

How To Read Philosophy

Joseph Ulatowski

University of Waikato, New Zealand

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Introduction

The backbone of any text of philosophy is an argument, that is, a set of statements where one or more statements provide support for another statement. The supported statement is called the conclusion and the supporting statements are called premises. Philosophy texts tend to sustain an argument over several pages and sometimes over several hundreds of pages. If no argument was included in the text, then it wouldn't be the writing style adopted by philosophers.

The argumentative writing style of the philosopher is typically dialectical. The dialectic state-of-play is guarded by lexical signposts to permit the reader to trace the line of argument throughout the text. Dialectic writing has an author defend her own thesis and then following that defence considering what a challenger may say in response to the argument defended. This gives the novice reader the impression that the author is 'contradicting herself!'

So, for these reasons, novices may not be able to follow philosophical lines of argument. The following may be thought of as tips for how a novice may go about reading a philosophy text, whether a journal article, monograph, or textbook.

1 Look for a Thesis

The author will likely say at one point: "The aim of this work is to..." or "I will argue that..." One could bet that this is indicative of the main thesis of the work. The rest of the work will support that main thesis. The reader should jot down the main thesis of the work at the outset and continually remind herself of that main thesis over the course of reading the article or monograph.

2 Look for Material in Support of the Thesis

The rest of the work will likely provide reasons for believing that the main thesis is true. The reasons that authors provide for a main thesis will be further supported by auxiliary arguments that lend support for the premises that lead the reader to the main conclusion. Again, it is important for the reader to jot down notes about these reasons and forms of evidence.

(An exercise I have students do for my 200/300/500 level papers is to outline the main argument of a text in standard outline form [1... (premise), 2. ... (premise), 3. ... (1,2)]. Doing so ensures me that students have taken the time to review the text carefully for the main argument and that students will be prepared to discuss the main argument of the paper in lecture or seminar.)

3 Take Notes, A Lot of Notes

Taking notes shouldn't be confined to the classroom. Reading a philosophy text is far more difficult than reading a harlequin novel or the latest instalment of J.K. Rowling. Readers too often believe that they're able to 'get it' just by reading through a text without so much as writing in the margins. I don't believe that for a second. Readers should write in the margins, write in the text, and write in one's own notebook. Just as with the notes one takes in lectures, students should return to their notes regularly and review what they have written about the texts. Use notes as a resource for studying the texts you're reading.

4 Read the End, Twice

The critical argument of a philosophy paper tends to come in the last three or four pages of the text. This is especially true of journal articles. Re-read the last three or four pages (likely the penultimate and concluding section) of the article twice or three times.

This rule doesn't typically apply to monographs. In books, authors have a greater degree of freedom to spread the main argument out over several chapters. The main argument, especially a critical one, needn't be confined to the penultimate or concluding chapter of a book. In fact, an author may choose to place the most critical argument up front at the beginning of the book.

5 Feeling lost?

Obfuscation means there's a problem lurking. While an aim of philosophical writing is clarity, authors very often miss the target. In reading a philosophy text, whenever one comes upon a passage that seems unclear, take note: the author's probably attempting to bluff the reader. Obfuscation is a defence

mechanism philosophers deploy in the face of a possible criticism to their argument. This is likely the place to challenge the author's position.