

APPENDIX: READING PHILOSOPHY

To read philosophy well one must read slowly and aggressively. There is a lot of emphasis today on reading fast. This is the age of information, we are told. To take advantage of the information available to us (even to cope with it) or to master that which is important for our job, for responsible citizenship, or for a full life—or at any rate for the final or the midterm—one must learn to absorb large amounts of information in limited amounts of time. The college student, one hears, must learn to read at a minimum of 1,000 words a minute. And 2,000 or 3,000 words is better; and those who really want to get ahead should read so fast that the only limiting factor in the speed with which they read is the speed with which they can turn pages.

These skills may be suitable for some types of reading, but not for philosophy. Good philosophers develop arguments and theories of some intricacy: arguments that are designed to convince the reader of the author's position on important issues. Reading such works is valuable insofar as one grapples with the ideas—fighting not only to understand the author but also, once one does, fighting with him or her for control of one's mind. One should not be easily convinced of one position or another on issues so weighty as the existence of God, the indirectness of our knowledge of the external world, or the nature of justice.

Of course, all generalizations are a bit suspect. When one is reading for pleasure or to absorb straightforward information from a reliable source, speed-reading can be fine. But, if one derives pleasure from reading philosophy, it should be the pleasure of grappling with important and sublime ideas, not the exhilaration of racing through a thriller. And, when one learns from reading philosophy, it should be a result of being forced to

think through new ideas and grasp new concepts, not simply the uploading of a data file from the text to the mind.

College students will have learned that mathematics and other technical material cannot be read in overdrive. But, philosophy can be deceptive. It cannot be claimed that good philosophy always makes good reading, but some philosophy does. A lot of philosophy, including a good portion of the famous historical works included in this anthology, make pleasant reading. They do not contain symbols, equations, charts, or other obvious signs of technicality and intricacy. One can just sit down and read Hume, or even Descartes, getting a feel for the author's position and style and the historical perspective of the work. When these texts are assigned in courses that survey the literature of various periods—with an eye toward getting a sense of the flow of ideas and concerns—as parts of larger assignments that cover hundreds of pages a week, one may have little choice but to read philosophy in this way, that is, just to get a feel for what is going on.

But appearances to the contrary, philosophy is inevitably technical. The philosopher constructs arguments, theories, positions, or criticisms in an attempt to persuade his or her most intelligent and perceptive opponents. The ideas and issues dealt with have a long history: to say something new, interesting, and persuasive, the philosopher must build his or her case with care. The result may be understood on various levels; to understand it at the deepest level, the reader must adopt the stance of the intelligent and perceptive opponent, thus coming to understand the case the philosopher is trying to make. This is what we mean by reading aggressively.

To read philosophy in this way, one should imagine oneself in a dialogue with the philoso-

pher—as if the philosopher were one’s roommate (or an intelligent and articulate new roommate) trying to convince one of a startling new idea.

To see this approach at work, let’s consider an example. Here is a passage from Descartes’s “First Meditation.”

Today, then, having rid myself of worries and having arranged for some peace and quiet, I withdraw alone, free at last earnestly and wholeheartedly to overthrow all my beliefs.

To do this, I do not need to show each of my beliefs to be false; I may never be able to do that. But, since reason now convinces me that I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what is not obviously certain and indubitable as from what is obviously false, I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if I can find some ground for doubt in each. And, to do this, I need not take on the endless task of running through my beliefs one by one: since a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it, I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Let’s start with the second paragraph. The first place to pause is the word *this*. Whenever one encounters a demonstrative pronoun or other device by which the author refers back to something earlier, one should pause and make sure one knows to what it refers.

DESCARTES: To do this . . .

YOU: Wait a minute. To do what? Oh yes, I see, *to overthrow all your beliefs*.

But what is it to overthrow one’s beliefs? This sort of phrase ought immediately to occasion a demand for clarification.

Y: What do you mean, “Overthrow all your beliefs, anyway?” Every one of them? You must be kidding? You are trying to make yourself believe everything you now believe is false? Can that really be what you mean?

Of course, Descartes isn’t your roommate and, in fact, is long dead. So he can’t respond to you.

Still, you should mentally—or on the margin of your book—note this question.

Y: Well, of course you can’t respond. But this sounds pretty odd. I will keep my eye open for clarification of just what it is you are trying to do.

D: As I was saying: To do this, I do not need to show each of my beliefs to be false; I may never be able to do that.

Y: Well, I didn’t have to wait long. It’s a relief that you aren’t going to show all of your beliefs to be false. Still, it sounds as if this is something you want to do but simply don’t think you could. The point of even wanting to seems a bit obscure. Go ahead.

D: But, as reason now convinces me . . .

Y: Reason. Reason. I wonder what exactly you mean by that. Hmm, this is the first use of the word. I mean, I know the meaning of the word *reason*, but it sounds as if you have something rather definite in mind. Actually, I use the word as a verb rather than a noun. Maybe I had better look it up in the dictionary. Here we are: “A statement offered in explanation.” That doesn’t seem to fit. *Motive, cause*, likewise. *Sanity*. That must be as in, “He has lost his reason.” Or *intelligence*. One of these must be the closest. The latter seems better. So you are saying that your intelligence convinces you that you should be a great deal more cautious about what you believe—that’s what this seems to amount to. Still, I have a hunch that more is packed into your use of the word *reason* than I can get out of the dictionary. The prof said you were a rationalist and that they put great emphasis on the power of reason. I’ll keep in mind that this is a key word and look for other clues as to exactly what you mean by it.

D: . . . That I ought to withhold my assent just as carefully from what is not obviously certain and indubitable as from what is obviously false. I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs if I can find some ground for doubt in each.

Y: Wait a minute. You just said a mouthful. Let me try to sort it out. Let’s see. *Withhold my assent*. So you said you were going to overthrow your beliefs at the end of the last paragraph. Then, you said to do this you don’t need to show that they are false. So *withholding assent* must be how you describe the in-between position—you have

quit believing something, although you haven't shown it false, you don't believe the opposite either.

Wait a minute. Does that make sense? If I don't believe that $3 + 5 = 8$, don't I automatically believe that it's not the case that $3 + 5 = 8$? Hmm. I guess not. Suppose it was $358 + 267$. Until I add it up, I neither believe it does equal 625 nor believe that doesn't. So I guess that's where one is at when one is *withholding assent*.

Here is another mouthful: "Not obviously certain and indubitable." I'll look up the last word. *Unquestionable: Too evident to be doubted*. How is that different from certain? If your *Meditations* is one of the all-time classics, why are you being redundant in this show-offy way? Maybe I should give you the benefit of the doubt.

Let's see, the contrast is between *certain and indubitable*—no, wait, *obviously certain and indubitable*—and *obviously false*. Clearly one withholds one's assent from what is obviously false. So what you are saying is that you are going to do the same for *everything*, except that which is obviously certain and indubitable. And your reason, which seems to amount to your intelligence, is what leads you to do this. OK, proceed.

D: . . . I can justify the rejection of all my beliefs . . .

Y: You seem to go back and forth between a pretty sensible position—not believing what you aren't really sure of—and something that sounds a bit weird. Before you said you were going to try to overthrow *all* your beliefs; now, you are trying to justify rejecting *all* your beliefs. I must admit, even though you have quite a reputation as a philosopher, this project strikes me as sort of extreme.

D: . . . If I can find some ground for doubt in each . . .

Y: Oh dear, another technical sounding phrase:

ground for doubt. I better pull out my *Webster's* again. Well, you aren't using *ground* to mean dirt and you don't mean the bottom of a body of water, so you must mean *basis for belief or argument*. It sounds as if you are going to look for some basis for an argument *against* every single one of your beliefs. *That* sounds like quite a project. I wonder how come your *Meditations* is so short if you are really going to go through each one of your beliefs.

D: And, to do this, I need not take on the endless task of running through my beliefs one by one . . .

Y: Well, that's a relief.

D: . . . Because a building collapses when its foundation is cut out from under it, I will go straight to the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Y: Relying on a metaphor at a crucial point, eh? I thought the prof said that was a dubious practice. She said we should look at the assumptions underlying the appropriateness of the metaphor. So it looks like you think your beliefs form a *structure* with a *foundation*. The foundation is principles. All your beliefs rest on—i.e., I suppose, depend on in some way—certain principles. For this all to make sense, these principles must be beliefs. So what you are saying is that you are going to isolate certain beliefs, on which the rest depend. If you have a ground for doubt for a principle, you will quit believing it, not in the sense of taking it to be false or believing the opposite, but in the sense of withholding your assent. In so doing, you will automatically have a ground for doubt for all the other beliefs that depend on the dubious principle.

Well, I guess that's an intelligible project. It still seems like it ought to take a lot longer than 50 pages. We shall see . . .

This is what it is like to read aggressively.