Introductory Notes About Reading Philosophy & Philosophical Method

As noted in the course syllabus, the emphasis in this course is on careful and systematic thinking about ethics. In order to make sense of how philosophy is done, it may help to convey some basic ideas and distinctions that philosophers use. First, reading philosophy is primarily about reading for arguments. An argument in philosophy is simply a collection of claims in which the truth of one or more of the claims is said to support (in one way or another) one of the other claims. The supporting claims are called ‘premises’ while the claim supported by the premises is called the ‘conclusion’. A course in logic involves the study of the different ways premises may be put together to adequately support conclusions (i.e., ‘forms of argument’). In reading philosophy (or any other subject in which an author is attempting to convince you of the truth of some matter), there is a good deal more information than just the premises and conclusions of the main argument, and there are often several arguments going on in the same work. For instance, there will often be a main argument for which there are several premises, and then several sub-arguments for each of (or many of) the premises. So, a given claim can serve as both a premise in one argument and a conclusion of a different argument. One further complication is worth mentioning here as well: many times, some premises necessary for completing an argument are not explicitly stated (often because these unstated premises are thought to be common knowledge or uncontroversial). You can improve your reading skills for any topic by improving your ability to recognize arguments.

There are at least two different things going on in assessing philosophical arguments (that is, in judging them to be good or bad arguments). First, we want to know whether the premises are true or false. If an argument is going to be convincing, the premises on which the conclusion rests must be true. Second, we need to know if the premises are properly related to the conclusion. If the premises are true but they do not in fact provide support for the conclusion, the argument form is invalid. How do we test this quality of being ‘properly related’? It is not easy to give a comprehensive listing of the proper forms of argument, though there are some well-recognized invalid forms of argument. An argument is invalid when the set of premises fails to lend support to the conclusion even in the case that all the premises are true. Different forms of argument are appropriate to different areas of study. In general we can ask the following question to assess the form of argument being offered. If the premises were all true, could it still be the case that the conclusion is false? The less likely we could have a false conclusion with all true premises, the stronger the form of argument. So you have two basic things to look for in assessing an argument. First, are all the premises true? Second, assuming all the premises are true, does the conclusion follow logically? If the conclusion doesn’t follow even if we just assume all the premises are true, then the argument can’t be convincing. But notice something else. Even if we confront an invalid argument form, it doesn’t follow that the conclusion is false since a given claim can be the conclusion of several different arguments, not all of which have to be valid.

In moral philosophy, arguments will nearly always involve two distinct kinds of claims. Some will be straightforward, ordinary factual claims purporting to describe the world. Others will be claims about what is of (moral) value—or what are called ‘normative’ claims (or ‘norms’). We seem to have to assess these two distinct kinds of claims differently (and, further, it is not always easy to tell the difference between a factual claim and a normative claim). Descriptive claims about the world are relatively straightforward to assess—we know what sorts of things to look for in order to determine whether they are true or false. Normative claims typically are defensible in less straightforward ways. We ask what reasons we have for thinking that they are reasonable or defensible, but it seems to involve a different kind of investigation. Nonetheless, we need to assess both kinds of claims in order to assess the kinds of reasons that figure in the moral philosophy we will read in this class.

The distinction between facts and norms is closely related to another distinction we should be aware of. When we ask for the reasons behind someone’s action, we can be asking either for an explanation of the action or for a justification of the action. Psychologists, economists, anthropologists, sociologists and other scientists are primarily interested in explanation—what caused a person or persons to act in such and such a way. Their answers will often depend on the agent’s beliefs and desires (‘the person wanted X and believed that doing Y was an effective way to achieve it in the circumstances’). In moral philosophy and in our own deliberations about what to do, we are interested primarily in justification of the action. We can (and do) ask what a person ought to do (rather than just what the person will do or is likely to do). This concern with what we ought to do or what others ought to do is a concern with justification. It forces us to confront the questions about what norms are defensible, and hence makes doing moral philosophy significant.