

## ON WRITING PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS: SOME GUIDELINES

Richard G. Graziano<sup>†</sup>

The discipline of philosophy is practiced in two ways: by conversation and writing. In either case, it is extremely important that a philosopher be able to communicate her respective ideas well so that such discussions are productive. In what follows, I will offer a number of guidelines and suggestions that will help you toward that end. Although my focus here will be on philosophical writing, much of what I say does apply equally to philosophical conversation as well (especially those inevitable reflective tête-à-têtes that have a way of cropping up at two o'clock in the morning!). I will divide the guidelines and suggestions along two lines, general and particular. First, I will discuss a handful of important general issues that you need to keep in mind when writing philosophical essays. Second, I will discuss issues that are particular to producing a good piece of philosophical writing.

### GENERAL GUIDELINES

The following are a number of general things to keep in mind when engaging in philosophical writing.

- *Grammar & spelling.* The first step toward writing a successful essay is to take care to write as you would any other research essay, namely, (i) use correct English grammar, and (ii) ensure that it is free of any and all spelling errors. There is no justification for failing to do either. A professor once asked his class the following insightful (not to mention rhetorical) question *if you don't take your work seriously, then why should I?* Take the time to check your work. Though the spelling and grammar checks in a word processing program can help, you should not rely on that alone since such programs often miss errors. Proof read your work multiple times to ensure that it is absent of such problems. If you are unclear about grammar or formatting issues, please see me or any of the resources listed on the last page of this essay.
- *Format.* It is important that you follow the format instructions that are specified by the assignment. In this course, your essays are to be double-spaced, have one-inch margins, typed using twelve-point Times New Roman font and be printed in black ink.
- *A comment on how much & what to say.* A rule of thumb in philosophical writing is this: if you are struggling to fill up the space you have been allotted, then it is likely that you do not really understand the issue or topic. Of course, this is not “a hard and fast” rule; it is merely a guideline. Nevertheless, it is a *good* guideline. Why? As a rule of thumb, there is always more to say about an issue than the space you have been allotted. As you will see below, although philosophers, like many other theorists, are concerned with whether or not some claim is true or there is good reason to believe it is true, the first step toward that end is to figure out what argument(s) are offered in favor of that claim, the exact details of the argument(s), etc. As such, many philosophers have written a number of very lengthy essays in which the only goal was that first step. For it is only after doing that that the all-important goal of determining whether or not the argument is any good or the claim in question is true

---

<sup>†</sup> © 2006, Richard G. Graziano.

can be satisfied. Note, however, that it is a virtue of an essay that it is written in a way that it is clear, concise and to the point; it is a vice of an essay when it is filled with “fluff” (i.e., material that is superfluous and unhelpful to the discussion at hand)! I will say more about this below.

- *On the use of ‘I’.* It is not only permissible to use the first-person pronoun ‘I’ (or plural ‘we’) in your paper; in some cases, it is essential. Philosophical essays often involve the giving and defending of arguments for positions and claims that *you* take there to be good reason(s) to accept or not accept.
- *On the use of ‘he’ and ‘she’.* Apart from using a pronoun to refer to a particular person, it is not necessary to use the he-or-she-pronoun clause as a means of capturing everyone with respect to some general claim. It is perfectly acceptable to use only ‘he’ in a paragraph or two, switch to ‘she’ in the next paragraph(s), and so on. The key is to use the pronoun uniformly in the given paragraph so that your reader does not become confused thereby losing sight of the content of the discussion.
- *On the use of quotes.* Generally speaking, I find that people use quotes inappropriately. As a matter of fact, it is often the case that I find that students that use quotes in their essays hardly, if at all, know what they are talking about. As a rule, except in very particular kinds of cases, it is neither necessary nor beneficial to incorporate quotes into a philosophy essay. As I discuss in detail below, the purpose(s) of philosophical writing is to discern what some philosopher is claiming and whether or not she is correct, and the use of quotes does not generally contribute toward meeting that end. If you do believe a quote is necessary and/or beneficial to the discussion, then you must do three things. Foremost, you need to make sure that you include and use an accepted format for citing references. Second, you need to discuss exactly what the quote means, why it is relevant to the discussion, whether there is more than one way of understanding what the quote means and/or its relevance to the discussion, etc. Third, make sure to keep the number of quotes to a minimum.

With that said, let us turn to the distinctive-making features of a philosophy paper.

## PARTICULAR GUIDELINES

In this section, I will talk about the nature of the three main components of a philosophy paper and the specific features that your essay should include.

### THE INTRODUCTION

Think of your introduction as a road map for the reader. It should state *what exactly is the topic of your essay, what exactly you are going to say about that topic and how exactly you are going to proceed to say it.* Make your introduction clear, concise and to the point. Generally speaking, there is neither need nor room for extraneous material about the history of some debated topic, the difficulty in answering some question, etc. (In fact, I find that in most cases, the claims that students make along those lines are false!) Consider the following example of a good introduction:

Peter Singer argues that we are morally obligated to give money to causes such as famine relief given that we are in a position to do so without sacrificing anything that would make our lives worse. I take it that his argument for that claim does not in fact work. After

carefully setting out Singer's argument, I shall argue that the key premise has two problems. First,....

A person who reads this introduction knows exactly *what* the author is doing and *how* he is going to do it. To that end, here are some important questions to ask of your introduction:

- Is my introduction concise?
- Does it contain a clear statement of my main thesis?
- Does it indicate very briefly my main line of argument?
- Does it explain the overall structure of my essay?

If you answer 'yes' to these four questions, then chances are that your introduction will be good.

## THE BODY

Although philosophy papers, like all papers, are written with a particular goal in mind, generally, there are two kinds of goals that the philosopher has in mind. On the one hand, she may intend to convince the reader that a particular view or claim is true, or that it is false, or that we should suspend judgement whether it is true or false. On the other hand, she may simply intend to get clear about the nature of an issue and the various positions that one might adopt regarding that issue without going so far as to argue for one view over another. Of course, in some cases, she may intend to do both. Irrespective of whether she has the first or second goal (or both!) in mind, the philosopher will formulate and defend one (or more) argument(s) that she is correct. Though it should be clear that that is the case with respect to the essays of the first type, it may not be clear that essays of the second kind also involve arguments. They do. For example, the latter kind will include one or more arguments in order to demonstrate that the range of options discussed with respect to the issue are in fact *genuine* options. So, philosophy papers are, by their very nature, argument papers. Given that arguments are involved, philosophy papers will generally involve an attempt to answer two questions:

- What is/are the argument(s)?
- Is/are the argument(s) any good?

As such, it is helpful to think of the body of a philosophy essay as being composed of two parts. First, the philosopher provides a *descriptive analysis* of the issue(s) or argument(s) under consideration. Second, she provides an *evaluative assessment* of the position(s) or the argument(s) she first described. Let us consider each of these in turn.

### *The Descriptive Analysis*

Simply stated, the descriptive analysis section of the paper merely describes the issues, position(s) and argument(s) in question by way of analyzing what exactly is being claimed. As such, it should state, as precisely and free from metaphor as possible, what the topic is, what it involves, and the claim or position for which the philosopher in question is arguing. Sometimes it is appropriate to quote the passage in which the claim or the argument appears; other times it is not.<sup>1</sup> In either case, the descriptive analysis portion of the essay must include a summarized

---

<sup>1</sup> Given the nature of the assignments for this course, you would do well not to use quotes. That is not only the case given what I said above about the general misuse of quotes, but also given that it will be hard to satisfy the requirements for using a quote appropriately since the length of the essays is restricted.

characterization of the claim or the argument.

There are a number of related features that you should make sure to include in your characterization of philosopher's argument or position. First, you need to make sure that it is such that that person would recognize the argument or position *as his own*. If your presentation does not do this, you run the risk of committing *The Straw Man Fallacy*—that is, the mistake of reasoning in which a person evaluates an argument or view that is *different* than that which the philosopher in question provided. It should be obvious that that is neither beneficial nor appropriate. Second, you should not only strive to make your characterization of the argument in question concise, but you should strive to make it precise as well. Your characterization should specify all and only those ideas or features upon which the argument *actually* uses/relies. You want to make sure that you neither include something that is *not* part of the argument you are describing nor fail to include something that *is* part of the argument. For instance, it would be both inappropriate to characterize René Descartes' *Trademark Argument* for the existence of God as an argument for the existence of the Christian conception of God. He may have such a being in mind, but it is arguably the case that the text does not warrant (implicitly or explicitly) any such interpretation. Moreover, it should not be characterized as an argument for some version of pantheism or polytheism, a view he clearly did not accept. A third feature that you need to do is make the argument or view under consideration as explicit as you can. That is, state plainly as possible what statement the argument is said to support (the conclusion) and the statements the author uses to demonstrate that it is true (the premise(s)). (There are few things more difficult than trying to piece together an argument that is buried amidst related—sometimes unrelated—discussions.) For instance, one may argue that affirmative action is morally permissible given  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$ . Here the statement following the *that* clause—'affirmative action is morally permissible'—is the conclusion while ' $x$ ', ' $y$ ' and ' $z$ ' are the reasons presented as evidence for that claim. One way of making an argument explicit is to use *The Enumerative Method* (hereafter, EM). EM is simply the method in which you list the premises and conclusion of the argument in order and give each statement a particular name, a label as it were. You can name or label the statements using anything you like, e.g., numbers, letters or acronyms. It can be anything *so long as* the name refers to that statement and *only* that statement. Otherwise, you will confuse the reader. Here is an example. If you were to offer the following argument,

- (1) If moral relativism is true, then there can be no moral progress.
- (2) If there can be no moral progress, then no culture's moral acts and beliefs are better than another culture's moral acts and beliefs.
- (3) Some culture's moral acts and beliefs *are* better than another culture's moral acts and beliefs.

Therefore,

- (4) Moral relativism is not true.

then you can easily refer to any one of these statements simply by using '(1)', '(2)', '(3)' or '(4)' throughout the remainder of the essay. You can employ EM when you discuss important principles as well. For instance, one might describe Kant's first formulation of The Categorical Imperative as follows:

- (CI1) An action  $A$  is morally permissible if and only if  $A$  is based on a maxim  $M$  that is consistently universalizable.

Having made the statement explicit in this manner, you can use (CI1) for the rest of the discussion to refer to that claim. Besides making your characterization of an argument or position explicit, EM has the additional benefit of both saving you space (that you can use for other important things) and it gives your essay simplicity. If you use EM, however, it is important to note that you must still take space to clarify and spell out the argument or claim that you named. It is a mistake to think that, by itself, EM provides the reader with enough information to understand the claim(s) being made. Again, it merely makes the claim(s) explicit. Accordingly, your use of EM does not mitigate the need to discuss the claim(s) any further. But note that this further discussion has two benefits: it both helps your reader understand the argument (as you have presented it) and sets the stage for your evaluative assessment. How then can you make sure that you describe the enumerated claims sufficiently?

To make sure that you describe the enumerated claims sufficiently, you need to identify and focus your discussion on any and all of the important features upon which the argument relies and requires if it is to be successful. This involves explicating the nature of the ideas or concepts (i) for which the author is arguing and (ii) by which she supports the conclusion. This involves explaining key terms, e.g., how the author uses particular value terms such as ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, how certain notions function to link premises to one another and/or the conclusion, any main ideas in the argument, etc. It is important to keep in mind that although the meaning of a term or idea may seem, on the face of it, to be obvious, in actuality, it may be “loaded” or used in a very technical way. So, make sure that you don’t gloss over any term or phrase until you have said enough to make its meaning sufficiently clear.

There is one final, although very important, thing to note regarding your effort to describe a term or phrase. Again, when you do have to explain some term, make sure that your analysis and discussion makes clear the line of thought that is *used by the author*. This means that definitions from dictionaries and other sources should be avoided unless the author herself refers to a given source. What’s more, if you think that her use or understanding of a notion is problematic or mistaken, then you should wait to argue for that in the evaluative assessment section. The purpose of this portion of the paper is to make the issue or position that you are going to evaluate as clear and understandable as possible. If something is left unclear, then it will be hard to see how some criticism affects the argument or position in question.

### *The Evaluative Assessment*

Evaluating an argument or issue is an extremely difficult process that requires great care, attention to detail and cognitive rigor. Often doing so well requires a great amount of practice. Even so, you will do well toward being successful if you keep two things in mind. The first thing is this: philosophical writing is not simply about making assertions. Any claim that you make must be supported with one (or more) argument(s). You need to tell the reader why you are correct and another view is incorrect. Otherwise, there are no rational grounds for accepting your claim over that of the argument or issue under consideration. If you think that your claim—whether it is incompatible or agrees to some degree with that of the philosopher you’re discussing—is true, give the reason(s) that you take to indicate that that is so. The second thing is this: do not commit the error of objecting to the conclusion of an argument directly. That is because the author has given an argument that involves reasons for thinking that the conclusion is true. If those reasons are in fact true and the nature of his reasoning is good, then it follows that conclusion will be true. That said, to object to a conclusion directly is to fail to consider

why the claim may in fact be true. How then should you evaluate an argument in order to call into question the conclusion? There are two steps in evaluating an argument. Let us consider each in turn.

*Step One* – Determine whether the argument is valid.

In the first step, you determine whether the argument is good by determining whether the evidential link between the premises and the conclusion is good. In other words, evaluate the argument so as to determine whether or not the premises, on the assumption that they're true (even if they're not), actually provide reasons or evidence for taking the conclusion to be true. As I discussed in class, we are going to say that an argument *A* is good only if *A* is valid (where *A* is valid if and only if the evidential link between the premises and conclusion of *A* is such that if the premises are true, then the conclusion cannot be false). If the argument is valid, then the proponent of the argument has at least reasoned well in terms of the form of the argument. If the argument is invalid, then the form of the argument is no good; it involves fallacious reasoning. If it does involve bad reasoning, then even if the conclusion *is* true or *there are reasons to believe that it is*, nothing of the kind has been shown to be the case. *Note:* if you think that the reasoning involved in an argument is no good, then the burden of proof is on you to provide an argument for that claim. What is more, make sure always to make it clear exactly what step(s) in the argument you are questioning or attacking.

While there a number of different methods for doing so, the easiest is to provide a counterexample that relies on the very same argument form and reveals that it is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. For example, take the following badly reasoned argument:

(5) Fetuses have the potential to be persons

(6) Persons have the right to life

Therefore,

(7) Fetuses have the right to life.

Taking the general form of the argument, namely,

(5') *x*'s have the potential to be *y*'s

(6') *y*'s have the right to *z*

Therefore,

(7') *x*'s have the right to *z*,

and replacing *x*, *y* and *z* with 'Tom Hanks', 'the President of the United States' and 'sign executive orders', respectively, we can see that the form of reasoning does not make it the case that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true as well. The reasoning is no good; the argument is not valid. If you have determined that the reasoning *is* in fact good in the sense that it is valid, then it is time to move onto Step Two.

*Step Two* – Determine whether the argument is sound.

In the second step, you determine whether the premises are actually true. It is always best to focus your attack on the smallest number of premises you take to be suspect or questionable. Also, the more central the premise is to the argument, the harder it will be for the argument's

proponent to fix the argument. The main thing is to identify what you take to be a substantive problem with at least one of the premises such that your discussion will, at a minimum, cast a shadow of doubt upon it, at a maximum, show that it is false. With that said, here are some ways to question a premise:

- Offer a counterexample that shows that *there is at least one instance* that the premise or principle ignores or cannot account for.
- Show how an important notion involved in the premise is problematic, that it is better to understand it some other way.
- Offer substantive reasons that call the premise in doubt to a sufficient degree such that the burden of proof is shifted back to the proponent to provide further argumentation or make something more clear.

It is true that there are other ways to question premises or principles. It is also true that some approaches are better than others. The general rule to follow is this: make your criticism as strong as possible against the weakest claim possible. If you do that, you will have a better chance of being successful!

Make sure to note this as well. When you bring criticisms to bear on an argument, make sure to claim only what you *have* shown. Do not claim to have shown more than you actually have. For instance, do not claim to have shown that theism is false simply because you have shown that some particular argument for theism fails. Even theists have shown that there are bad arguments for the existence of God! Make sure to ask yourself such questions as

- Have I really shown what I claim to be the case?
- Have I shown something different?

There is one final thing that you should do in the evaluative portion of your essay. You should consider how the author would respond to your arguments and claims. Your paper will be much stronger—not to mention demonstrative of an intellectually honest attitude toward the truth—if you both offer some possible responses and then respond accordingly. Of course, this does not mean that *any* response from either party will do. They should be reasonable claims and as strong as possible. Remember, the goal of arguments is not to win at any cost, but to have or adopt rationally grounded beliefs in pursuit of a correct picture of how the world really is. Thus, you should neither offer “empty” replies on behalf of your opponent that are easily discarded or in response such that they are not intellectually honest about the issue. Provide replies against your position such that, were *you* your opponent, you would believe that you are being taken seriously. Here are some questions to ask yourself toward satisfying this end:

- What would my opponent say to my objections? How would she respond?
- How would I respond to my opponent’s response(s)?
- Have I tried to say too much without giving enough considerations?

## THE CONCLUSION

In most cases, it is not necessary to include a conclusion—more properly, a concluding section—in a philosophical essay. In fact, for the purposes of this course, you do not need to include one. However, were you to do include a conclusion in the essay, it is important to remember that the conclusion section is simply a review of your discussion, a place to “tie together” the work you did in the essay. It may review the claim(s) and argument(s) you addressed, and what you said in

response to that claim and how you defended what you said. *It is nonetheless still a review.* Do not discuss new topics or raise new arguments in your conclusion. If you have something new to say, e.g., as it relates to the topic you address in your essay, then you should include that as another section in the relevant portion of the essay.

In this essay, I have discussed a number of general and particular guidelines for writing philosophy essays. There is far more that I could say than space allows. Nevertheless, if you follow these suggestions, you will maximize your chances of both authoring a successful piece of philosophical work and getting a strong grade. Good luck with your writing, and always remember to have fun in and with the process of philosophizing. I look forward to reading your work.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

#### GENERAL RESOURCES

Strunk, William and E.B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. New York: Macmillan Publishing.

Turabian, Kate L. 1996. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

American Psychological Association. 2001. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Washington D.C.

#### PHILOSOPHY-RELATED RESOURCES

Baggini, Julian and Peter S. Fosl. 2003. *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Weston, Anthony. 2001. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Pryor, Jim. "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" [Available on-line: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>]

Pryor, Jim. "Philosophical Terms & Methods" [Available on-line: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/>]