

Critical-Constructive Reading of Philosophical Texts

Read through once, marking passages that strike you as needing further attention. Try writing a very brief (2-4 line) summary of the author's position. Then:

Passages you can't understand:

Look up any unfamiliar words, and mark the meanings on the text (you may need occasionally to go beyond a regular dictionary to a specialized philosophical dictionary, e.g., Anthony Flew's). If the meaning is still obscure to you, read and re-read the sentence in question, trying to put it in your own words.

Passages that strike you as somehow wrong:

If a passage is ambiguous, try to articulate what its alternative meanings are. Is the claim true in one interpretation but false in another, or what? Does the ambiguity affect the soundness of the author's argument?

If a passage is vague, try to state more precisely what the author may be trying to say.

If the passage is clear and unambiguous but you think it is false, try to articulate why it is false. How does its falsity affect the rest of the author's argument?

If the passage is clear and ambiguous, and you think it is true, but not for the reasons the author gives, try to articulate what's wrong with his reasons, and what reasons you would give.

Passages that strike you as true and important:

Put the claim in your own words, and try to articulate why you think it is important. What are its consequences? Can you suggest how to develop the point in new ways?

Re-read. Go back to your preliminary summary, correct and amplify it into, say, a paragraph which solidifies what you have learned from reading this article or chapter. Your final summaries, if they are accurate, will be a useful tool for future work -- e.g. they will tell you which articles you want to rely on most for a paper.

The idea is to read actively, not passively; and constructively as well as critically, i.e., not trying just to pick holes, but also to identify the author's good ideas and put them to further use.

PHI 581 -- PRAGMATISM

Study questions on Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (1877)

(1) What, according to Peirce, is the object of reasoning, and what is it for reasoning to be good? What does he mean by saying that validity is a matter of fact and not of thinking? Why does he think that human beings are not perfectly logical animals? (pp.110-11)

(2) Carefully explain Peirce's conceptions of doubt, of belief, and of inquiry (pp.113-5). Who is the target of Peirce's first objection on p.115? Do you agree with his criticism?

(3) Carefully explain what Peirce means by:

- the method of tenacity
- the method of authority
- the a priori method
- the scientific method

commenting briefly on what he says about the disadvantages of the first three methods (pp.115-22).

(4) "To satisfy our doubts, therefore, it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs should be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency. ... Such is the method of science." (pp.121-2). What does this mean? What reasons does Peirce give for the two claims being made here? Are they good reasons?

(5) Explain what you take Peirce to be saying

(a) in the lines from "Hence, the sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion" to the end of that paragraph on p.115;

(b) in the lines from "[A] man should consider that, after all, he wishes his opinions to coincide with the fact" to the end of that paragraph on p.125.

Are these two passages compatible with each other?

PHI 581 -- PRAGMATISM

Study questions on Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878)

(1) What does Peirce mean by saying that Descartes displaced the method of authority by the a priori method (pp.128-30)? -- remember that he introduced these ideas in "The Fixation of Belief." What are the old ideas of clearness and distinctness, and what role did they play in Descartes' and Leibniz's philosophy? What do you understand by the passage that begins: "It is terrible to see how a single unclear idea, ... lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery ..." on p.131 and runs to the end of that paragraph on p.132?

(2) What does Peirce mean by "feigned hesitancy"? What role does he think this plays in science (p.133)? (How does it differ from Cartesian doubt?) What is it that Peirce describes as "the very debauchery of thought" (p.134), and why does he think it's so bad? Do you agree?

(3) Explain Peirce's comments about what a belief is (p.134-5), about how to identify what counts as the same belief (p.136), and about how this applies to the case of the doctrine of transubstantiation (p.137-8).

(4) Explain how Peirce applies his statement of the Pragmatic Maxim (p.138) to (a) the concept of hardness and (b) the dispute over free will (pp.138-9). Why did he avoid using the phrase "Pragmatic Maxim"?

(5) Explain Peirce's new hierarchy of three grades of clearness (pp.144-5), and its relevance to the definitions of truth and reality he gives on p.147.

(6) What is the Problem of Buried Secrets? (p.148); what is Peirce's solution? Do you think his solution is satisfactory?

PHI 581: Pragmatism

Study questions on Peirce, "The Backward State of Metaphysics" (1898/1903) and "The Categories" (1903).

1. Why does Peirce deny that the "backward state of metaphysics" is due either to its being so abstract, or to its objects being beyond observation? What, according to Peirce, is the reason why metaphysics is so "puny, rickety, and scrofulous"? (pp.170-74).
2. Pick any one of the questions Peirce lists on p.175, and explain what the issues are. If you can, comment on the present state of knowledge on the question you have picked.
3. What does Peirce mean by "phenomenology"? What are the three faculties he believes it requires?
4. Explain Peirce's distinction between *universal* and *particular* categories. Which kind are Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and Peirce himself seeking to identify? (pp.179-80.)
5. Give a brief (2- or 3-sentence) statement of what you understand by each of Peirce's categories: firstness, secondness, thirdness (pp.180-94).
6. Give a brief statement of what is going on in Peirce's "wheel of metaphysical systems" on p.194.

Study Questions on James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy"

1. (a) What does James mean by "the philosophy which is so important in each of us" (p.274)? How does it differ from philosophy-as-academic-discipline? Why does he think it so important?

(b) Explain the allusion to Peirce at the end of this paragraph.

2. Explain James's conception of the roles of *temperament* and *impersonal reasons* in philosophy (275-6).

3. Explain James's distinction of the tough- and the tender-minded temperaments (277-9), spelling out each of the attributes on his lists of characteristics (287).

4. What did James see as the dilemma facing philosophy in his day? (279-82). Why was it a dilemma? Has it any relevance to the present situation in philosophy?

5. What, according to James, was the great advantage of pragmatism in that situation? (284) What does he take to be its superiority to, for example, Herbert Spencer's (then very popular) philosophy?

6. What do you think about that observation James attributes (not quite accurately; see n.3, p.287) to Walt Whitman: "who touches this book touches a man"? Can you illustrate your response by reference to specific books -- preferably books of different kinds, such as a novel and a work of philosophy?

PHI 581 -- Pragmatism

Study questions on James, "What Pragmatism Means"

- (1) Explain James's account of the etymology of "pragmatism," and the origins of the pragmatic movement in philosophy (pp.291-2). In light of this, what do you think about Menand's account of Peirce as trying to get on the Pragmatist bandwagon after James had made it famous ?
- (2) Carefully spell out the characteristics of pragmatist philosophy James presents from the paragraph beginning "Pragmatism represents" on p.293 to the last full paragraph on p.295. What would Peirce have thought about this conception of pragmatism?
- (3) Explain the view of scientific laws expressed from the last full paragraph of p.295 to the last full paragraph of p.296. Do you agree? Why, or why not?
- (4) Spell out the ideas about truth presented from the bottom of p.296 to the break on p.302, and from "To answer this difficulty" on p.305 to the end of p.306. What would Peirce think of this?
- (5) What does James mean by calling pragmatism "democratic" (p.307)? How does this relate to his ideas about religion?

Study questions on William James, "The Will to Believe" (1896)

(1) Explain what James means by saying that a choice between two hypotheses may be:

— live or dead

— forced or avoidable

— momentous or trivial.

Give James's examples of each (pp.222-3). Can you think of examples of your own?

(2) Comment on James's suggestion that our opinions may be modifiable at will (pp.224-9). What reason is there to think this "silly"? What reason is there to think it "vile"? How does James reply?

(3) Explain James's discussion of empiricism vs absolutism, and comment on his comments on Clifford's conception of "insufficient evidence" (pp.230-31).

(4) Explain how James relates his conception of momentous choice to the dichotomy of going by the principle: gain truth! *versus*: eschew error! (pp.234-5)

(5) What kinds of question does James think are such that their solution "cannot wait for sensible proof"? (pp.236 ff.) Do you agree that it is OK for "our passionate nature" to decide such questions? Why, or why not?

(6) Explain and comment on James's use of the Pragmatic Maxim in note 4 (pp.245-6).

(7) Think about and comment *either* on James's observations about "the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences" (p.226) *or* on Oliver Wendell Holmes's description of the Will to Believe as "an amusing humbug."

PHI 581 -- Pragmatism

Study questions on Dewey, "Truth and Consequences" (1911)

1. Explain and comment on the difficulties Dewey diagnoses in the "consistency" (or coherence) theory of truth. Why does he also call this the "idealist" theory? (pp.341-2)
2. Explain and comment on the difficulties Dewey diagnoses in the correspondence theory of truth (pp.342-3). Why does he also call this the "realist" theory?
3. What assumption does Dewey think the realist and the idealist theories share? Why does he think it is false? (344-6) What would Peirce have said about this? (210-12)
4. Explain Dewey's account of the "pragmatic" theory: pay special attention to his (1), (2), (3) on p.346; to his claim that judgments are *made* true (347); and to his comments on the observation "tried and true" (350).
5. Explain how Dewey [re]interprets "correspondence" (352) and "presenting things as they really are" (354); and his comments on "a true poem, a true man, plants that breed true, a true formula of algebra or physics" (p.354).
6. What do you make of Dewey's comments on the relation of philosophy to science/to common sense (p.359)?
7. Explain and comment on Dewey's account of the history of the pragmatic theory of truth (fn.4, pp.360-61).

Study questions on Dewey, "The Construction of Good"

(1) What, according to Dewey, is "the deepest problem of modern life" (p.397)? Why has this problem arisen? What do you think Dewey means, in this context, when he writes of "values"?

(2) What does Dewey mean by the speaking of the "rationalist" and the "empirical" theories of values (pp.397-400)? What does he see as the strengths and weaknesses of each? (NB. answering this requires four clauses.) How does this relate to his critique of rationalism and empiricism in theory of knowledge?

(3) How does Dewey propose to improve the empirical theory in a pragmatist way (pp.400-407)? Carefully explain his distinction between the desired/the desirable, etc., and his analogy with taste.

(4) "[T]he notion that every object that happens to satisfy has an equal claim with every other to be a value is like supposing that every object of perception has the same cognitive force as every other" (p.407). Comment on this passage as it bears on James's "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." Do you think Dewey or James has it right – or neither? Why?

(5) Why does Dewey think it is "inevitable that genuine knowledge of man and society should lag far behind physical knowledge" (p.410)? What does he mean when he says that "a moral[ity] that frames its judgments of value on the basis of consequences must depend in a most intimate manner on the conclusions of science" (p.413)?

(6) What is Dewey's objection to "subjectivism," or as he prefers to say, "egoism," in ethics? (pp.413-5)

(7) "To many persons, the idea that the ends professed by morals are impotent save as they are connected with the working machinery of economic life seems like deflowering the purity of moral values and obligations" (p.421). What does Dewey mean by this, and why does he think this is a wrong-headed reaction? Do you agree?

Study Questions on Dewey, "Art as Experience" (1934)

1. What does Dewey mean when he says that "to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as esthetic" (424-5), and that it is a mistake to "set Art upon a remote pedestal". What do you think?
2. Explain Dewey's account of the place of art in the life of a community historically (427-9), and its connection with the claim in 1 above.
3. Describe the forces Dewey sees as having contributed to the "chasm" between esthetic and ordinary experience in modern times (429-32).
4. "The difference between the esthetic and the intellectual is thus one of the place where the emphasis falls in the constant rhythm that marks the interaction of the live creature with his surroundings. The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference of kind" (437). Explain and comment.

Study Questions on Mead, "The Social Self"

NB. I realize that Mead's writing can be very difficult to penetrate; give it your best shot! If any or even all of questions (1)-(3) have you stumped, I'll understand; but I'll expect everyone to have something to say about question (4).

(1) What does Mead mean by the "self as subject" (the "I") and the "self as object (the "me")"? (477-9)

(2) "... it is only as the individual finds himself acting with reference to himself as he acts towards others, that he becomes a subject to himself rather than an object, and only as he is affected by his own social conduct in the manner in which he is affected by others, that he becomes an object to his own social conduct." (479)

(a) Try to put this in your own words;

(b) try to spell out how it suggests that self is dependent on society.

(3) How does Mead respond to the traditional conception of consciousness: that it is the nature of the self to be conscious of both subject and object, "thinking its [own] existence along with whatever else it thinks"? (480-81)

(4) "It is fair to say that the modern Western world has lately done much of its thinking in the form of the novel, while earlier the drama was a more effective but equally social mechanism of self-consciousness" (482). Comment:

(i) on the historical aspect of this (perhaps asking: and NOW how does the Western world do much of its thinking?); and

(ii) on the philosophical assumptions conveyed by "does its thinking in the form of"