

How to Read Philosophy? The Answer Might Surprise You.



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Eric Weber: Welcome everyone to a special short edition of Philosophy Bakes Bread, which we call a Breadcrumb. Crumble, crumble. Crumble, crumble.

Anthony Cashio: Philosophy Bakes Bread is a production of The Society of Philosophers in America. In our Breadcrumb episodes, we include snippets from past episodes or more substantive responses to your feedback that we received on Twitter at Philosophybb, Facebook at Philosophy Bakes Bread, or by email at philosophybakesbread@gmail.com.

Eric Weber: That's right. In today's episode, we've got a fun breadcrumb for you that we're recording with Dr. Nancy McHugh, Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Wittenberg University. In this episode, we're gonna talk about how to read philosophy.

Anthony Cashio: And the answer may surprise you. We've got a nice little clickbait title for it.

Eric Weber: Indeed. Let me mention ... Let me mention one thing, that our episode with Dr. McHugh is episode 47, and this should be our 10th Breadcrumb in the series.

Anthony Cashio: Nancy, why do we need to be taught how to read philosophy? If I can read, can't I read philosophy. I mean, what do you mean?

Nancy McHugh: Yeah.

Anthony Cashio: How is it different to read philosophy?

Nancy McHugh: When I was a grad student, I remember Jitendra Mohanty, who was a philosopher at Temple, and he was a Husserl scholar. Husserl is a philosopher from Europe, and

Mohanty said to us, "We aren't born knowing how to read philosophy. We have to learn how to read philosophy." I think he's right, that philosophy ... It's not that any kind of reading is necessarily easy, but philosophy is particularly challenging.

The example I use now about how to read philosophy comes from me teaching as part of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program. The first semester I ever taught as part of the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, which is where I take 15 students from my university to have class with 15 people who are incarcerated, was in the Clark County Juvenile Detention Center. The very first reading I frequently do in this class is The Apology by Plato, and it's about the trial of Socrates. One of the reasons why I do it is because the inside students, they've all been on trial, some of them recently, and they have a really good sense of what it means to actually be on trial, to be trying to defend oneself, and feeling as if one is poorly understood.

And so it really sets the inside students up, to help them sort of be in a position of authority in a way in which the outside students might not. It sort of challenges a dynamic in which I think the assumption is the outside students ... The traditional college students are gonna be stronger. The first class, I go in and we're ... We've had an initial class, and we're going in to get into the material. It's The Apology, and I go in and there's this young woman. She's 16 years old. She's a young girl, and she opens up her book, and I see that she's got [taps 00:03:48] all the way through the book. Then I see that she's got everything annotated, and then she's got a page of notes. It turns out that she read The Apology five times before the first day of class.

Anthony Cashio: My goodness.

Nancy McHugh: She annotated the whole thing and took notes, and when we had the class discussion, she nailed it. You know? She was able to identify all the charges against Socrates, able to synthesize the text to analyze it critically. And this is a 16-year-old. This is an incarcerated youth, who we tend to think of ... You know, used to use the phrase "juvenile delinquents," right? These are the kids that people think are ... I don't want to say think that they're throwaway, but they think they're going to amount to nothing.

This young woman not only took the time to do it, but cared enough to really engage this very traditional, philosophical text on a really meaningful level. And it blew everybody in the class away. It blew away her teachers at the ... The teachers at the detention center. She basically showed us how to read philosophy, which is carefully, repeatedly, taking careful notes, and taking the time to really think through the text. And so what I tell-

Anthony Cashio: Wow. It's, yeah.

Nancy McHugh: ... people now is, I say, "You know, you need to learn to read philosophy like this 16-year-old girl." She's my example.

Anthony Cashio: That is awesome.

Eric Weber: That answer did surprise me.

Anthony Cashio: Read philosophy like a 16-year-old girl.

Nancy McHugh: Yup.

Anthony Cashio: We should say no skimming, right? Carefully and reread and-

Nancy McHugh: Yeah. No. Yeah, carefully. It's a little bit like ... You know, I use the analogy also of the slow food movement. You know. People we want to read quickly, a little bit. We tend to treat reading like as fast food, something to be quickly digested, but most disciplines don't work this way, and philosophy certainly doesn't. Philosophy's more like slow food, where you need to take the time to prepare for it, you need to think about it. As you're going through it, you need to do each part of it ... You know, each of the ingredients has to be carefully included, and thoughtfully included.

So you're going through and you are, like I said, you're annotating. You're going back and you're reading passages, and sometimes you ... Like if you're making bread, for example. You don't knead the bread once if you want a nice loaf. You let it rise. You go back and you knead it again, and maybe even knead it a third time. You might let it sit overnight, and then you might go back to it again. Reading philosophy is like that. You have to actually really take the time for it. You can't expect-

Eric Weber: That's awesome.

Nancy McHugh: ... to digest it all in one sitting. You have to take your time with it. Maybe you go through and you read it once, and then you go back to it again, and then you maybe look at it again. Or maybe you read part of it. But you have to assume that your contact with the material is gonna be happening at multiple times, not just in one quick sitting.

Anthony Cashio: Wow.

Eric Weber: That's awesome. You know, one of the things I thought you were gonna tell us is that just because you know how to read English doesn't mean you know how to read French. And so I thought maybe one answer is to say that, well, we need to learn a new vocabulary, and we need to sort of understand in a new grammar or something like that. But no, this is actually of a different character than just a language change. Although, of course, there are some words we sometimes need to learn, it's the method. It's the whole way of approaching a text that needs to be different.

Nancy McHugh: Exactly. It has to be-

Anthony Cashio: Chew slowly, digest slowly.

Nancy McHugh: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Anthony Cashio: Grow faster.

Nancy McHugh: Exactly. And reflect upon it, right? As you're going through the process. It requires continual points of touch, in order for it to be effective, for you to effectively absorb it.

Anthony Cashio: That's good. You know, I'm a really slow reader myself. I've always been frustrated by how slow of a reader I am, but it turns out it's just always been a benefit in philosophy, my slow reading. I had to explain to my students the other day. They were complaining, "Why did you assign all this reading?" I was like, "Well, look. I'm reading it too,

and I bet I'm slower than you, and somehow ... I mean, I'm really slow." And I told them how slow I am, and they were like, "What?" I was like, "Yeah," so I'm taking all the time to read this, and that's about how slow. You should always have a pencil or something in your hand to-

Nancy McHugh: Yeah. No, that's exactly what I say.

Eric Weber: You know, it's funny. I just had that conversation this morning, with a relative of mine whose daughter is studying theology and philosophy in high school right now. She sort of was apologetic to say, "You know, honestly, the strange thing is she reads really slowly, and she's a little embarrassed about that, but she really loves this stuff." And I responded, "No, no, no, no. She's excellent at this stuff because she reads slowly." You know? Because for me, I let people know that to really read Descartes ... I mean, the way I read, I reread less than some people, but it's because I read so darn slowly that I will read 10 pages of Descartes in an hour.

Anthony Cashio: That's about how long I take. Yup.

Nancy McHugh: Yeah, no. Yeah.

Eric Weber: I mean, someone else might think that that doesn't sound like fun. But actually, when you take the time and you read very carefully the words of incredibly brilliant thinkers, it just blows you away there every step. You know?

Nancy McHugh: No, absolutely.

Eric Weber: And so, I think slow reading makes you a better philosopher, as does rereading, and reading frequently, as you say, and stewing on it.

Nancy McHugh: No, I think so, too. And I think that we ... Just like we don't have a lifestyle that's conducive to slow food, we don't have lifestyles that are terribly conducive to slow reading. Which is really a shame, because these things really don't get processed quickly. Just like it's physically unhealthy for you to eat fast food all the time, it's intellectually unhealthy for you to rush your reading, or to rush your knowledge acquisition. It takes time.

Eric Weber: Yeah. That's awesome. And by the way, I think you win a little prize for incorporating a bread metaphor.

Anthony Cashio: Yeah, the more bread metaphors, the better.

Eric Weber: It's not a dead horse, it's a loaf of bread. You can beat it as hard as you want.

Nancy McHugh: Exactly. Exactly.

Eric Weber: And as many times.

Anthony Cashio: You need to beat it more, yeah.

Eric Weber: Yeah, you have to push on it. You know, punch the bread.

Nancy McHugh: Yup.

Eric Weber: In fact, we call it punching down the dough.

Nancy McHugh: Exactly. Exactly, yup.

Anthony Cashio: Punching down the dough.

Eric Weber: Yeah, that's right. We should do that, indeed. Thank you so much. This was a lot of fun to talk with you about, Nancy. And so, everybody remember, how do you read philosophy? Like a 16-year-old girl.

Nancy McHugh: That's right.

Anthony Cashio: A 16-year-old girl.

Eric Weber: I love it. I love it.

Anthony Cashio: I hope everyone has enjoyed this little Breadcrumb. Little Breadcrumb. Crumble, crumble.

Eric Weber: Remember that you could call us and leave a short recorded message with a question or a comment that we may be able to play on the show at 859-257-1849. That is 859-257-1849. You can also reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and by email. For any of that info again, visit us online at philosophybakesbread.com.

Anthony Cashio: This is Anthony Cashio and Eric Weber, and we've been talking with Nancy McHugh. Once again, thank you again, Nancy.

Nancy McHugh: Thank you for having me. It was really great. I appreciate it.

Anthony Cashio: And thank-

Eric Weber: Well, we really do appreciate you.

Anthony Cashio: Yeah, and thank you everyone for listening to Philosophy Bakes Bread, food for thought about life and leadership.