

PHILOSOPHY 22: CONTEMPORARY MORAL PROBLEMS

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WRITING GUIDE

All of your papers for this course will consist of two main parts. In the first, expository part, your job will be to explicate one or more arguments in a text we've been reading. In the second, critical part, you will have the opportunity to present and defend a view of your own. But remember that philosophy is all about arguments, and what makes for good philosophy are good—that is, cogent and persuasive—arguments. Here are some guidelines for writing excellent philosopher papers.

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First some suggestions for how to approach your paper:

Organization

The paper assignment presents you with a problem to solve. Organize your paper around that problem and around your solution (if you believe there is one). You might even begin your first paragraph with a clear statement of the problem. *Every other sentence* in your paper should contribute either to a more detailed explanation of the problem you're trying to solve, to a solution to the problem, or to an explanation of why the problem is irresolvable. If a sentence you've written does not further any of these three goals, it should not be in your paper.

Thesis

Your paper should be organized around a thesis you intend to defend. If the point of the paper is to solve a problem, the thesis is the solution you propose (if you believe that a solution is possible). Include a statement of your thesis in your opening paragraph, as well as a brief description of how you will go about defending this thesis. For example, you might begin a paper about Descartes' argument for the distinction between mind and body as follows:

In this essay I will discuss Descartes' argument concerning the real distinction between mind and body. In particular, I will argue that this argument does not succeed in showing that the mind and the body are distinct substances. I will begin by laying out Descartes' argument from Meditation 6. I will then present my objection to his argument—an objection based on Descartes' claim that God can accomplish the impossible. I will then consider two different ways in which Descartes could respond to my objection.

Notice how this sample introduction gives the reader a very clear idea of what to expect from the rest of the paper.

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Next some important guidelines for writing the expository part of your paper:

Explanation, not Narration

Explaining the argument contained within a particular passage is not the same as explaining everything that is said in that passage. Many first-time philosophy students fall into the trap of narrating a passage, rather than extracting and explaining the argument contained therein. Suppose that you're presented with three paragraphs from Descartes' *Meditations*, and part of your assignment is to explain Descartes' argument in those paragraphs. It might be tempting simply to walk your reader through everything Descartes says there:

First Descartes asserts *A*. Then Descartes notes *B*. He then considers an alternative to *B*, *C*. Then Descartes mentions *D* and *E*. Finally, after dismissing the interesting possibility *F*, Descartes concludes *G*.

This sort of approach does not usually produce a satisfactory explanation of the argument in question. Descartes might make assertions in this passage that have little or nothing to do with his overall argument. Part of your job is to recognize which claims are central to the argument and which are peripheral or irrelevant. Don't waste space and muddy your explanation by discussing the irrelevant claims. For example, a solid understanding of Descartes' position might involve the recognition that assertions *B*, *C*, and *F* are irrelevant to his argument for the conclusion *G*. In that case your explanation should focus on *A*, *D*, *E*, and *G*.

Moreover, Descartes' presentation might be confusing or difficult to follow. That is, he might not present the various elements of his argument in the most logical order or straightforward manner. Rather than mimicking his confusing presentation, a good expository paper will correct it. As you're preparing to write your paper, try to break his argument down into its component pieces and to figure out how these pieces are connected to one another. Then, in your paper, you can put the argument back together again in your own words and in the clearest way possible. To return to the above example, suppose that Descartes presents the important elements of his argument in the order *A*, *D*, *E*, and *G*. However, after thinking about how the argument works, you might realize that claims *D* and *E* are actually the premises or starting points of his argument. *A*, it turns out, only makes sense in light of these two premises. And so, despite the fact that Descartes mentions *A* first, the clearest explanation of his argument will begin with *D* and *E*.

You might even write out the argument in numbered steps, as we have been doing in class, although this is not required. Bear in mind, though, that reconstructing the argument in this way does not by itself make for a complete explanation. You still need to guide your reader through the reasoning that is supposed to establish the conclusion. *How* does each step follow from the previous step or steps? Remember: arguments are composed of inferences and reasons. The more light you can shed on the reasoning whereby an argument proceeds, the better your explanation of that argument will be. Similarly, do not ignore the details of an argument. Even if these small steps seem obvious to you, explain them carefully. Philosophy is all about the details!

Textual Support

When you refer to one of the philosophers we have read, try to state precisely what he or she said, giving references to the text. (Since you will working only with texts we have all read, full citations are not necessary. Parenthetical page references are sufficient.)

When needed, include quotations from the text to support your interpretation. However, *do not rely on quotations to do your work for you*. Your job in these papers is to explain arguments *in your own words*. Simply quoting the relevant passages does not contribute to such an explanation at all. A quotation can sometimes be helpful, though, especially if you're going to spend a bit of time discussing a particular claim that a philosopher makes. For example, the following would be a perfectly acceptable use of direct quotation.

The most important step of the Dream Argument is Descartes' claim that "there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep" (13). Here Descartes is pointing out that there are no aspects of my present experience that could serve as conclusive evidence that I am not currently dreaming. In other words, my experience never provides me with a basis to rule out the possibility that I am dreaming rather than waking. And so, Descartes concludes, I could be dreaming right now.

In this example, the author directly quotes an important sentence but makes sure to provide his own explanation of Descartes' point.

Explanation, not Assertion

Do not assume that your reader understands what you mean or how an argument is supposed to work. (I won't be assuming that *you* understand. Your job is to *show* me that you understand by providing clear explanations and by using sound reasoning.) Simply restating a particular claim in your own words does not amount to a proper explanation, though it *is* an important first step. After you compose a sentence, ask yourself whether it needs to be elaborated or explained. For example, in an paper on Descartes' Dream Argument, it is not sufficient merely to assert that the possibility that we could be dreaming gives rise to doubts about almost all of our beliefs. Even if the reasoning seems perfectly obvious, you must explain *how* this possibility casts doubt on our beliefs:

Descartes concludes that if we cannot rule out the possibility that we are dreaming, then we have a reason to doubt almost all of our beliefs. My belief that I am currently writing a philosophy paper could be false, since I cannot rule out the possibility that I am only dreaming of writing a philosophy paper. And the fact that my belief could be false gives me a reason to doubt that belief. That is, I cannot be absolutely certain that I am currently writing a philosophy paper. The same holds for all of my beliefs that are based on sense perception.

The first sentence in the example restates the concluding inference of Descartes' Dream Argument. The rest of the paragraph explains that inference.

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Now some suggestions for writing the critical part of your paper:

Argument, not Assertion

When it comes time to defend your own position, focus on giving *arguments* for that position, and remember that good arguments involve more than mere assertions. Don't write: "I'm an atheist, so Descartes is wrong." Instead, provide an argument that might have a chance of convincing someone who disagrees with you—maybe even Descartes! Don't simply insist that Locke is wrong about the nature of personal identity. Explain *why* he is wrong, giving reasons to support your contention. Remember that simply repeating your position or restating it in different words is not the same as defending it. You need to provide support for the claims that you make and give reasons why the view you're defending is correct.

Assumptions

If your argument depends on certain assumptions, make sure to acknowledge those assumptions. Defend any controversial assumptions you make. Of course, not all assumptions need to be defended; most of us agree already that the Earth is round.

Examples

Give examples. One of the best ways to explain a complicated philosophical point or argument is to apply it to a particular example.

Objections and Replies

Sound philosophy depends on taking seriously multiple points of view, and so a good critical paper will always include a discussion of objections to the view or argument being advanced. After all, the most effective way to test an argument is to identify the weakest points and see if they can withstand some serious pressure. In other words, the best way to make sure that your argument is a good one is to consider the best possible responses to it. If you're criticizing Descartes, spend some time thinking about how he would defend his view against the argument you've come up with. Don't waste time writing up and responding to weak or trivial objections. Focus on the strongest ones. Then present your replies. If you can effectively respond to these objections, your argument will be all the more persuasive. Note that even the best arguments have weak points. No matter how compelling you think your argument is, you should nonetheless be able to identify at least one serious objection to it.

Depth

Depth is more important than breadth. It is more effective to develop one or two arguments for your thesis in depth—carrying them through several layers of objections and replies—than it is to give dozens of reasons for your thesis, none of which are developed with any seriousness.

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Here are some stylistic guidelines:

Language

Avoid flowery language. Many first-time philosophy students assume that good philosophy is all about grandiose statements and “deep thoughts.” It isn’t. Good philosophy is concise, precise, and well-reasoned. Don’t use big words when small words will do. Don’t use convoluted compound sentences when simple and clear sentences will suffice. Your style may be personal (you can certainly use the first person) but should still be scholarly. Remember: clarity is your goal.

Terminology

Write as though your reader is an intelligent layperson. Do not use philosophical “terms of art” without first explaining what they mean. For example, do not simply write that Descartes is attempting to refute *skepticism* or that you think *relativism* is wrong. Let your reader know how you’re using such technical terms.

Proofreading

Proofread your work carefully before you submit it. I’m always amazed by the large number of papers I receive that haven’t even been casually looked over. Run the spell-checker, but don’t stop there! The spell-checker will miss many typos, and it certainly won’t do a good job correcting bad grammar and poorly written sentences. Read your paper aloud to yourself. Ask yourself whether you could rewrite certain sentences or paragraphs to make your explanations clearer. I’m not grading your spelling and grammar, but spelling and grammatical mistakes make for a bad first impression. Papers that are full of typographical errors and run-on sentences will be returned ungraded. There is no reason for me to read your work closely if you have not taken the trouble to do so yourself.

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The final suggestion is in many ways the most important.

Office Hours

Talk to me about your papers during office hours. Come alone or in a group. I will happily go over outlines or drafts, answer questions, or just talk with you about the assigned passage. It is almost invariably the case that students who drop by my office to talk about their work write better papers and receive higher grades. If you can’t make it to my regular office hours, let me know and we can set up an appointment. If you can’t make it at all, send me your questions over e-mail. Trust me—you won’t be bothering me. I *want* you to drop by my office. It will show me that you care about what you’re doing, and it will make the papers I read that much better. Remember: I’m here to help!