BASIC GUIDELINES FOR WRITING PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS

In writing a philosophical paper, you should always take a position *of your own* and argue for it with the aim of *convincing others*, in particular the kind of intelligent reader who does not already agree with you. Your papers should be addressed to this audience, and not just your professors and GSIs.

With that in mind, you should (*i*) *explain fully* what you mean and (*ii*) *offer reasons* why someone else should agree with you. And, to the extent that your position raises obvious questions or objections, you should (*iii*) *anticipate difficulties*, by indicating what problems your account faces and how it can address them (or, at any rate, the most important ones).

Remember that you will *not* be graded on the position you choose to take, but rather on how well you *explain* it, *argue* for it, and *defend* it.

The parts of a philosophical paper

introduction. Typically, a philosophical paper concerns an argument, either for or against a particular position. It is customary to begin such a paper by indicating *very briefly* what the general issue is and what your eventual position will be. (Think of it like the agenda for a meeting.) It is also helpful to say *very briefly* why it matters.

> *A word of advice*. Write the introduction *last*. People are sometimes unsure of what they actually believe until they start writing; and even when they are sure, they sometimes change their minds while working out the issues in close detail.

explaining the argument. Before you get down to the business of evaluating an argument, you need to *state* the argument in detail. It is usually not enough to offer a regimentation of it: you need to talk through it *in your own words*, explaining how the logic works and just what is asserted in each premise, being careful to define key terms and concepts.

> *A good habit*. This may be an argument that you don't endorse yourself, but are about to criticize. But you still need to say something about it first. And it's not just for the reader's sake. In presenting an argument methodically, you will often notice key features that you didn't appreciate before.

evaluating the argument. At this stage, you can proceed to evaluate the argument systematically. This will form the central part of the paper and typically consists of a number of smaller discussions. Is the argument valid? If it is, is it also sound? Which premises are true and which false? In thinking about each step, you will need to consider both the pros and cons. But when you come to write about it, you should order your thoughts so as to *make a case* for a particular position, not merely stating that (for example) a particular premise is false, but *arguing for* that view. And if one of your views is important to your position as a whole, you should make sure that you have considered the obvious replies or objections to your argument.

Tips & strategies

say what you mean. This is often the greatest difficulty for beginning students. One often hears in office hours, "But you know what I *meant*!" In fact, we couldn't possibly know what you meant unless you *say* it. So we will take you to mean *exactly* what you say on the written page, and that might be incomplete, ambiguous, or completely different from what you actually had in mind. So be careful to *say* exactly what you *mean*.

figuring out what to believe. Some people are not sure what they believe, either about a particular premise or about a topic as a whole.

The first thing to do is to check your intuitions. First isolate the claim by itself and try to imagine just what is being said, no more and no less; then see whether you in fact think that it is true or not. Don't spook yourself here. You're just trying to check whether you already have a view on the question. You might not. But often you do, and that's the best place to start (even if you need to evaluate it further down the road).

TRYING A POSITION ON FOR SIZE. If you don't have a definite view, then it's worth trying out a particular position *for the sake of argument*, just to see where it leads and whether you are comfortable with the results. If you can't accept the consequences, then you should go back and revise, or even reject, the position you were trying out and *spell out explicitly* what the alternative is. Then see whether that's any more comfortable for you.

REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY. Often, if you're not sure what to think, it is useful to choose the strongest view first as your working hypothesis. Because a strong view makes larger claims, there is a greater chance that there will be evidence to *refute* it. And if you can refute it, you have learned something quite important, namely, that a particular view is *false* and so that its contradictory is true; and you understand *why* it is false, which is often even more useful. If, on the other hand, this strong hypothesis is not easily refuted, you will also have learned something very interesting, namely, that, while strong, such a claim may well be true.

SAVE YOUR WORK. As mentioned earlier, sometimes you will change your mind over the course of a writing a philosophy paper. That's not a bad sign. Quite the opposite: it shows you are thinking seriously about what is being claimed and are responding to it. Moreover, what you've written may still be useful, since you can use it to explain why a *mistaken* view—the one you *used* to hold—is in fact false. Of course, the final version of the paper should represent a coherent view, so be sure to check your paper at the end to make sure that it represents your *final* view and that what you have *written* is internally consistent.

Other resources

Martinich, A.P. 1996. *Philosophical Writing*. Blackwell Publishers. (First edition, 1988.)

Lanham, Richard A. 1999. *Revising Prose*. 4th edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Also see Prof. James Pryor's guidelines for writing philosophy papers on his website:

http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html