

Writing Papers for PHIL449

The Assignments

For this course, you will write two argumentative papers contesting the material that we have covered.

The first paper (~1000 words) will reconstruct an argument from one of the readings (~500 words) and then present and develop an original objection to that argument (~500 words). The second paper (~2000 words) will do the same thing but then introduce a reply to your objection (~500 words) and then critically assess the reply (~500 words).

Below are some general points about how to successfully complete each component part of the paper.

Reconstructing an Argument

The point of the reconstruction is to set the stage for your objection. So, everything you do in this part of the paper should be deliberately and carefully done with that end in mind.

A successful reconstruction will begin by introducing the author and the central thesis *that you want to attack*. This should roughly take the form of “In “[Paper Title],” [Author] argues that [Thesis].” It will then present the *supporting argument* for [Thesis.]

[Thesis] does not have to be the author’s big conclusion; it could also be a sub-thesis that supports that central conclusion. Pick the thing that is the main target of your critique. That said, [Thesis] does need to be a central part of [Author]’s paper. You need to go after one of the core philosophical positions [Author] is advancing, not a small side point or afterthought. Typically, if [Thesis] only appears in the last few pages of the paper, that means it’s not a central point worth writing about.

Note that you are *reconstructing* the argument, not *summarizing* it. This means that you should not try to restate everything that [Author] says in their paper or rephrase their sentences. Rather, you want to pick out the key parts of the argument that are relevant to your objection and present them in your own terms. The goal should be to present [Author]’s core argument more efficiently than they do, so be concise!

Your reconstruction should be very explicit about the parts of the argument and how they fit together. For example, you might have [Thesis], [General Principle], and [Thought Experiment]. These are the parts. You might then note that [Thought Experiment] is *evidence for* the truth of [General Principle] because [General Principle] *explains* our judgments about [Thought Experiment]. And [General Principle] *entails* [Thesis] because [Thesis] is a particular *application of* [General Principle]. Be sure to explain each part of the argument and not neglect to include any key parts. Be thorough!

Reconstruction also sometimes requires *interpretation*. Philosophers aren’t always as clear as they should be. When they aren’t, you might want to present multiple different ways of understanding what they are saying. Then argue against the one that is most plausible, since it’s not worth arguing against weaker views. You should *briefly* explain why the interpretation you are discarding is not plausible/worth considering.

Be very careful and precise when restating [Author]’s argument to make sure that you have the details correct. When you attribute a view to them, **you should cite which page** of their paper the view appears on as follows: “[Author] argues that [Thought Experiment] is unjust because [Reason] ([Page Number]).” Further, you should be able to point to the sentence on the page where [Author] makes that claim. In general, if you are attributing a view to an author that seems obviously silly, that’s a sign that you are misinterpreting them, so take a second look.

Keep in mind that your goal is to make the author’s argument seem *as plausible as possible*. If the view you’re criticizing is obviously implausible, then what value is there in criticizing it? A critical philosophy paper is only interesting if it takes something that *seems* plausible and reveals that we should actually reject that view.

Finally, while you want to restate the argument in your own terms, you *do* want to use the same technical language and terms that the author employs. If they say that something is “permissible,” don’t say that the thing is “good to do” or “legitimate” or “allowed” or something like that. Use the terms and concepts that they give you but then reassemble them using your own words.

The Objection

The objection should contest a specific part of the reconstructed argument. You should be able to point to that part in what you have written and say, “That’s the thing that’s false.” **You then need to give reason(s) for thinking that the contested premise is false.** What could you say to convince a reasonable person who disagreed with you?

The objection should have the same clear and explicit structure as the reconstruction. It should have distinct and identifiable parts (including a thesis) and clearly articulated explanations of the relations between those parts.

It should also be original (not something that is argued in one of the other papers in class), interesting (not something that is obvious to most people), modest (don’t try to prove too much!), and plausible (your most basic premises are ones that most people would accept as true; you can endorse more controversial premises, but should argue for them by appealing to non-controversial ones).

Your objection shouldn’t rest on *non-obvious empirical premises* about the world. Some facts about the world are obvious like the fact that some people are kind while other people are mean-spirited. If something is obvious and uncontroversial, it’s fine to assert it. But you should avoid making bold and controversial claims about the world that you aren’t positioned to answer without getting a PhD in sociology or psychology. For example, you don’t want your objection to rest on your claim that people’s personalities are genetically determined and not amenable to change. At most, you should make arguments about what *would* follow *if* certain facts were true, without asserting the truth of those facts.

There are many strategies for objecting to a thesis like [Thesis]. Here are a few:

- You might show that [Thesis] or one of its supporting premises has implications that [Author] would not want to accept. For example, if it turns out that [General Principle] entails that

slavery is permissible, they will likely want to reject [General Principle] and, thus, no longer have a reason for endorsing [Thesis].

- You might argue that a part of their argument that is supposed to support another part actually does not. For example, you might argue that our judgments about [Thought Experiment] are better explained by some general principle other than [General Principle]; thus [Thought Experiment] doesn't actually give us reason to endorse [General Principle].
- You might present a counterexample to one of the premises. For example, you might argue that if [General Principle] were true, then that would imply that some other proposition is true; however, that proposition is actually false, so [General Principle] must be as well.
- You might provide reasons for rejecting one of the premises. Maybe the supposed judgment about [Thought Experiment] is misguided because the way it is described distorts our intuitions; once we fix the thought experiment, we now have the opposite judgment about it.
- You might draw a conceptual distinction that reveals that [Thesis] doesn't follow from the premises. For example, it might turn out that there are really two different varieties of freedom where the kind referenced by [General Principle] is not the same kind as that referenced by [Thesis]; thus, [Thesis] isn't a particular application of [General Principle] after all.

These are just a few possible argumentative strategies. If you want more ideas, take another look at the assigned readings to see how their authors have gone about objecting to other views.

The Reply

The goal here is to provide the most plausible response to your objection that you think the author could give. In other words, how might they object to your objection? Anticipating their reply is the best way to make your objection more plausible.

A reply to an objection can take a few forms. First, it might contest the truth of the objection by contesting denying the truth of one of its premises. It could do this by adopting any of the strategies presented in the previous section.

Second, it might concede that everything that your objection asserts is true, but that this doesn't actually undermine the part of the argument that you target. In other words, it might argue that *even if everything you say is correct*, [Thesis] (or [General Principle], or whatever part of the argument you are targeting) is still true. This might be because your objection isn't actually relevant to the original argument; maybe your objection only really applies to a principle that is similar to [General Principle] rather than [General Principle] itself.¹ Alternatively, the reply might concede that your objection is relevant to [Thesis]/[General Principle]/etc., but deny that it gives us reason to reject [Thesis]/[General Principle]/etc. For example, the reply might grant that [General Principle] has the very undesirable implication you present, but argue that the many theoretical advantages of [General Principle] outweigh this admitted drawback.

Finally, the reply might concede that everything your objection asserts is true, concede that this gives us reason to reject [Thesis]/[General Principle]/etc., but then argue that your target can be suitably *revised* to sidestep your objection. For example, it might hold that while [General Principle] is false (as

¹ This is what the philosopher Michael Cholbi calls "deflecting" an objection. I'm borrowing heavily from his handout "How Philosophers Address Objections to their Positions."

revealed by your objection), [General Principle 2] gives the original author most of what they wanted from [General Principle] while avoiding your objection.

Assessing the Reply

Your critical assessment of the reply will treat this reply as an objection to your objection. It will then provide a reply to this objection (i.e., a reply to the reply). Thus, everything that has been said in the previous section about replying to an objection will apply here.

General Writing Guidelines

Your goal is to be as clear as possible. Aim for writing shorter, simple sentences that use precise and informative language rather than vague abstractions. Every one of your sentences should display all of the virtues discussed in the Four-Sentence Papers handout: they should be accurate, clear, concise, focused, relevant, and plausible. Avoid vague and general language when you could say something more specific and informative instead.

Two great things you can do to enhance clarity are define your terms and provide examples. Any technical term should be defined. The same is true of any language you use that might be unfamiliar to someone who has never taken a philosophy course. You can then illustrate your ideas by providing hypothetical (or actual) examples; these cases help make your abstract ideas concrete.

You also want to make sure that the structure of your argument is clear. The reader should always be able to determine the relation between each part of the paper and the big thesis, as well as the relation between each part and the surrounding parts. In other words, as the reader moves through your paper, they should be able to easily keep track of what role the part they are moving through plays in supporting the thesis.

This is best achieved by using transition words and signposting terms that clarify how all of your sentences fit together to support your overarching thesis. Here are some useful terms you can use to make the structure of your argument explicit:

- “Thus”/“Therefore”/“Given this...”/“Given that _____, it follows that _____.”/“If _____, then _____.”
 - Used to express that the truth of two ideas is linked such that if you’ve established that one is true, then the other is true also. The reader can’t accept one without accepting the other.
 - Example: “I love animals and wouldn’t do anything to hurt them. Thus, I refused to shoot the deer in our backyard.”
- “However,”/ “While one might think _____, actually _____.”/“But,”
 - Used to deny a proposition that readers might naturally endorse given what has come before.

- Example: “In [Thought Experiment], it seems like we have an obligation to flip the switch. However, we only have that intuition because the case has not been described with adequate detail.”
- “That said,”/“Admittedly,”
 - Used to indicate that what follows is a caveat to what comes before.
 - Example: “Given that all of the best arguments for [Thesis] fail, we have no reason to accept [Thesis]. That said, there might be some better argument that has not yet been proposed, so we cannot conclude that [Thesis] is false.”
- “For example,”
 - Used to indicate that what follows is an example of what came before.
 - Example: “Doctors will prescribe painkillers even in situations where doing so is inappropriate. For example, a doctor once prescribed me Percocet for a stubbed toe.”
- “Further”/“In fact,”
 - Used to indicate that what follows extends the idea that came before.
 - Example: “We, thus, have reason to accept [General Principle]. In fact, we have reason to accept an even stronger version of [General Principle] that declares flipping all switches to be obligatory.”
- “In support of this claim”/“The reason for this is that”/ “To see why this is the case, note that”/“This is true because”
 - Used to indicate that what follows is a reason for accepting what came before.
 - Example: “Many scientists say that crows are smarter than dogs. In support of this claim, they appeal to the fact that crows can successfully complete multi-step puzzles while dogs cannot.”
- “I will present three arguments against this proposal. First...”
 - Gives general structure to your argument.

If you’re finding it hard to fit these kinds of words into your writing, that can be a warning sign that your argument lacks the kind of argumentative structure that a successful paper needs to have.

Finally, you should generally avoid using language like “I think,” “I believe that,” “In my opinion, etc.” Just say what you think, not that you think it. That said, the general use of “I” is fine.

Other Resources

You can find a collection of other philosophers’ guides to writing a philosophy paper at: <https://dailynous.com/2019/01/15/write-philosophy-paper-online-guides/>