

I Re-Read, Therefore I Understand

Kimberly Blessing tells us René Descartes' advice on reading philosophy.

Anyone who has sat down to read a primary text in philosophy knows that it's often not easy! Fortunately, French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596-1650) provides us with some useful advice about how to read a philosophical text. But before I turn to his advice on how to read philosophy, let me tell you a bit about this great philosopher.

Descartes' most widely read work is his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), or maybe his earlier work *Discourse on Method* (1635), which served as a preface to three essays, *Optics*, *Meteorology* and *Geometry* (the latter contains the first introduction of the Cartesian coordinate system). The passage below appears in another work that is less widely read in introductory philosophy courses, *The Principles of First Philosophy* (1644). Descartes wrote the *Principles* as a sort of textbook. It contains all the ideas and discoveries of his earlier works, including the *cogito* ('I think therefore I am': his proof of his own existence) and his proofs for God's existence. The style of a textbook would have been different in Descartes' time. What he had in mind was a book that would, in a systematic way, take students through all his ideas and arguments. The style of the *Principles* is also very different from the meditative and autobiographical nature of his more widely read *Meditations* and *Discourse*. It was Descartes' hope that the *Principles* would be adopted by the finest universities in Europe, and would eventually replace the old Aristotelian corpus that had dominated medieval scholastic thought.

When Descartes wrote out the following advice for his readers, the printing press had only recently been invented, which meant that the mass of people were only beginning to have access to books. Prior to this time, only the learned (primarily members of the clergy) would have been reading. Since the vast majority of the population were illiterate, knowledge and information had to be handed down from some authoritative source, such as the Roman Catholic Church. But like Martin Luther before him, Descartes was convinced that ordinary citizens (even peasants!) could discover truth for themselves if only they applied their minds well. Hence Descartes published the *Discourse* in the vernacular – in French instead of Latin. By publishing in the language of his countrymen, Descartes wanted to “aim over the heads of the academics and reach the man and woman [!] of *bon sens*” (good sense, or reason).

Here is the advice that Descartes offers his readers about reading his works:

“I should like the reader first of all to go quickly through the whole book like a novel, without straining his attention too much or stopping at the difficulties which may be encountered. The aim should be merely to ascertain in a general way the matters I have dealt with. After this, if he finds that these matters deserve to be examined and he has the curiosity to ascertain their causes, he may read the book a second time in order to observe how my arguments follow. But if he is not able to see this fully, or if he does not understand all the arguments, he should not give up at once. He should merely mark with a pen the places where he finds the difficulties and continue to read on to the end without a break. If he then takes up the book for a third time, I venture to think he will find the solutions to most of the difficulties he marked before; and if any still remain, he will discover their solution on a final re-reading.”

(*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. I, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny, p. 185.)

The first and most important thing to recognize is that reading philosophy takes time and persistence. It's not an easy, passive activity. Instead it requires the reader to think carefully about what is being read. It's not unusual to have to re-read a philosophical book, or a section, several times in order to understand the author's ideas.

Just as in the *Discourse on Method* Descartes provides a method 'for rightly conducting reason', so we too can formulate Descartes' advice for 'rightly reading philosophy' into the following four rules (which apply equally well to reading a book, a chapter, or an article):

1. Read through the entire work quickly, as you would a novel. At first, you're just trying to get a general idea of what the material is about.
 2. Read through a second time, paying greater attention to the arguments that are being put forward. Take a pen and mark the places where you're having trouble. (I would add, try writing out the arguments(s) in your own words – we often think that we understand something until we're forced to articulate it in our own words.)
 3. Read through a third time, keeping the questions and problems noted in step 2 in mind. This should help you see solutions to the difficulties you marked up.
 4. If some difficulties still remain, re-read those parts a fourth time. That should do it.
- Descartes' message is empowering. Each of us, whether man or woman, peasant or priest, is capable of reasoning, which means we're each capable of discovering truth for ourselves. Some of these truths, whether about us or about our world, are waiting to be discovered within the pages of books. So for those who are interested in discovering for themselves what is true, heed Descartes' advice: Read. And now read again!

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