

“Thinking Through Philosophic Texts:
On Reading Plato and Descartes on Reading”

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Because Angel Moger is perhaps most of all a reader and teacher of readers, it seemed appropriate to honor her today by thinking about what it is that we do when we read. When Plato has Socrates speak in Book 10 of the *Republic* of the “ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (607b), he wishes in part to do justice to the strangely double character of human thought in which there is always a tension between the passivity characteristic of *philosophia* as love of wisdom and the agency characteristic of *poiēsis* as poetry, doing, or making. The same tension emerges more prosaically in Aristotle, for whom the soul is “somehow all things” (*De Anima* III.8, 431b). To be able to know things, we must be able to reproduce in ourselves their characteristics—what makes them what they are. But if the soul is to do this accurately, it should have virtually no nature of its own—no tinted lens to transfer its own color to its object and so distort the reality that shines through. The nature of thinking is to take on the nature of what it thinks; for it to do any more means for it to do much less. What we call objectivity thus makes it extremely difficult to get a read on the nature of thinking, which seems always to hide itself chameleon-like in the thing thought. On the other hand, as the power to take on the nature of all things must itself be something distinct, thinking cannot simply be the perfect mirroring of reality, for if it were, how would one distinguish the two? Such a soul would not be *somehow* all things but *simply* all things. Soul cannot be a perfect reflector; in fact, it is hard to imagine what such a thing would be—even mirrors reverse their images. Accordingly, soul *is* an agent, but one of which the characteristic activity is both maddeningly illusive and perhaps the most important thing in the world.

Now, the activity of reading, like the activity of thinking, is a self-effacing affair—most powerfully present when most absent from view. We make a text our own when we adopt its perspective. At first glance, to read is an “attempt to understand an author as he understood himself” where what we ourselves are doing tends to disappear from sight. Restoring it into our field of vision, thinking about reading, is a version of “thinking about thinking,” which, as some of you may know, is Aristotle’s characterization of the activity of god (*Metaphysics* Book 12, 1074b). No wonder then that it turns out to be rather difficult to know what we are doing when we read.

That reading is like thinking is not a particularly novel thought. Near the end of the First Part of his *Discourse on Method*, Rene Descartes recounts how, when he came of age, he “quit entirely the study of letters ... and resolved to seek no longer any other science than could be found in [him]self or at least in the great book of the world” (I.14). Descartes uses this image to reject the whole of his previous education in favor of a new mode of thinking that will serve as a foundation for a revolution in science the goal of which will now be to “render men like masters and possessors of nature” (VI.2). With this method in hand, Descartes will turn away from books to read the world. To understand what he has in mind requires that we examine his thoughts about what was wrong with the old methodless way of thinking.

The full title of Descartes’s little book (it runs fewer than 100 pages) is *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*; it alerts us to Descartes’s underlying assumption: the weakness of reason—its inability by itself to conduct itself. This has something to do with the fact that reason is always someone’s reason; it is always *sa raison* and never simply *la raison*. And it has to do as well with Descartes’s advice in an introductory synopsis that “if this discourse seems too long to be read all at one time, one may

separate it into six parts.” Going on to specify the subdivisions of each part, Descartes provides us with a sort of Spark Notes version of the *Discourse on Method* (itself a sort of Spark Notes version of his unpublished book entitled immodestly—*The World*, a book which, in turn, is a sort of Spark Notes version of the world itself). Descartes’ aim is to help us to work through these larger wholes one manageable bit at a time. He therefore suggests to us the source of the weakness of reason: as always *someone’s* reason it is always limited by time. Reason cannot grasp wholes all at once and so is forced to begin looking at things in a partial (that is, in a necessarily distorted) way.

The problem of reason is nowhere more striking than in the wonderfully ironic opening sentence of the *Discourse*.

Good sense is of the things in the world the best apportioned; because everyone thinks himself to be so well provided with it that even those who are most difficult to satisfy in every other thing are not at all accustomed to desire more of it than they have.

Now is this really an argument for the equality of good sense or reason? What is well apportioned here? Isn’t it rather self-satisfaction and natural egoism than “good sense?” This founding book in modern rationalism thus begins not with a statement of the equality of reason—that is only a tease—but rather with a hint of the inclination that all of us have a tendency to value ourselves as highly as we can. Not reason but natural egoism is the best apportioned thing in the world. The first sentence of the *Discourse* is therefore a sort of joke—but why begin with a joke? Isn’t it because we human beings, although we might long to be richer or better looking than we are, so identify ourselves with our “good sense” that we are uninclined to think we need more than we have. Wanting more good sense would be too much like wanting to be someone else, so that were some god to offer any of us all of the good things in the world with only the stipulation that we would lose the sense of ourselves—including the

memory of who we are—we would invariably refuse. For what good would this do *us*? What would distinguish it from death? Descartes begins the *Discourse* with a thinly veiled ironic claim about what is present in all his readers so as to seduce all his readers into the experience of something non-ironically present in them—natural egoism. Rather than telling us, he makes us experience what limits the purity of reason and thereby shows us the underlying need for a method for conducting a reason all too inclined to fall into the trap of wishful thinking.

As readers of the *Discourse on Method*, we are initially flattered when a distinguished author equates his reason with ours. If we are attentive, however, we come to realize that we have been seduced by artful rhetoric. If reason is equal, Descartes wonders at the end of the first paragraph, what is the source of the diversity of our opinions? He replies that it is surely the diverse ways in which we conduct our thought and the different things we consider. That reason is always someone's means that it is always rooted in the particulars of our lives—both subjective and objective. But there is more. Descartes goes on to say that, while reason is equal, mind (*l'esprit*) and soul can both be good or bad although, he assures us, he never presumed to judge his own mind to be better than the ordinary. He even longed to have “thought as quick, or imagination as accurate and distinct, or memory as ample or as ready as some others.” Nothing but these, Descartes assures us, makes for the perfection of the mind. Good sense or reason may be equal, but these playfully self-deprecating remarks surely indicate that this does not mean that all human beings think equally well. And we, who have artfully uncovered the ironic cleverness of Descartes's display of his own superiority, have in the process demonstrated to ourselves our own cleverness. We become his co-conspirators, and this pleases us. For the second time in as many paragraphs we have been seduced by way of our natural egoism.

This proneness to seduction is the problem that Descartes's method is designed to overcome. We are thrown into a world that our survival requires us to understand. It is, however, a world infinitely complex, and we confront it with only finite capacities. With a quick wit and a powerful memory we can grasp more of it than might otherwise be possible, but more is never enough. We are doomed to fail because we always assume too much from a perspective too little comprehensive. Our natures force us to look at the world in a self-interested way. We survey the world as though it were food and in doing so sort through it as best we are able. We naturally reject moldy bread as inedible, not having leisure for the sort of detached speculation that would allow us to toy with the possibility that what we find initially repulsive might in the end provide raw material for a wonder drug. Ironically, our natural egoism regularly thwarts our natural interest by skewing our thinking in favor of obvious "goods" that may or may not in the final analysis be good for us. Our natural attraction to things—that we are so easily seduced—is at once the sign of the deepest feature of our nature as souls and the greatest problem for our souls.

This problem is rooted in our temporality:

But I shall not fear to say that I think I have had the good fortune [*beaucoup d'heur*] from my youth to have encountered certain paths that have conducted me to some considerations and maxims from which I have formed a method, by which it seems to me I have the means to augment my knowledge and to raise it little by little to the highest point to which the mediocrity of my mind and the short duration of my life would permit me to attain. (I.3)

Life is short, and thought is slow—the two problems are essentially one. How is this difficulty to be overcome? Life might be lengthened. In Part VI, Descartes himself will suggest this as the goal of his science, but despite Descartes's rhetorical suggestion to the contrary, immortality does not really seem possible as a scientific goal, and, even if it were, it would lie so far in the future that it would not serve as a solution to the immediate problem of how to get to that future. Or, thought might be made quicker. But it is hard to see how the production of qualitatively

superior minds lies within our present power; education too has its limits. Or, life might be “lengthened” and its perspectival character ameliorated by making it possible for different human beings to contribute to one enterprise—a continuing process of thought that would be a sort of species-life. For thought to be additive in this way, however, it would have to be altogether uniform, not built on brilliant but idiosyncratic insights that some understand and others do not—the stuff of those great souls who are “capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues” (I.1). It would have to be a body of thinking so formed as to follow one preestablished method, even if arbitrarily imposed.

This is Descartes’s project, and the vehicle for his new method is to be mathematics. Galileo had, after all, already said that “the great book of the world is written in mathematical characters.” Of all Descartes’s conventional studies, mathematics most delights him for the “certitude and evidence of its reasons” but he is also quite astonished that nothing more lofty has been built on foundations so firm and solid (I.9). Descartes is thus the founder of the modern scientific method and of its single most distinctive product, modern mathematical physics. He sees that it might be possible to use the one kind of human knowledge that seems not to vary according to perspective, and so seems capable of being perfectly reproduced in different souls, to forge a method for understanding everything. He means to make possible a knowledge universal in form that will deal with the infinite variety of particular things.

Now, although we may seem to have digressed from the problem of reading, we have not strayed all that far, for the uniformity that is the goal of the scientific method is really an attempt to create an ideal reader of the world, one who, because he reads according to the rules of the method Descartes outlines in Part II of the *Discourse*, will not be seduced by natural egoism. When we don our white lab coats, we will all read in the same way, and nothing personal or

idiosyncratic will intrude on our appropriation of the object. The split between reader and text, thinker and thought, will be methodically overcome. When scientific experiments are *controlled*, they are reproducible by any observer who follows the proper procedures, an observer who is presumably the pure subject, neutralized so as to have no vested interest in what is under observation, the “I” of the “I think, therefore I am.” This observer is the idealized reader of the world. The “somehow” has somehow been removed from “the soul is somehow all beings.”

Or has it? In the fifth paragraph of the First Part of the *Discourse*, Descartes describes his own writing in the following way.

But considering this writing only as a history, or if you prefer, only as a fable in which, among some examples that one can imitate, one will perhaps also find several others that one will have reason not to follow, I hope that it will be useful to some without being harmful to any, and that all will thank me for my frankness.

Two paragraphs later he tells us that

The prettiness of fables awakens the mind; that the memorable actions of histories elevate it, and that being read with discretion, they aid in forming judgment.

and in the following paragraph,

Besides, fables make us imagine many events as possible that are not so at all; and even the most faithful histories, if they neither change nor augment the value of things in order to render them more worthy of being read, at least they nearly always omit in them the basest and least illustrious circumstances....

Apparently the *Discourse on Method*, while awakening and elevating the mind, must nevertheless be read with discretion, for it makes some things seem possible that are not so and augments the value of others. In each case it deceives us; it seduces us. As readers, Descartes places us in the position of discovering through what he has told us that we must doubt in advance everything that he will tell us. We must always be on our guard lest we be subjected to an elaborate ruse or exaggeration. And he does all of this in the very book in which he is

supposed to be articulating a scientific method that will turn us into ideal observers and so ideal readers. Modern rationalism indeed.

Now the suspicion Descartes has engendered in us is not the famous programmatic doubt he describes in Part IV as the foundation of the scientific method. It is much more idiosyncratic and less systematic—a habit of reading born of the experiences encountered in reading his book. Descartes has therefore introduced us to two ways of thinking. One is a project and is the desired result of reading the *Discourse on Method*; the other, which allows *us* to think through the project of the *Discourse on Method*, is presumably also what made it possible for *Descartes* to write it. The method is not, and cannot be, the same as the way to the method, which must be premethodological and so is presented in the form of a history or fable. This, the more fundamental of the two modes of thinking, does not involve the fiction of the ideal reader who neutralizes his natural egoism. It rather involves seduction—a sort of bait and switch—that would be utterly impossible without natural egoism. We are led to follow our initial natural impulses to their erroneous conclusions, discover our errors, and then learn from them. Descartes thus practices an old art of writing given a formula by the chorus of Aeschylus's tragedy, *Agamemnon*—*pathei mathos*, learning by suffering, experiencing, or undergoing. In the world of tragedy we discover what we could never have seen without first having been missed. While the story of the influence the Cartesian method has had on the science so instrumental in the making of the modern world is one well worth pursuing, it would take us off in quite a different direction. What I hope to have shown here is only that however influential this method has been, it is not and cannot be the manner of thinking that Descartes used in the discovery and founding of the method. Cartesian science is not the same as philosophy, a far messier affair that does not allow us to begin from pure universal first principles and descend to the particulars. And

Descartes, although perhaps not the Cartesians who follow him, is certainly aware of the difference. This messier way is philosophy as reading.

Close to the end of the *Republic*, in the tenth book, Plato has Socrates renew the attack on poetry begun in books two and three. This account of the “ancient quarrel [or “difference”] between poetry and philosophy” is not simply to be taken at face value. Book ten may begin with an attack on poetry; it nevertheless ends with a poem—a myth about a man named Er who dies and returns from the dead. So, Socrates cannot simply dispense with poetry. Indeed, he repeatedly mentions its charm, and his examples of the ancient quarrel always involve poets deprecating philosophy, never the reverse. The attack on poetry, as is well known, involves an attack on *mimēsis*—imitation. Socrates will attack poetic imitation as giving us versions of things three steps removed from the truth—as if, he says in an image, the poet goes around with a mirror simply reflecting objects, themselves only copies, that he finds in the world; this poetic image should by itself make us suspicious, since in the list of objects so reflected Socrates includes gods. Furthermore, in criticizing poetry for the unreality of its images, he seems to leave open the possibility of making images while knowing them to be images. In the course of their inquiry into the nature of *mimēsis*, Socrates and his interlocutor, Glaucon, have the following conversation:

Do you wish, then, [this is Socrates speaking] that we begin by inquiring from this point according to the customary procedure? For we are accustomed, I suppose, in the case of each particular many to set up one particular idea (*eidos*) by which we apply the same name. Or do you not understand?

I understand.

Then let us also now set up whichever many you wish. For example, if you want, there are, I suppose, many couches and tables.

Surely.

But there are indeed, I suppose, two ideas (*ideai*) of these implements, one of couch and the other of table.

Yes.

Therefore we are also accustomed to say that the craftsman of each of the implements, while looking toward the idea (*idea*) in this way, the one makes the couches and the other the tables that we use, and other things in the same way. For, I suppose, none of the craftsmen crafts the idea (*idea*) itself. For how could he? (596a5-b10)

Now, the words *eidōs* and *idea* are synonyms in Greek; both are cognate with the verb “to see,” and both mean something like form. They are the “ideas” of the much heralded Platonic “theory of ideas.” Here, however, Socrates seems to make an interesting, if rather arbitrary, distinction. When speaking of an idea or form as the unifying seal placed over a many when we know *that* the many is a one (for example, when we specify a variety of things with the single designation “table”) but not *how* it is a one, he uses *eidōs*. When talking about the form we look at in order to fashion copies of it, he uses *idea*. So in the present context, *eidōs* stands for a dimly intuited object of inquiry—we must think we are looking for some one thing even to begin to search—while *idea* stands for something so fully known that by itself it can serve as a measure of, and paradigm for, other things—it is a sort of blueprint.

In another famous passage of the *Republic* in Book 6, Socrates provides an image of the ways in which our various cognitive faculties are related. Dividing a line in sections, he assigns to each section a faculty of cognition and its appropriate object. Of this, one of the most celebrated and argued passages in Plato, I do not propose to try to give a full account. Suffice it to notice that in the course of developing his complicated image, Socrates describes two sorts of thinking: one that treats principles or beginning points (*archai*) as fixed and known and argues *from* them, and one that he calls dialectic which makes “hypotheses not *archai* [beginnings or first principles] but hypotheses in reality, i.e. means of access and springboards, for the sake of

reaching the non-hypothetical at the beginning (*archē*) of the whole” (511b5-7). In other words, (Aristotle’s words) thinking moves either *from* first principles or *to* first principles; the former movement presupposes that we already know what we are talking about, the latter that we do not yet know what we are talking about. Since we must inevitably at first *not* know what we are talking about, the latter mode must be more fundamental, and this is what we do when we read—constantly anticipating *that* things will make sense and making hypotheses with a view to seeing *how* they make sense, but always being ready to have our initial assumptions reversed by what we discover as we go along. Reading in this sense is not the passive taking in of information on a page by a neutered reader. It is rather the product of an ongoing longing to put together what we are taking in so as to make it a whole. As linked to what Descartes calls our “good sense”—i.e. our natural egoism—it is always a questionable affair, for thinking *is* always wishful thinking. On the other hand, without the wishing, the rush to move from left to right, to get to the end of the sentence so as to reach a temporary stop—a whole—before pushing forward into the next sentence—the next unknown—there would be no thinking at all. Without stipulating in advance what we want to prove—where we wish to end up—a geometrical proof couldn’t even begin, for without a wished for end as a principle of incompleteness, a proof is essentially complete at the end of every step. It has no principle of motion within. Such stipulation is, of course, fraught with danger. How can we know in advance—before we have learned it—what it is we want to learn? Descartes’s method notwithstanding, there is no sure-fire cure for this peril, no system for suppressing natural egoism. Reading is an activity that is simultaneously treacherously duplicitous and profoundly revealing, and it can be the latter only because it is the former. *Pathei mathos*.

Two final (and brief) examples. In *On Poetics*, Aristotle concludes an apparent digression on the parts of speech by citing two examples of a *logos*: “Cleon walks” and the *Iliad*—one consisting of two words the other of rather more. What could he possibly mean? In order to move from left to right in the sentence “Cleon walks,” one has to assume that one understands the name or noun (the same word, *onoma*, stands for both in Greek) of which walking is predicated. Presumably that means that it is possible to grasp a Cleon who is not walking, or sitting, or orating, or conspiring, or reading—you get the point. Cleon as an *onoma* first has to be lifted out of time and treated as though he could exist without anything predicated of him in order to move through the sentence to see what is actually predicated of him. We must assume a much purer Cleon than can possibly exist in order to understand the Cleon who does exist. This is connected to Aristotle’s second example of a *logos*, Homer’s *Iliad*, the first line of which is “Sing goddess the wrath of Peleus’s son Achilles.” Now, presumably to understand the poem we must understand this line, and to understand the line we must understand what is meant by “wrath.” Yet it is reasonable too to suppose that Homer’s poem is all about the nature of wrath. If so, then we cannot understand the true significance of the first line without having understood the whole poem, and we cannot understand the poem without at least assuming we understand the first line. With his two examples, Aristotle suggests that what is true of the *Iliad* is true of every *logos*, however short. Reading is a messy affair. Doing it well—really doing it at all—means first doing it badly.

Finally, some Platonic advice on reading by way of a Socratic description of writing. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates suggests that “every *logos* ought to be put together just like an animal, itself having a body of its own, so as not to be headless nor footless, but to have a middle and extremities, written out in a way fitting to each other and to the whole” (264c). On the one hand,

this is just confirmation of what we have seen repeatedly in the texts we have glanced at today. This assumption of logographic necessity is what justifies us in anticipating that the words we are reading will constitute a perfect whole with each part having its organic place, and, when the whole we thought we had discovered dissolves upon closer examination, this assumption is what justifies our seeking to reconstitute a new, more subtle, more comprehensive whole. It is worth noting, however, that Socrates introduces this claim that writings are like animals just after addressing his interlocutor with these words: “Or have I said nothing, O dear head, Phaedrus.” To be a living organism, a writing must have a head, which only the reader to whom it is addressed is capable of providing. Without the reader, writing is not alive—it does not move. But as readers provide writing with soul, not a pure mind without desire or prejudice, they must need distort what they read. The remedy for this distortion is not to banish this troublesome soul but to acknowledge its existence by somehow indicating in the writing its inevitable presence. To be sure, the most dramatic form this mode of writing takes is the Platonic dialogue, but, what I have tried to suggest today is that including the reader in the writing is a necessary feature of all philosophical writing and reading, which is to say, of all writing and reading simply, which is to say of all genuine thinking.

So, to return to where we began. In teaching several generations of students how to read—really read—Angela Moger, has educated them in the deepest sense. She will be sorely missed.