Reading Philosophy Texts

Reading and Understanding Material from the History of Philosophy

Reading texts in philosophy might seem difficult. One is often thrown into a highly specialized debate on abstract issues. And the way in which philosophers ask and solve their problems appears esoteric, inaccessible and – more often than not – boring.

Let me give you an example from Donald Davidson, one of the most eminent philosophers of the 20th century:

“Philosophers of many persuasions are prone to talk of conceptual schemes. Conceptual schemes, we are told, are organizing experience; they are systems of categories that give form to the data of sensation; they are points of view of individuals, cultures, or periods survey the passing scene. There may be no translating from one scheme to another, in which case the beliefs, desires, hopes and bits of knowledge that characterize one person have no true counterparts for the subscriber to another scheme. Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another.” (Davidson, D. *On the Very Idea of A Conceptual Scheme,* p. 5)

Just… What?

In order to start making progress in even accessing the text, it is important to understand that contemporary philosophers are mostly making a **claim,** supporting the claim with **arguments,** providing **evidence** for their arguments and taking part in a **debate** which is the context in which the claim acquires a specific meaning. (Please try to superficially familiarize yourself with the technical sense in which the terms “claim” and “argument” are used in philosophy.)

When I read a text in philosophy I engage with a problem within a discipline that has very concrete ideas about how to solve these problems. Truth is not something that is ultimately dependent on the individual, truth has a technical meaning. If we say that sentence such as “the periodic table has 118 elements” is true, then we are saying that there is a state of affairs in the world that makes it such that the sentence is either true or false. Even though this is just one tiny aspect of what makes philosophy *philosophy*, we can already see better what Davidson is doing:

Davidson clarifies in the passage, (1) what conceptual schemes are, (2) how they are used in explaining phenomena and (3) what some important implications and 4) consequences of their use are.

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We might say that Davidson clarifies in what sense he uses a concept. When the time comes to tell whether a sentence containing the concept “conceptual scheme” is true or false, we are in a better position to assess it, because we know what a conceptual scheme is. But, importantly, the definition of a conceptual scheme also indicates why we are talking about conceptual schemes to begin with. Conceptual schemes are probably some phenomenon that needs to be explained, or they are explaining something. Philosophers find it worthy of explanation how experience is organized, and this is likely the context in which conceptual schemes are debated. We can see that the **context** of Davidson’s article is the age-old question:How does chaotic sense data - the stuff we see, hear and feel - become *knowledge*?

And in the passage quoted, Davidson is setting the stage for a claim and some arguments within the context of this debate. Remember that Davidson mentioned that one consequence of conceptual schemes is that *reality itself* depends on the individual.

And from the wording of the passage itself, we can expect Davidson to either claim that there is no shared reality among individuals (exciting! but unlikely), argue against the very concept of a conceptual scheme or argue against this particular definition of it.

For you to get a good understanding of a passage of philosophical writing your reading should try to identify

1. the problem at hand

2. the context of the debate

3. the way in which the problem is solved within the debate

4. the author’s proposed solution (their claim)

5. and the strategy the author uses to make her solution persuasive or true (the arguments and evidence given).

Like in the case of the Davidson passage, you will of course have to read the entirety of the text to understand all of these aspects. And without years of familiarizing yourself with the debate, this will not be easy or particularly straightforward, but a **dictionary** and a **restrictive use of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy** will help you out.

**Please don’t** try to understand the entirety of the debate. All you need is a

* rough understanding of the problem
* an understanding of the technical vocabulary used
* a rough understanding of the claims and arguments.

The whole process is no different for historical philosophy texts, there is just more uncertainty and there are more puzzles. I will demonstrate this with an example again:

“Of those who declared that the first principle is one, moving and indefinite, Anaximander […] said that the indefinite was the first principle and element of things that are, and he was the first to introduce this name for the first principle [i.e., he was the first to call the first principle indefinite]. He says that the first principle is neither water nor any other of the things called elements, but some other nature which is indefinite, out of which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them. The things that are perish into the things out of which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time, as he says in rather poetical language.” (Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 24.13-21 = 12B1+A9)

I took a random passage from Simplicius’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* and immediately had many questions that I wanted to answer in order to understand what was going on. What’s a first principle? Why would it be moving and indefinite? Who is Anaximander? What are things that are? Why does Anaximander rule out that they are water? What are elements? What’s a nature? What did the ancients think about the heavens and the worlds in them? How do things perish? Necessity, in which sense? What does it mean to pay penalty and retribution? What did the ancients think about the order of time? And who is Simplicius?

And as is common with historical texts we may not be able to fully understand the problem at hand and the context of the debate. This is so because sometimes there is **limited material** available. But some additional difficulties make this endeavor into a puzzle where one can often identify multiple possible readings that seem equally plausible.

A difficulty is for instance that the **meaning transported through language is not clear**. The meaning of these text will evade us if we don’t understand ancient Greek, and even for someone trained in the language it will be impossible to say with certainty what is meant. Ancient languages are lost and so is the meaning of the words in them. All we have nowadays are our best guesses. And the further we think about this aspect the more it becomes clear that other aspects of meaning are likewise inaccessible. Just like “braces” and “trainers” means something completely different in Britain and in the U.S., the social, political, scientific, mathematical and logical context of an author’s world might shape the meaning and make it hard to recognize for us.

And even if we have access to resources that clarify the context of an author’s work and thought, it will be confusing to decide which context is relevant for clarification and which one is not. I suggest this order of the relevance of contexts: First, I look at the author’s other works, to see whether there is some indication as to what is meant anywhere there. Then, I look into other authors’ works of the time and with whom the author is debating. Maybe Aristotle is just replying to a contemporary’s theses without explicitly mentioning him. And finally, I will look for cues within the larger intellectual and social context of the time. I’ll sit down and read some history books.

Fortunately, that is not what *you* need to do! This is the task of us, historians of philosophy and we are here to clarify these contexts as best as we can. But you might share with us the initial confusion while reading. Many things may not make sense and even when they do, they may seem odd. I would like you to **flag and underline what you don’t understand and bring your questions to the lecture or to discussion section.** But for developing some useful analytical skills, you should read the text and think about its structure along these lines.

Along which lines again?

* Claim
* Argument
* Evidence
* Context

In short, you are not asked to know *all* minutiae of a text and its context. You are asked to grasp the structure of the text and then answer all questions necessary to understand how the argument works.

A good way for me to start is to read the text and underline the main structure. After an initial superficial reading, I start by **finding the main claim** and I underline it. Then, I restate the claim as clearly as possible and write it into the margins of my text. Then, I find and underline **arguments *for* the claim** and the **evidence that is meant to support the argument.** And finally, I underline **all arguments against the opposing side** and the **counterevidence given.**

Now what?

Your marginal notes and the underlined passages should enable you to answer the following questions:

What is the claim? Is that even clear? Do the arguments support the claim? And not least important of all: does this make sense *to* *you?*

Discussion sections should now come easier to you: Finding partners in conversation will become rewarding and you will start developing a more complex view on the topic. Finally, writing your paper will be much easier.

How so?

You will be able to quickly and simply **articulate the main point of an author’s position** and her strategy and this should be a **core** part of *any* paper. And because you now have identified what the author is saying and why, you can agree and disagree and give a justified response and critique. Because your paper about the history of philosophy needs to *be* philosophy. It needs to argue for and convince me of your interpretation of the text.

# Works Cited

* Davidson, D. *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.* In: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 47 (1973 - 1974), pp. 5-20.
* Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics,* 24.13-21 = 12B1+A9.