

# How to Read a Philosophical Text?

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## 1 Key Features of Philosophical Texts

This is an instruction on how to read a philosophical text. Reading a philosophical paper is very different from reading an article in a science journal. Philosophical texts are about arguments. That means they are about how to reach a certain conclusion under the assumption of certain premises. Unlike textbooks or scientific papers that are expository and contain factual information, philosophical papers are not intended to communicate facts (or results of experimental studies). Rather, philosophical papers make arguments and are persuasive, that is, they aim to persuade or convince readers to believe their conclusions.

An argument is

- a series of connected sentences (statements or propositions)
- where some of the sentences are the premises
- and one is the conclusion.

Note that

- The premises are intended to provide a reason for the conclusion.
- The premises can consist of factual information, scientific data, thought experiments, counter examples, conceptual truths etc. (while philosophical papers do not primarily intend to communicate factual information, philosophers often use them as premises or as evidence in support of their premises).

- The premises are either true or false (questions, exclamations, and commands cannot constitute premises because they are neither true nor false)
- The premises of an argument are logically connected, and the connection between them reflects the authors reasoning process.

Here is an argument:

(P1) To have a mental state is to have a disposition to behave in certain ways.

(P2) Pain is a mental state.

(C) Therefore, to be in pain is to have a disposition to behave in certain ways.

## 2 Spot the Arguments!

When reading a philosophical text, we must try to spot the premises, understand the logical connection between them and figure out the overall structure of the authors argument. The philosophical papers we read often do not have a straightforward structure like the above example. They often are detailed and consist of embedded arguments in which one or more arguments are used in support of each premise. For instance, the argument the author presents may have the following form:

It has been argued that C is true if A and B are true. In this paper I argue that the truth of A and B is neither (1) necessary nor (2) sufficient for the truth of C. I present two arguments for (1), and then I draw on data from developmental psychology for (2). I further argue that there are some (3) data from primatology that cannot be accounted for if C is true. Finally, I propose an alternative account that accommodates (3).

The first step to understand a philosophical paper is to spot the argument, that is, the premises and connection between them, and the conclusion. It is good to start by keeping an eye on argument markers:

- However, but, nevertheless, despite that, although
- Because, since
- Consequently, therefore, for that reason, hence, as a result, accordingly

We then examine the argument by looking to see

- Whether the ideas really make sense
- Whether the premises and ideas discussed are consistent (or contradictory)
- Whether and how what the argument presents fits or conflicts with what we already know
- Whether and how what the argument presents fits or conflicts with the established facts The result of the paper is therefore not really more important than how it is reached; often the contrary is the case.

## 3 Practical Advice for Reading

### 3.1 Read Benevolently

Try to read the text benevolently. If a passage does not make sense to you, don't stop reading or working with the text because it doesn't make sense, anyway. Normally, this happens because you interpreted a word or a sentence differently from the author or you overlooked a remark. Keep in mind that the argument featured in the paper can be correct, even if you do not support all of the premises. Also keep in mind that the author is normally not stupid.

Don't give up reading because you just think an author has absolute nonsense assumptions. Instead, jot down your objections and think about the reasons/arguments that you think support your objections, and the reasons why the author thinks otherwise. Discuss your reasons with other students and your instructor. Your objections and questions treated in this way can help you to write a brief critical summary after your first reading.

## **3.2 Understand the Concepts**

Make sure you understand the concepts that the author uses. Authors usually give a definition of the key concepts they use. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, but also Wikipedia will normally give you a sufficient understanding of the other concepts.

It also often helps to quickly look up the author and see what her/his main philosophical contributions are in order to understand what she/he is up to in the text or which background assumptions she or he is relying on.

## **3.3 Understand the Structure**

The first step is to identify the main problem the author is addressing. This helps readers to identify authors main argument and other key and straightforwardly relevant ideas in the text. Start by paying attention to the title and abstract of the paper you are reading. In most philosophy papers, the authors set out the questions/problems they are addressing at the beginning of their paper. Whether titles, abstracts and introductory parts are helpful or not continue your reading to the end. Note that, quite ideally, as you improve your philosophical skills you should not limit yourself just to spot a problem. Try to understand why the author thinks the issue is problematic and philosophically important. Think about it with other students and your instructor.

Something that often helps to grasp the idea behind a text better is to understand what the author is arguing against. Especially when you are under the impression that the positive claims of a text are quite vague, it is often useful to check whether the actual aim of the text is not so much to propose a new hypothesis, but actually just to show that someone else is wrong. If the later is the case, authors normally just offer some sketchy draft of their own position about what things actually are like to conclude their destructive argument.

The next aim in your first reading is to get a general understanding of the argument the author is presenting. One way to identify arguments is to identify argument markers (see above for argument markers).

### 3.4 Keep Track While You Read

- Mark passages with keywords or tags (e.g. definition, conclusion, example).
- Mark single sentences that are sufficient for you to recall the entire argument after you have read the text once. In many texts, paragraphs begin or end with such sentences and in the rest of the paragraph, the author elaborates on what is meant by the sentence.
- Also mark passages or concepts that are still unclear to you to prepare for the seminar discussion or a tutorial.
- In interdisciplinary texts, it may be helpful to use different colors or tags for those passages that mainly report empirical results.
- Take notes while you read; write a short bullet-point summary of the text.

### 3.5 Evaluate the Text Critically

When you have got a good understanding of the goal, structure and content of the paper, go over it a second time and build an own critical opinion about the text. Some people read the whole text again. Others have made sufficiently many notes and tagged or underlined important passages so that they do not have to reread it.

Check whether the conclusions that the author derives really follow from the premises she/he gives and whether the premises are plausible. Start your assessment first by thinking through the following lines:

1. Is there just one argument in this text, or does the text consist of many small arguments, whose conclusions serves as a premise in the main argument?
2. See exactly what is claimed and what is not claimed by an argument.
3. Consider the premises to see whether they are scientific evidence or a priori truth.
4. Consider the premises to see how what the author is using in support of her view fits or conflicts with what you already know.

5. Consider the premises to see how what the author is using in support of her view fits or conflicts with established facts.
6. Identify unspoken assumptions. These are assumptions an author makes but are not explicitly expressed in an argument.

In the end, you should review your own criticism of the author and think about what the author would answer to you or whether your point is in fact trivial. Be self-critical: assess whether you perhaps just misinterpreted a certain concept or sentence.