Reading and Analysing Philosophy

In the reading section of *Doing Philosophy* we set out some of the ways that philosophical arguments can be analysed and suggest tips and guidelines for approaching philosophical texts. We explore why philosophy can seem difficult, and we outline some of the different sorts of text you might encounter. We discuss how to uncover the logical underlying structure, hidden assumptions and premises and connections to other ideas the author has taken for granted; and we outline the ways in which you can make better use of your reading time.

Below are some further, more challenging, examples from philosophy texts designed to expand the skills we set out in *Doing Philosophy*.

Read through each of the passages and then follow the instructions beneath. See our responses to some of the questions in the answer sheet. *We haven't given answers to all* of *the questions*.

The passages allow you to test out many of the points we raise in the book. Please take time to think through your responses and discuss them with others. Some of the questions ask for short answers, while others need longer consideration and ask for your judgment. Where longer answers are called for you could discuss them with your fellow students, or in class. The book covers information on reading in groups that can help with this.

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1.

The following extract is from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism* (Sartre, 1973), a lecture given in 1946, explaining and defending some of the basic principles of existentialism:

> Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares . . . that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or . . . the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.

Q1. This passage shows the use of specific terms to have specialized meanings. Pick out where this occurs. What does Sartre mean by 'essence' here? (Some research beyond this text may be required!)

See answer sheet

Q2. The first sentence is an argument with at least one assumed or hidden premise. What is the conclusion of Sartre's argument and what are the premises?

See answer sheet

Q3. Sartre writes in an engaging way here about how man 'surges up in the world' and how 'he wills to be after that leap towards existence'. To what extent is this style part of the crucial point Sartre is making?

2.

The following is an extract from *A Treatise of Human Nature* by David Hume (Hume, 1978), whom we also mention in the book.

> There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on *self* either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be deriv'd from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

Q1. Hume is making a point about an argument for the existence, continuity, identity and simplicity of the self. What is his main observation about the arguments that are used by the supporters of this position?

See answer sheet

Q2. How might you reconstruct an argument to the conclusion that without a concept of the self, there can be nothing certain?

See answer sheet

Q3. Hume goes on to argue that there is no self in the terms described. In your judgment which of the features of the conscious self that are highlighted here can be most easily debated? Defend your position.

Q4. What connections can you make to the other aspects of Hume's philosophy we mention in *Doing Philosophy*?

3.

The next passage is about Buddhist ethics (de Silva, 1991).

> . . . the most crucial concept necessary for the evaluation of human action is the notion of *kamma*, based on the notion of moral causation. The Pali term *kamma* is used to refer to volitional acts which are expressed by *thought, speech,* and *bodily action*. The oft-quoted statement 'I call the motive to be the deed' provides a focus for the evaluation of human action from a moral point of view. Volitional acts which come within the purview of moral evaluation can be good, bad or neutral, and could also be of a mixed nature.

This passage illustrates two important points in reading philosophy discussed in *Doing Philosophy*.

1. There is a careful use of precise language here; for example, the terms 'volitional acts', 'moral evaluation' and 'moral causation' all have specific meanings we have to pay attention to if we are to grasp the point being made.
2. A non-English technical term is used: the Pali word '*kamma*'. In this case *kamma* is retained rather than being translated because it has a specific meaning as a core concept in Buddhist philosophy, but it is worth revisiting notes on the use of technical foreign terms in *Doing Philosophy*.

Q1. What is meant by 'volitional action'? Investigate the technical application of this term.

See answer sheet

Q2. How accurate is the statement 'I call the motive to be the deed' as a summary of the point de Silva is making?

Q3. The passage, as it stands, potentially implies a degree of circularity in making moral judgments. Can you identify this?

See answer sheet

4.

The following is from the introduction to an influential book called *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1980) by Richard Rorty, an American philosopher in the pragmatist tradition. It is quite a dense book, but in it Rorty has a lot say about philosophy itself.

> Philosophers usually think of their discipline as one which discusses perennial, eternal problems – problems which arise as soon as one reflects. Some of these concern the differences between human beings and other beings, and are crystallized in questions concerning the relation between the mind and body. Other problems concern the legitimation of claims to know, and are crystallized in questions concerning the 'foundations' of knowledge. To discover these foundations is to discover something about the mind, and conversely. Philosophy as a discipline thus sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind.

Q1. A significant part of philosophy is about the nature of philosophy itself. From your experience of philosophy so far, how accurate is Rorty's sketch of the foundational aims of philosophy? Justify your answer.

Q2. If Rorty goes on to dismiss philosophy's foundational role in knowledge, what can we say about the passage above as a piece of philosophy?

See answer sheet

Q3. What do you think philosophy is? How has your understanding of philosophy changed since you began studying it in detail?

Consider keeping a file of your thoughts on the nature of philosophy itself to help your reflection on your studies over time.

5.

The next extract is from a book called *Aesthetics and Photography* by Jonathan Friday (Friday, 2002). One of the central themes of the book is about the ontological status of photographs and Friday argues that they are fundamentally different from other sorts of pictures. Here is part of that argument where hand-created pictures (paintings, engravings, collages, etc.) are called manugraphs.

> [A] manifestation of the fundamental difference between manugraphs and photographs is to be found in the relation of each to their subject matter. A photograph always depicts real and existing objects at a particular moment in time because the necessary first step in the photochemical process of photography is the exposure of film to light reflected from objects in the world. The final photograph is therefore causally dependent on the way the world is in front of the camera – that is, what is there and how much light. Manugraphy, by contrast, does not necessarily picture the real world and, to the extent it does, it is the real world mediated by the mind and skill of an artist. Consequently photographs are causally dependent on the world they depict, but manugraphs have an intentional relation to the world in that the beliefs, thoughts and skills of the manugrapher are the sole determinant of the world depicted in a manugraph.

Q1. In the passage Friday makes a distinction between photography and manugraphy that depends on two key abstract philosophical concepts. What are they?

See answer sheet

Q2. How far is it true that photographs are not 'mediated by the mind and skill of an artist'? What does Friday mean here?

Q3. Based on this passage, what are the consequences, if any, for digital images?

See answer sheet

6.

Finally we turn to one of most influential of twentieth century philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's work is difficult and has multiple strands running through it, which makes it rich and rewarding, as well as challenging. It calls on all the reading skills we describe in *Doing Philosophy*. As you progress in philosophy you are very likely to encounter his thinking. This is a taster from *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1967). Here Wittgenstein is exploring how we refer to, and have knowledge of, our own sensations.

> 293. If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word 'pain' means – must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?
>
> Now someone tells me that that *he* knows what pain is only from his own case! – Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle'. No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word 'beetle' has a use in these people's language? – If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something***:** for the box might even be empty. – No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.
>
> That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.

Note use of the specific term 'language-game', which Wittgenstein uses to mean language that hangs together in a context because the meanings of words are interrelated and how words and phrases are *used* in actual practice.

Q1. From this passage what is Wittgenstein's point about pain sensations and our referring to them?

See answer sheet

Q2. What are the consequences for our knowledge about ourselves? Do we have any language to talk about our internal states?

Q3. This is an argument using an analogy. Does the use of the 'beetle' analogy make Wittgenstein's point clearer or does it raise questions about the robustness of his argument? Justify your answer.

Works cited

de Silva, P. (1991). 'Buddhist Ethics'. In P. Singer, *A Companion to Ethics.* Oxford: Blackwell, p. 58–68.

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