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HOW TO READ PHILOSOPHY

Children ask magnificent questions. "Why are people?" "What makes the cat tick?" "What's the world's first name?" "Did God have a reason for creating the earth?" Out of the mouths of babes comes, if not wisdom, at least the search for it. Philosophy, according to Aristotle, begins in wonder. It certainly begins in childhood, even if for most of us it stops there, too.

The child is a natural questioner. It is not the number of questions he asks but their character that distinguishes him from the adult. Adults do not lose the curiosity that seems to be a native human trait, but their curiosity deteriorates in quality. They want to know whether something is so, not why. But children's questions are not limited to the sort that can be answered by an encyclopedia.

What happens between the nursery and college to turn the flow of questions off, or, rather, to turn it into the duller channels of adult curiosity about matters of fact? A mind not agitated by good questions cannot appreciate the significance of even the best answers. It is easy enough to learn the answers. But to develop actively inquisitive minds, alive with real questions, profound questions—that is another story.

Why should we have to try to develop such minds, when children are born with them? Somewhere along the line, adults must fail somehow to sustain the infant's curiosity at its original

depth. School itself, perhaps, dulls the mind—by the dead weight of rote learning, much of which may be necessary. The failure is probably even more the parents' fault. We so often tell a child there is no answer, even when one is available, or demand that he ask no more questions. We thinly conceal our irritation when baffled by the apparently unanswerable query. All this discourages the child. He may get the impression that it is impolite to be too inquisitive. Human inquisitiveness is never killed; but it is soon debased to the sort of questions asked by most college students, who, like the adults they are soon to become, ask only for information.

We have no solution for this problem; we are certainly not so brash as to think we can tell you how to answer the profound and wondrous questions that children put. But we do want you to recognize that one of the most remarkable things about the great philosophical books is that they ask the same sort of profound questions that children ask. The ability to retain the child's view of the world, with at the same time a mature understanding of what it means to retain it, is extremely rare—and a person who has these qualities is likely to be able to contribute something really important to our thinking.

We are not required to think as children in order to understand existence. Children certainly do not, and cannot, understand it—if, indeed, anyone can. But we must be able to see as children see, to wonder as they wonder, to ask as they ask. The complexities of adult life get in the way of the truth. The great philosophers have always been able to clear away the complexities and see simple distinctions—simple once they are stated, vastly difficult before. If we are to follow them we too must be childishly simple in our questions—and maturely wise in our replies.

The Questions Philosophers Ask

What are these "childishly simple" questions that philosophers ask? When we write them down, they do not seem

simple, because to answer them is so difficult. Nevertheless, they are initially simple in the sense of being basic or fundamental.

Take the following questions about *being* or *existence*, for example: What is the difference between existing and not existing? What is common to all the things that do exist, and what are the properties of everything that does exist? Are there different ways in which things can exist—different modes of being or existence? Do some things exist only in the mind or for the mind, whereas others exist outside the mind, and whether or not they are known to us, or even knowable by us? Does everything that exists exist physically, or are there some things that exist apart from material embodiment? Do all things change, or is there anything that is immutable? Does anything exist necessarily, or must we say that everything that does exist might not have existed? Is the realm of possible existence larger than the realm of what actually does exist?

These are typically the kind of questions that a philosopher asks when he is concerned to explore the nature of being itself and the realms of being. As questions, they are not difficult to state or understand, but they are enormously difficult to answer—so difficult, in fact, that there are philosophers, especially in recent times, who have held that they cannot be answered in any satisfactory manner.

Another set of philosophical questions concerns *change* or *becoming* rather than being. Of the things in our experience to which we would unhesitatingly attribute existence, we would also say that all of them are subject to change. They come into being and pass away; while in being, most of them move from one place to another; and many of them change in quantity or in quality: they become larger or smaller, heavier or lighter; or, like the ripening apple and the aging beefsteak, they change in color.

What is involved in any change? In every process of change, is there something that endures unchanged as well as some respect or aspect of that enduring thing which undergoes

change? When you learn something that you did not know before, you have certainly changed with respect to the knowledge you have acquired, but you are also the same individual that you were before; if that were not the case, *you* could not be said to have changed through learning. Is this true of all change? For example, is it true of such remarkable changes as birth and death—of coming to be and passing away—or only of less fundamental changes, such as local motion, growth, or alteration in quality? How many different kinds of change are there? Do the same fundamental elements or conditions enter into all processes of change, and are the same causes operative in all? What do we mean by a cause of change? Are there different types of causes responsible for change? Are the causes of change—of becoming—the same as the causes of being, or existence?

Such questions are asked by the philosopher who turns his attention from being to becoming and also tries to relate becoming to being. Once again, they are not difficult questions to state or understand, though they are extremely difficult to answer clearly and well. In any case, you can see how they begin with a childishly simple attitude toward the world and our experience of it.

Unfortunately, we do not have space to go into the whole range of questions more deeply. We can only list some other questions that philosophers ask and try to answer. There are questions not only about being and becoming, but also about necessity and contingency; about the material and the immaterial, about the physical and the non-physical; about freedom and indeterminacy; about the powers of the human mind; about the nature and extent of human knowledge; about the freedom of the will.

All these questions are speculative or theoretical in the sense of those terms that we have employed in distinguishing between the theoretical and practical realms. But philosophy, as you know, is not restricted to theoretical questions only.

Take *good* and *evil*, for instance. Children are much con-

cerned with the difference between good and bad; their beings are likely to suffer if they make mistakes about it. But we do not stop wondering about the difference when we grow up. Is there a universally valid distinction between good and evil? Are there certain things that are always good, others that are always bad, whatever the circumstances? Or was Hamlet right when, echoing Montaigne, he said: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

Good and evil, of course, are not the same as right and wrong; the two pairs of terms seem to refer to different classes of things. In particular, even if we feel that whatever is right is good, we probably do not feel that whatever is wrong is evil. But how do we make this distinction precise?

"Good" is an important philosophical word, but it is an important word in our everyday vocabulary, too. Trying to say what it means is a heady exercise; it will involve you very deeply in philosophy before you know it. There are many things that are good, or, as we would prefer to say, there are many goods. Is it possible to order the goods? Are some more important than others? Do some depend on others? Are there circumstances in which goods conflict, so that you have to choose one good at the expense of forgoing another?

Again, we do not have space to go more extensively into these questions. We can only list some other questions in the practical realm. There are questions not only about good and evil, right and wrong, and the order of goods, but also about duties and obligations; about virtues and vices; about happiness, life's purpose or goal; about justice and rights in the sphere of human relations and social interaction; about the state and its relation to the individual; about the good society, the just polity, and the just economy; about war and peace.

The two groups of questions that we have discussed determine or identify two main divisions of philosophy. The questions in the first group, the questions about being and becoming, have to do with what *is* or *happens* in the world. Such

questions belong to the division of philosophy that is called theoretical or speculative. The questions in the second group, the questions concerning good and evil, or right and wrong, have to do with what *ought* to be done or sought, and they belong to the division of philosophy that is sometimes called practical, and is more accurately called normative. Books that tell you how to make something, such as a cookbook, or how to do something, such as a driver's manual, need not try to argue that you ought to become a good cook, or learn to drive a car well; they can assume that you want to make or do something and merely tell you how to succeed in your efforts. In contrast, books of normative philosophy concern themselves primarily with the goals all men *ought* to seek—goals such as leading a good life or instituting a good society—and, unlike cookbooks and driving manuals, they go no further than prescribing in the most universal terms the means that *ought* to be employed in order to achieve these goals.

The questions that philosophers ask also serve to distinguish subordinate branches of the two main divisions of philosophy. A work of speculative or theoretical philosophy is metaphysical if it is mainly concerned with questions about being or existence. It is a work in the philosophy of nature if it is concerned with becoming—with the nature and kinds of changes, their conditions and causes. If its primary concern is with knowledge—with questions about what is involved in our knowing anything, with the causes, extent, and limits of human knowledge, and with its certainties and uncertainties—then it is a work in epistemology, which is just another name for theory of knowledge. Turning from theoretical to normative philosophy, the main distinction is between questions about the good life and what is right or wrong in the conduct of the individual, all of which fall within the sphere of ethics, and questions about the good society and the conduct of the individual in relation to the community—the sphere of politics or political philosophy.

Modern Philosophy and the Great Tradition

For the sake of brevity in what follows, let us call questions about what is and happens in the world, or about what men ought to do or seek, "first-order questions." We should recognize, then, that there are also "second-order questions" that can be asked: questions about our first-order knowledge, questions about the content of our thinking when we try to answer first-order questions, questions about the ways in which we express such thoughts in language.

This distinction between first-order and second-order questions is useful, because it helps to explain what has happened to philosophy in recent years. The majority of professional philosophers at the present day no longer believe that first-order questions can be answered by philosophers. Most professional philosophers today devote their attention exclusively to second-order questions, very often to questions having to do with the language in which thought is expressed.

That is all to the good, for it is never harmful to be critical. The trouble is the wholesale giving up of first-order philosophical questions, which are the ones that are most likely to interest lay readers. In fact, philosophy today, like contemporary science or mathematics, is no longer being written for lay readers. Second-order questions are, almost by definition, ones of narrow appeal; and professional philosophers, like scientists, are not interested in the views of anyone but other experts.

This makes modern philosophy very hard to read for non-philosophers—as difficult, indeed, as science for non-scientists. We cannot in this book give you any advice about how to read modern philosophy as long as it is concerned exclusively with second-order questions. However, there are philosophical books that you can read, and that we believe you should read. These books ask the kinds of questions that we have called first-order ones. It is not accidental that they were also written primarily for a lay audience rather than exclusively for other philosophers.

Up to about 1930, or perhaps even a little later, philosophical books were written for the general reader. Philosophers hoped to be read by their peers, but they also wanted to be read by ordinary, intelligent men and women. Since the questions that they asked and tried to answer were of concern to everyone, they thought that everyone should know what they thought.

All of the great classical works in philosophy, from Plato onward, were written from this point of view. These books are accessible to the lay reader; you can succeed in reading them if you wish to. Everything that we have to say in this chapter is intended to help you do that.

On Philosophical Method

It is important to understand what philosophical method consists in—at least insofar as philosophy is conceived as asking and trying to answer *first-order questions*. Suppose that you are a philosopher who is troubled by one of the childishly simple questions we have mentioned—the question, for instance, about the properties of everything that exists, or the question about the nature and causes of change. How do you proceed?

If your question were scientific, you would know that to answer it you would have to perform some kind of special research, either by way of developing an experiment to test your answer, or by way of observing a wide range of phenomena. If your question were historical, you would know that you would also have to perform research, although of a different kind. But there is no experiment that will tell you what all existing things have in common, precisely in respect to having existence. There are no special kinds of phenomena that you can observe, no documents that you can seek out and read, in order to find out what change is or why things change. All you can do is reflect upon the question. There is, in short, nothing to do but think.

You are not thinking in a total vacuum, of course. Philoso-

phy, when it is good, is not "pure" speculation—thinking divorced from experience. Ideas cannot be put together just any way. There are stringent tests of the validity of answers to philosophical questions. But such tests are based on common experience alone—on the experience that you already have because you are a human being, not a philosopher. You are as well acquainted through common experience with the phenomena of change as anybody else; everything in the world about you manifests mutability. As far as the mere experience of change goes, you are in as good a position to think about its nature and causes as the greatest philosophers. What distinguishes them is that they thought about it extremely well: they formulated the most penetrating questions that could be asked about it, and they undertook to develop carefully and clearly worked-out answers. By what means? Not by investigation. Not by having or trying to get more experience than the rest of us have. Rather, by thinking more profoundly about the experience than the rest of us have.

Understanding this is not enough. We must also realize that not all of the questions that philosophers have asked and tried to answer are truly philosophical. They themselves were not always aware of this, and their ignorance or mistake in this crucial respect can cause unperceptive readers considerable difficulty. To avoid such difficulties, it is necessary to be able to distinguish the truly philosophical questions from the other questions that a philosopher may deal with, but that he should have waived and left for later scientific investigation to answer. The philosopher was misled by failing to see that such questions can be answered by scientific investigation, though he probably could not have known this at the time of his writing.

An example of this is the question that ancient philosophers asked about the difference between the matter of terrestrial and celestial bodies. To their observation, unaided by telescopes, it appeared to be the case that the heavenly bodies changed only in place; they did not appear to come into being or to pass away, like plants and animals; nor did they appear

to change in size or quality. Because celestial bodies were subject to one kind of change only—local motion—whereas all terrestrial bodies change in other respects as well, the ancients concluded that they had to be composed of a different kind of matter. They did not surmise, nor could they probably have surmised, that with the invention of the telescope, the heavenly bodies would give us knowledge of their mutability beyond anything we can know through common experience. Hence they took as a question that they thought it proper for philosophers to answer one that should have been reserved for later scientific investigation. Such investigation began with Galileo's use of the telescope and his discovery of the moons of Jupiter; this led to the revolutionary assertion by Kepler that the matter of the heavenly bodies is exactly the same as the matter of bodies on earth; and this in turn laid the groundwork for Newton's formulation of a celestial mechanics in which the same laws of motion apply without qualification to all bodies wherever they are in the physical universe.

On the whole, apart from the confusions that may result, the misinformation or lack of information about scientific matters that mars the work of the classical philosophers is irrelevant. The reason is that it is philosophical questions, not scientific or historical ones, that we are interested in when we read a philosophical work. And, at the risk of repeating ourselves, we must emphasize that there is no other way than thinking to answer such questions. If we could build a telescope or microscope to examine the properties of existence, we should do so, of course. But no such instruments are possible.

We do not want to give the impression that it is only philosophers who make mistakes of the sort we are discussing here. Suppose a scientist becomes troubled by the question about the kind of life a man ought to lead. This is a question in normative philosophy, and the only way to answer it is by thinking about it. But the scientist may not realize that, and instead suppose that some kind of experiment or research will give him an answer. He may decide to ask 1,000 persons what

kind of life they would like to lead, and base his answer to the question on their answers. But it should be obvious that his answer, in that case, would be as irrelevant as Aristotle's speculations about the matter of the celestial bodies.

On Philosophical Styles

Although there is only one philosophical method, there are at least five styles of exposition that have been employed by the great philosophers of the Western tradition. The student or reader of philosophy should be able to distinguish between them and know the advantages and disadvantages of each.

1. **THE PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE:** The first philosophical style of exposition, first in time if not in effectiveness, is the one adopted by Plato in his *Dialogues*. The style is conversational, even colloquial; a number of men discuss a subject with Socrates (or, in the later dialogues, with a speaker known as The Athenian Stranger); often, after a certain amount of fumbling, Socrates embarks on a series of questions and comments that help to elucidate the subject. In the hands of a master like Plato, this style is heuristic, that is, it allows the reader, indeed leads him, to discover things for himself. When the style is enriched by the high drama—some would say the high comedy—of the story of Socrates, it becomes enormously powerful.

"A master like Plato," we said—but there is no one "like" Plato. Other philosophers have attempted dialogues—for example, Cicero and Berkeley—but with little success. Their dialogues are flat, dull, almost unreadable. It is a measure of the greatness of Plato that he was able to write philosophical dialogues that, for wit, charm, and profundity are the equal of any books ever produced by anyone, on any subject. Yet it may be a sign of the inappropriateness of this style of philosophizing that no one except Plato has ever been able to handle it effectively.

That Plato did so, goes without saying. All Western philosophy, Whitehead once remarked, is but "a footnote to Plato"; and the later Greeks themselves had a saying: "Everywhere I go in my head, I meet Plato coming back." Those statements, however, should not be misunderstood. Plato himself had apparently no philosophical system, no doctrine—unless it was that there is no doctrine, that we should simply keep talking. And asking questions. For Plato, and Socrates before him, did indeed manage to raise most of the important questions that subsequent philosophers have felt it necessary to deal with.

2. **THE PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE OR ESSAY:** Aristotle was Plato's best pupil; he studied under him for twenty years. He is said to have also written dialogues, but none of these survives entirely. What does survive are curiously difficult essays or treatises on a number of different subjects. Aristotle was obviously a clear thinker, but the difficulty of the surviving works has led scholars to suggest that they were originally notes for lectures or books—either Aristotle's own notes, or notes taken down by a student who heard the master speak. We may never know the truth of the matter, but in any event the Aristotelean treatise was a new style in philosophy.

The subjects covered by Aristotle in his treatises, and the various styles adopted by him in presenting his findings, also helped to establish the branches and approaches of philosophy in the succeeding centuries. There are, first of all, the so-called popular works—mostly dialogues, of which only fragments have come down to us. Then there are the documentary collections. The major one that we know about was a collection of 158 separate constitutions of Greek states. Only one of these survives, the constitution of Athens, which was recovered from a papyrus in 1890. Finally, there are the major treatises, some of which, like the *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, or the *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Poetics*, are purely philosophical works, theoretical or normative; some of which, like the book *On the Soul*, are mixtures of philosophical theory and early scientific investiga-

tion; and some of which, like the biological treatises, are mainly scientific works in the field of natural history.

Immanuel Kant, although he was probably more influenced by Plato in a philosophical sense, adopted Aristotle's style of exposition. His treatises are finished works of art, unlike Aristotle's in this respect. They state the main problem first, go through the subject matter in a thorough and business-like way, and treat special problems by the way or at the last. The clarity of both Kant and Aristotle may be said to consist in the order that they impose on a subject. We see a philosophical beginning, middle, and end. We also, particularly in the case of Aristotle, are provided with accounts of the views and objections of others, both philosophers and ordinary men. Thus, in one sense the style of the treatise is similar to the style of the dialogue. But the element of drama is missing from the Kantian or Aristotelean treatise; a philosophical view is developed through straightforward exposition rather than through the conflict of positions and opinions, as in Plato.

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 educed 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 *Pensées*. 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 expository 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

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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 ex-

PLICITLY, 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 Aristotelean 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 judgments, 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 *reperentially*. 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.