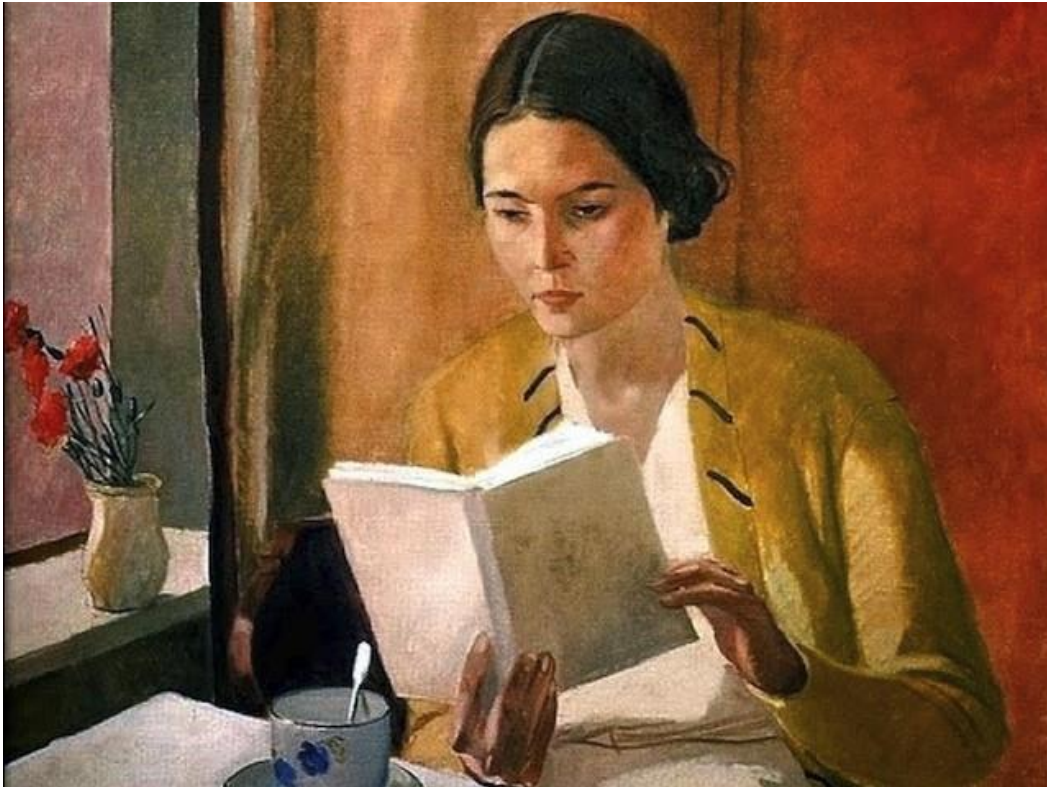


The Philosophy of Reading as First Philosophy

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“Girl with a Book,” by Alexander Deineka (1934)

You, the reader of this very sentence, are consciously reading this very sentence from left to right here and now.

Dear Reader, please now read the first sentence of this essay again, this time (even) more slowly and carefully. Obviously, insofar as you read it, it’s true. Moreover, your belief in its truth is sufficiently justified by the intrinsically compelling evidence yielded by the phenomenology—i.e., the subjectively experienced intentional performance, intentional content, and specific qualitative characters—of your conscious act or process of reading it. The sentence cannot read itself, because it’s not conscious; and nobody else but you consciously read that very sentence in the same way, at the same time, and in the same place, that you did. On the contrary to both of those, because the sentence is in English you consciously read it from left to right, and you also consciously read it right here and now, just as the sentence says. Even if nothing *else* in the world had existed but that sentence and your consciously reading it from left to right here and now; even if you had consciously read that sentence in a *dream*; or even if an evil scientist had somehow

produced in you a *hallucination* of your consciously reading that sentence: it would still be true, and your belief in its truth would still be sufficiently justified by the intrinsically compelling evidence yielded by the phenomenology of your conscious act or process of reading it. There are no epistemic gaps between you, the reader of the first sentence of this essay, and your consciously reading that very sentence. So you have authentic, skepticism-proof, empirical or a posteriori knowledge of it (see also Hanna, 2015: esp. section 1.7). Or in René Descartes's technical terminology, you have clear, distinct, and certain intuitive knowledge of it (Descartes, 1984-1985b, 1984-1985c, 1984-1985c, 1984-1985d, 1984-1985e).

Moreover, given the fact that you have authentic, skepticism-proof, empirical or a posteriori knowledge of the first sentence of this essay, Dear Reader, at least twelve other truths also follow self-evidently from it:

1. Therefore, you exist.
2. Therefore, you are conscious.
3. Since you can tell the difference between your left and your right, between now and elsewhere, and also between here and elsewhere, therefore you are an egocentrically-centered, conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
4. Therefore, you are also embodied.
5. Therefore, your embodied consciousness exists as locally embedded in orientable spacetime.
6. Therefore, your embodied conscious act or process of reading the first sentence of this essay also exists.
7. Therefore, you also possess a capacity for consciously reading legible sentences like the first sentence of this essay.
8. Therefore, legible sentences also exist, both as types and as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.
9. Therefore, legible texts exist, both as types and as tokens of those types instantiated in actual spacetime.

10. Therefore, the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts exists.

11. Therefore not only you, an egocentrically-centered, embodied conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime, possessing the capacity for reading, exist, but also the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts, exists.

12. Because *I*, R.H., consciously wrote the first sentence of this essay, but *you*, Dear Reader, who are *not* R.H., consciously read the first sentence of this essay, therefore *at least two* conscious subjects, who are communicating intersubjectively by means of writing and reading, exist in the manifestly real spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts.

The first sentence of this essay is what I've called a *caveat lector sentence* (Hanna, 2023). Because of its explicitly self-referential and self-orienting spatiotemporal properties, I'll call it more specifically a *self-locating caveat lector sentence*. In what immediately follows, I'm going to argue that self-locating caveat lector sentences are more epistemically fundamental than the classical Cartesian Cogito, and that therefore the philosophy of reading, and not the philosophy of thinking and existence, is truly first philosophy in the Cartesian sense.

What is the Cogito? Descartes formulates it in three slightly different ways:

Observing that this truth "I am thinking, therefore I exist" was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (Descartes, 1984-1985c: p. 127, AT VI: 32)

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who who is deliverately and constantly deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (Descartes, 1984-1985d: pp. 16-17, AT VIII: 25)

For it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very same time when it is thinking, exist. Accordingly, this piece of knowledge — *I am thinking, therefore I exist* —

is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.
(Descartes, 1984-1985e: p. 195, AT VIII A: 7)

No matter which formulation we consider, however, it's essential to notice that the Cogito *itself* is nothing more and nothing less than *a certain legible text* that's embedded *within a larger legible text*—indeed, also a published text—in philosophy, whether the *Discourse on the Method*, the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, or the *Principles of Philosophy*. To be sure, Descartes's three formulations of the Cogito are all *about* thinking and existence, but even so, he's very explicit that the Cogito itself is just "this truth 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'," "this proposition, *I am, I exist*," and "this piece of knowledge—*I am thinking, therefore I exist*" (underlinings added).

Now, in order for Descartes to have *written* the Cogito, he must already have been able to *read* the Cogito—otherwise, he wouldn't have known what he was writing. Therefore, Descartes must have already possessed *the capacity for reading*, including the capacity for reading *self-locating caveat lector sentences* like the first sentence of this essay. But reading the Cogito does *not* epistemically or logically guarantee *either* the existence of the body of the thinking subject *or* the existence of the external world beyond the body of the thinking subject, *or* the existence of many thinking subjects—aka "other minds"—and not only one solipsistic thinking subject, without various other premises and subsidiary reasoning, including an appeal to the existence of a non-deceiving God, all of which are—famously and/or notoriously—epistemically questionable in various ways (see, e.g., Markie, 1992; Beyssade, 1992; Loeb, 1992). By a diametric contrast, however, reading self-locating caveat lector sentences does indeed epistemically or logically guarantee not only that you, an egocentrically-centered, embodied conscious subject locally embedded in orientable spacetime, possessing the capacity for reading, exist, but also that the manifestly real external spacetime world that contains both types and tokens of legible texts, exists, and *also* that at least two intersubjectively communicating conscious subjects exist in that manifestly real spacetime world—as per entailments **11.** and **12.** of the first sentence of this essay. As a consequence, self-locating caveat lector sentences are *more* epistemically fundamental than the Cogito, and therefore the philosophy of reading (see, e.g., Hanna, 2023), and *not* the philosophy of thinking and existence, is truly *first philosophy* in the Cartesian sense.

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