same purpose. The philosopher employs them only and always to get at the truth. The sophist, in sharp contrast, puts them to use in order to succeed in getting others to adopt this or that view even if the view advocated is incorrect or false.

I mention this differentiation between the sophist and the philosopher as background for the distinction I wish to make between two approaches to the authors of the Great Books. One is the philosophical approach to reading and interpreting them; the other is the scholarly approach. The difference between these two readings, I would like to suggest, is that one of them has truth for its object, whereas the other does not—that in this sense the scholar is like the sophist, not because he tries to make what is false appear to be true, but because he is not for the most part concerned with whether the views or positions taken by the author under consideration are true or false.

I appreciate that in suggesting this I may seem to be putting scholarship down, though that is not my intention. For as between the philosopher and the sophist, or even one who is said to be like the sophist, the latter must sound to our ears the less noble figure. He is so because we regard him as one who seeks to gain victory—that is, to convince us of something—at any cost, and particularly at the cost of that for which the contest ought to be waged, which is truth.

We are likely to think of the sophist in this way even if, in other discussions, we subscribe to the proposition that there is no such thing as “the truth,” or if we insist that, after all, there is no substitute for victory, or hold that Socrates himself was a kind of dialectical trickster who in the end was the greatest sophist of all, as his enemies said.

None of these contentions really makes us comfortable or happy with the sophist, but only defensive of him as the best that ignorance allows, or that a ruthless world affords, or as an instance of one rather low ceilinged truth we admit, which is the truth of the great figure who has been debunked.

Of course we admire, or we should, the kind of presentation that seeks to prevail when the question of truth is beyond human capacity to decide absolutely, as in the trial of an issue of fact that cannot be reenacted, and as to which subsequent accounts differ; or the kind that a teacher adopts when he invites contention from his students on a matter of which the truth can be known, and is, but which for the moment he hides to the end that they may ferret it out themselves, for the good of the exercise (a somewhat debased version, be it said, of the “learned ignorance” that Socrates himself adopts in the Platonic dialogues); and so we admire, too, the exposition that a scholar makes when his object is to set forth the views of some writer as consistently as they will allow, to the end that

they may make the best case for themselves and be best understood.

Why then our felt reservation with respect to such practices? Surely it is that they are acceptable only in special cases of one sort or another, the cases having as their common feature that in them truth is unavailable, or for didactic reasons has been temporarily suspended, or is regarded as something subject to a prior condition. Where the situation is not of this sort, we have much greater difficulty allowing sophistry, or anything like sophistry, to prevail, if we allow it at all.

Thus the lawyer who knows, or thinks he knows, that his client is guilty of the crime with which he has been charged is faced at the very least with an ethical dilemma when it comes to defending him. Similarly, whatever the devices of the teacher may be with respect to dissembling as to the truth of what he teaches, no one would say he had not some ultimate responsibility to see that it is recognized by his students, especially if they do not perceive it—if they are in fact quite misled by the pretense of ignorance or error which he has adopted.

And so with the scholar, whose summary of the opinions and arguments of the writer he has undertaken to expound we think wholly proper, indeed altogether necessary to the further task of deciding whether what the writer says is true or not—yet we say, or we should say, that our sense of that writer is incomplete when the further inquiry into the truth of what he asserts is not undertaken; and we should add that when, as sometimes happens, we are diverted by the authority of the scholarship from making any such inquiry at all, we have been badly served by it.

Where we are well served by scholarship is in the reading of difficult works, particularly those of ancient writers, which none of us could read—which could not even be translated—were it not for the patient labors of generations of scholars who have established their texts, so far as possible.

Even more recent writers who have written in our own language are such as we come to with the benefit of comments by those who have gone before, and whose interpretations form part of our own reading, though we may think it necessary on occasion to correct them, and though, having satisfied ourselves that they fairly represent what the author has said, we still must go on to decide whether or not in our judgment it has any validity. Indeed, the greater the author, the more likely he is to need rereading from time to time—by readers who perceive something in them which they did not

perceive before, or which they had long since forgotten.

Nevertheless, this kind of reading is always to be distinguished from the kind that seeks to determine the truth of what an author says, or its value. For the aim of this kind of scholarly writing is never anything more (or less) than comprehension, and the difference between that and the philosophical reading to which I have referred is just the difference between comprehension and judgment—between a grasp of the statement and a conclusion as to the truth of the statement. It is because the scholarly kind of reading has as its aim the comprehension of what the author says, and not its truth, that I presume to liken it to the sophistry of which Plato wrote.

I do not mean that the scholar is a sophist. I mean that he is like one in that he is interested in something besides truth—something we may call accuracy, or consistency, or even coherence, but not truth. Because that is so, the scholar as such is never, at least in my view, a philosopher, nor is the kind of reading he gives to a scholarly task a philosophical one.

Hence I presume also to say that, the scholarly reading of a work having been completed, the philosophical one must begin, and precisely at the point where the scholarly reading leaves off—at the point where the fact of the statement (or its consistency, or coherence) has been established, but where its truth has not yet been considered.

How important philosophical reading is will be evident when we remember that the authors of the Great Books are fallible human beings, and that no matter how great they are, their works are likely to contain, in some proportion, both truth and error. We should never expect to find a great book that is completely and perfectly true, true in every principle it appeals to or in every conclusion that it reaches. Nor should we ever expect to find one that is false throughout—false in every point it makes or proposition that it advances. If that were the case, it would hardly have the status of a great book. But it could easily be a great book if it contained some admixture of truth and error, particularly if the truths it enunciates are fundamental and the errors it also contains are extremely important ones to avoid making.

With this in mind, the philosophical approach to the reading of a great author concentrates on sifting the truths to be found in his works from the errors that are also present there. Aristotle, in two passages, succinctly summarizes the essence of the philosophical

approach. The first passage occurs in chapter 1 of Book II of his *Metaphysics*. There he tells us that:

The investigation of the truth is in one way hard, in another easy. An indication of this is found in the fact that no one is able to attain the truth adequately, while, on the other hand, we do not collectively fail, but everyone says something true about the nature of things, and while individually we contribute little or nothing to the truth, by the union of all a considerable amount is amassed.

The second passage comes from chapter 2 of Book I of his treatise *On the Soul*. There he writes as follows:

It is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their suggestions and avoid their errors.”

Among the authors of the Great Books, Aristotle is the one in whom I find a great many truths of fundamental importance, but I also find errors in his writings, among them two of the greatest importance—his error about the division of mankind into those who are by nature intended for freedom and those who are by nature intended for slavery, and his error about the inferiority of women to men. There are, of course, other errors in Aristotle, but many of these are errors about matters of fact that represent the inadequacy of the scientific investigation of nature in his day.

In contrast to Aristotle, I find more errors than truths in the major philosophical works of David Hume—errors of the greatest importance because they are errors in fundamental principles, which, carried out to their logical conclusions, lead to very serious consequences that ought to be avoided like the plague. I also find some truths in Hume—particularly the insight that even complete knowledge of the way things are in reality cannot yield a single conclusion about what goals human beings ought to seek in life or how they ought to be sought.


What I have just said about my reading of Aristotle and Hume is offered as an example of what I regard as a philosophical approach to the authors of the Great Books. If I had chosen other authors to comment on—Plato and Rousseau, for example—the proportion of truth to error would have been more nearly balanced than it is in the case of Aristotle and Hume; but I would still be proceeding philosophically in the same way—sifting truth from error and profiting by the discovery of both, for finding errors to be corrected is as profitable as finding truths to be espoused.

The scholarly approach to the authors named, and other authors as well, is quite different. I am acquainted with scholarly interpretations of Aristotle that, instead of rejecting his views about natural slaves and about women as flagrant errors, attempt to put them somehow in a good light. This kind of approach to Aristotle apparently proceeds on the assumption that every fundamental position in Aristotle must be regarded as having the aspect of truth, as if it were an oracular instead of a human utterance.

I am also acquainted with scholarly interpretations of Hume, of Plato, and of Rousseau, which proceed in the same way, even when the scholarly commentators do acknowledge the presence of what looks like contradictions in the authors they are writing about. They give us the impression that these contradictions must be more apparent than real, and that a deeper understanding of the author can somehow remove them.

In thus describing the scholarly approach, I am not accusing scholars of overlooking or concealing errors and contradictions that they plainly recognize. I am only asserting that the scholarly approach is controlled by the aim of putting the best face on, or seeing in the most favorable light, everything that the author being considered has to say. The aim, in short, is apologetic rather than critical. It is certainly not directed to the sifting of truths from errors, adopting the former and rejecting the latter.

Are both approaches to the reading of the great authors recommended? Do both make significant contributions to the education we seek in reading the Great Books? My answer to these questions is affirmative. They are both to be recommended because they both do make contributions to the learning we seek in reading the Great Books. But their contributions are quite different.

The scholarly approach contributes to our understanding of a great author, usually an understanding that encompasses all or most of his writings, not just one book or another. The philosophical approach contributes to our knowledge of the truth and to the wisdom we come to possess as our knowledge of ourselves and of the world we live in is enlightened by more truth and by truths that are more fundamental than those we first understood. 

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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