How to read and write philosophy

A piece of written philosophy (as opposed to a philosophical conversation) might be understood at face value: it will purport to present an argument for one position or against another, and seem to describe some facts of a metaphysical, or ethical, or related nature which, once established, might join the grand body of human knowledge. In some cases this may be an appropriate image, as when, for instance, an enduring philosophical movement is narrated.

But often a piece of cogent philosophy, as opposed to some ill-thought through philosophy, will, as it were, slip through the fingers, vanish into thin air, seem suddenly trivial. It might examine some big concepts only to arrive, after a detour via more or less obvious misconceptions, at a truth that will strike many as a truism. Less cogent philosophy will be unsatisfactory in other ways; it is likely, for instance, to be hard to comprehend or, as is frequently the case, it will devise a novel way of talking about an issue, perhaps introducing neologisms, and occasionally a whole way of talking that is unfamiliar and therefore seems to hold out the promise of a solution or a profound truth.

(At times I suggest provocatively that there are no original thoughts under the sun, only inventive ways of presenting old ideas or else the rediscovery of obvious thoughts that have fallen into disuse. New bottles for old wine.)

One aspect to bear in mind is that always we are dealing in metaphors of one sort or another, or in concepts so vast that, despite the fiction that we understand them (intuitively), they are in fact unwieldy, unmanageable.

I wish to propose a different understanding of how to read at least some philosophy texts, and in particular to recommend this perspective to those writing philosophy (as opposed to those writing in the history of ideas or a social science).

I use the metaphor of making one's way through a landscape. In Europe a landscape is likely to have a number of outstanding features (such as a hilltop, tower, valley, river, some woodland, a plain, etc.) and before we have begun to explore the land it will not necessarily be clear how we might move from one landmark to another and where there are short-cuts or unforeseen barriers. One might set out to explore the land only to ascertain after a while that one has been going round in circles, rather than progressing to do a proper tour. It would be good to have a guide or, at least, a guide-book.

One might explore the land out of curiosity or for the exercise and the enjoyment of the walk, but on another occasion one could seriously need to be familiar with the lie of the land (in order to make an escape, to find someone, or to gather firewood).

You will judge me as a guide partly according to whether, after the hike, you do indeed have a feel for the landscape such that, on another occasion, you could manage without me. But if you have the feeling that we have been going round in circles, or if we just hitch a ride from one landmark to another, or you are soon so exhausted that you can no longer see the wood for the trees, you might wonder whether I am much of a guide at all.

My contention is that, some philosophy writing at least, is not like map-making but rather like discovering and planning a way through the landscape that will give others (and oneself) a better feel for the lie of the land, will identify and do a tour of the main landmarks, in an enlivening manner, without exhaustion and without getting bogged down in swamps.

An alternative way of understanding philosophy, again, would be to see it as much more akin to poetry or other imaginative literature than we are wont to. Whereas poetry especially and literature in general will lay store on the choice and concatenation of words, possibly under the discipline of rhyme and metre, the imperatives of philosophy are the refining and logical dovetailing of concepts. Often it will involve leading away from confusions and simplistic generalities to precision, where precision is possible, and abstractions where these serve to reveal concealed connections.

The corollary is that some philosophy, today at least, although still disciplined, is fundamentally different to a science, even to a social science. You learn to write philosophy, or to appreciate it, in the way you may learn to write or appreciate poetry; later you can return to the rough and tumble of life with a better feel for which distinctions are key and which bogus.

This understanding of the nature of philosophy (which is a separate issue to its subject matter) generates a more relaxed approach to the vastness of philosophical thought. No-one tries to be familiar with every landscape in the country, or to know every poem in the anthologies; and similarly one can leave unread and not overly regretted the mass of philosophers, fashionable and unfashionable, once one has acquired a feel for the discipline and worked out which approaches suit one personally best. There is no need to heed the connoisseurs or zealots enthusing and canvassing for their favourites, any more than, your stomach replete, you need to eat another gourmet meal, however delicious.

A note on the subject-matter of contemporary philosophy

Much of what is considered as philosophy in the contemporary world is akin to history of ideas or sociology or other social science. There are analyses, among others, of where society is headed and of how our perceptions are metamorphosing under the influence of the media. These are legitimate topics and they are related, more or less distantly, to what has traditionally been understood as philosophy. But one task of philosophy, here and now, might be seen precisely in the critical examination of these new "philosophies". How coherent are they, and where, even as they claim to reveal our common prejudices, are their own underlying assumptions? Might they be helpful in getting us somewhere else? Or do they just keep us lame, sacking our strength and preventing us from moving on because they describe us as trapped.