Part I

Writing Philosophy

1

Writing a Philosophy Paper

1.1 What is a Philosophy Paper Supposed to Accomplish?

The point of writing a philosophy paper is to demonstrate in writing that you have thought carefully about the issues presented in the texts you have read and to make an argument pertaining to one of these issues. The paper will be better the more carefully you have:

- ☑ read and re-read the texts;
- ☑ thought through the claims made by the author;
- ☑ thought through the arguments offered for these claims;
- ☑ thought through the argument you want to make in your paper; and
- ☑ crafted your paper so that the written expression facilitates the expression of thoughts, as opposed to obscuring them.

Your task is to write a paper that:

- ☑ has a clearly-stated thesis and a clearly-defined structure;
- ☑ makes an interesting argument or develops an accurate interpretation of a text;
- ☑ is supported by adequate and appropriate quotations;
- ☑ explains the meaning of the quotations and the significance of the quotations to your argument, and
- ☑ contains no editing oversights.

An instructor's evaluation of a paper usually focuses on these requirements.

1.2 Choosing a Topic

Philosophy instructors often allow students to choose the topics of their papers. This may not strike every student with equal glee, for not every student is equally taken with the class or the readings. That is fine. Philosophy is difficult and often obscure, and a person does not need to do philosophy to be a rational and reflective person.[1] It may strike others with vertigo if they find the class and the readings particularly fascinating. These students run the risk of picking a topic that is too ambitious for the assignment. So let me offer separate advice for these two categories of students.

1.2.1 Students who have not found a fascinating topic

First, students who are having difficulty finding something interesting to write about are well-advised to ask their instructor for a suggestion. Instructors often ask students what their interests are outside of philosophy. This information helps the instructors to think of topics that will resonate with their students' chosen areas of study. If your philosophy instructor does not suggest anything that moves you, try asking someone from the department in which you plan to major for topics that would be of interest to them if they were taking your philosophy course.

You might be unable to find a thrilling topic, in which case you will have to settle for a topic that simply makes for a good paper. Here, it helps to have paid attention in class, because instructors often tell you what *they* find most interesting or confusing in the texts you are reading. Sometimes they even say during a lecture: "It would make for a good paper if you could make sense out of such-and-such." If nothing suggestive has been said in class, try asking the instructor to suggest a question that would be worthy of appearing on a final exam. Such a question will present a problem that the instructor thinks is difficult and interesting. If you address such a question in your paper, you have a good opportunity to demonstrate your understanding of the texts and the underlying concepts and arguments.

[1] Philosophy as an academic discipline does not have a monopoly in the marketplace of ideas, even if it exercises considerable market power in setting the terms and the standards for many debates and oftentimes offers a superior product.

If all else fails, try approaching an especially sharp colleague in the class, convey your predicament, and ask for ideas. Maybe your colleague considered writing on topics A and B, but decided finally to write on topic A. You may be able to write on your colleague's plan B if three conditions are met: first you must ask for permission to use it (as he or she may have planned to use the idea for a different paper); second, if permission is granted, you must acknowledge in a footnote somewhere at the beginning of the paper that your able colleague Ms. So-And-So kindly suggested the topic; third, you must only use the *topic* – which could be stated in one relatively general sentence – and not any arguments, research, or writing that are not your own original contribution. If the source is acknowledged, borrowing an idea is not plagiarism. But the expression and development of the idea must be altogether your own.[2] If these three conditions are satisfied, the paper meets the criteria for responsible and original academic work. Nevertheless, it is wise first to get approval for your plan before you begin to carry it out, as policies may vary across instructors and schools.

1.2.2 Students who have found a fascinating topic

Students who already think that philosophy is the most interesting thing you could possibly spend your time doing also have difficulty, not in generating ideas, but in focusing on one that will make for a good paper. Papers usually have to be written under certain constraints. You will only have a certain number of days until it is due. You might only have a certain number of pages or words in which to develop your argument. A good topic for a ten page paper may be a disastrous topic for a five page paper. And a topic that is well within your intellectual reach given a month of thinking and writing may be quite beyond your competence if given only three days.

The best way to address the problem of constraints is to identify the argument you want to make and determine what part of it you can develop and defend under the circumstances. The purpose of your paper will be *to defend a certain part of an argument*; it will not be to make the broader, more ambitious argument all in one go. In

[2] See Chapter 6 for further explanation of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

choosing which part of the argument to explicate, consider tackling the most problematic aspect of the broader argument. Focus on the premise or inference in your broader argument that your reader will probably have the most trouble accepting. Explain the broader argument and how this discrete part fits into it. Tell the reader what you intend to accomplish, so he or she knows what to expect from your work.

It is common for an author to state that certain relevant issues and arguments cannot be addressed, because they are "outside the scope of the present paper." This is often a legitimate excuse. But you should not open a can of worms and then tell the reader that dealing with it is outside the scope of your paper. You may decline to treat certain *relevant* issues. However, you will have to explain certain concepts and defend certain inferences in order for your thesis to make any sense or have the slightest plausibility. You may not sweep such essential components of your present argument under the rug.

1.2.3 Supplemental reading ought not to become the primary focus of your paper

Enthusiastic students often do extra reading. This is often an edifying and productive practice, but there are also risks. The first is having your attention prematurely focused on one aspect of a text before you have a good grasp of the text as a whole. The second is picking up technical jargon that it may only be appropriate for professionals to use.[3]

Students who want to be aided but not distracted by extra reading might do well not to take notes on the supplemental text and not to look at that text while writing their papers. If you take notes, it is too easy to think of those notes as something important that has to be incorporated somehow into your paper. But that is not true, given

[3] Of course, learning the jargon is one step in becoming a member of a discipline. But first we read the texts, learn the arguments, learn the historical context of the debate, and only afterwards do we acquire the privilege of using verbal shorthand. It is almost always better to offer an explanation than to use a fancy term. For further discussion of using what I call five-star vocabulary words, see ✐ 25.

that your extra reading should only enrich your reading and understanding of the arguments in the primary text. It is, of course, appropriate to acknowledge in your paper where a secondary source has helped you to think through your own argument.[4]

1.2.4 On better and worse targets for philosophical analysis

It is important when choosing a topic for philosophical analysis to focus on a target that is amenable to critical scrutiny with respect to its argument and the concepts employed. It would be an exceedingly strange project (for the purposes of most academic papers) to subject a love note, for example, to philosophical analysis. Now, there is a subfield of philosophy that studies sex and love, so maybe there is a place for it after all. But presumably the author of a love note has no intention of justifying his or her statements or making much literal sense or employing concepts consistently or employing coherent concepts at all. Showing that its conclusion (if there is one) does not follow logically from its premises or that the concepts employed are incoherent would be like playing the harpsichord with a jackhammer. Usually, your target text was chosen for you by the instructor when he or she made the assignment. But if you are able to choose your target, I would recommend that you focus on cultural artifacts (for example, books, or theories, or doctrines) that are *supposed to be* rationally defensible.

Students should be careful when they undertake *philosophical* scrutiny of political rhetoric for much the same reasons. Sometimes political rhetoric is not intended to rationally persuade, but rather to arouse passions (for example, by bringing some injustice to the public's attention) or instigate action (for example, by urging the public to address the injustice). In order to become virtuous, one's feelings and dispositions must be trained, in addition to one's intellect; and, for this reason, Aristotle argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that political discourse may legitimately aim to engage one's emotional and

[4] For further discussion of the use of secondary sources, see ℓ 45, and for correct attribution, see ℓ 41.

volitional faculties, in addition to one's rational faculty (1984c: II.3.1104b4–1105a17).[5]

Furthermore, Aristotle taught that political and legal rhetoric aims for both rational and affective persuasion: "since rhetoric exists to affect the giving of decisions – the hearers decide between one political speaker and another, and a legal verdict *is* a decision – the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind" (1984d: II.1.1377b21–25). That is to say, the orator builds sympathy and confidence at the same time as he or she builds a case.

While a critical attitude is always appropriate when you are confronted with persuasive rhetoric, it will only be edifying to logically scrutinize the cogency of rhetoric that is presented in the form of a reasoned view. This does not mean that the only engagement philosophers have with political rhetoric is evaluating arguments. Philosophers also study the way that concepts, expressed in words or images, are put to use (and, oftentimes, thereby transformed) in order to affect our emotions, actions or thoughts. However, this sort of project will be more descriptive and phenomenological, rather than formally logical and analytical. This methodological difference is appropriate, for there ought to be some *fit* between the sort of rhetoric you study and the sort of scrutiny to which you subject it. Since philosophical scrutiny is primarily concerned with concepts and arguments – the terms we use to theorize about the world and the justifications we offer to support such theories – you stand a much better chance of writing an interesting philosophy paper if you focus on the philosophical commitments *underlying* political rhetoric and the policies expressed. For the commitments underlying political rhetoric stand a better chance of being rationally articulated and are, thus, more amenable to rational scrutiny.

One common manner of criticizing political rhetoric is to point out contradictions among the reasons offered for certain policies. There

[5] Aristotle (384–322 BC) was a member of Plato's Academy before he served as tutor to Alexander the Great and founded his own school of philosophy. Aristotle's ethics continues to wield great influence. It is fair to say that he invented formal logic and was one of the first natural philosophers whose theories, especially on biology, were informed by extensive observation. Students can expect to read Aristotle in courses on Ancient Philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics. Aristotle is also one of the few philosophers often deemed important enough to warrant an undergraduate course devoted exclusively to his own works.

are three cases to consider. First, if *a policy* is self-contradictory, then we know that it is wrong; for it includes among its commitments two propositions that cannot both be true. Criticism of political rhetoric almost never takes this form, however, because even politicians are usually able to avoid self-contradiction on a single topic, at least in a single breath. Second, if *two policies* are inconsistent, then we know that at least one of them is wrong. If policy A is inconsistent with policy B, then A includes some sentence(s) that cannot be true together with some sentence(s) included in B. This would be the case if, for example, President George W. Bush's policies on terrorism and capital punishment are inconsistent with the sanctity of life ethic that supports his policies on abortion and stem cell research, as Peter Singer (2004) has recently argued.[6] But notice how little we learn if all we know is that two theories cannot both be true together: we know that at least one of the theories is false, but not which one; and, in demonstrating the inconsistency, one does not necessarily explicate the conceptions at stake or evaluate the separate commitments in their own right, which is what primarily interests philosophers. Third, if *one person* expounds two theories that are inconsistent, then, in addition to knowing that the theories cannot both be true together, we have good reason to think that the person is untrustworthy, because the information he or she propounds is corrupt. But do we learn anything about the conceptions or commitments at stake by impugning the source?

The argumentative strategy whereby one shows that one's opponent has contradicted him- or herself is an *argumentum ad homimem* – an argument against the person.[7] Yet, in this case too, there is usually

[6] See especially chapter 3. I only mention Singer's book as an example of diagnosing inconsistency, not to critique it or recommend it.

[7] *Ad hominem* arguments are often fallacious. However, they are appropriate in dialectical settings where the credibility of a person figures among the reasons others have to accept his or her statements as likely true. Consider the example of an attorney arguing that the testimony of an expert witness should be excluded from trial because the expert testified to an inconsistent thesis in a different trial one month before. This argument does not show that the expert's current testimony is false, only that the court has reason to view the expert as an unreliable witness whose testimony may serve as an unstable basis for the jury's findings of fact. Since it is a precondition of testifying at all that the expert's testimony be deemed reliable and that the expert witness be deemed trustworthy, offering an *ad hominem* argument for exclusion of the expert's testimony is cogent. See generally Walton (1998: 280) (vindicating the appropriateness of *ad homimen* arguments, however narrowly circumscribed) and (1998: 220–1) (on attacking inconsistent commitments).

nothing of philosophical interest to be gained from such an argument. Consider an example. Suppose I claim that all humans are mortal and that I am a human, and nonetheless claim that I am immortal. My opponent can point out that I am an idiot, because the conclusion I embrace cannot be true together with the premises I accept. However, showing that I am an idiot does not help my opponent to show which of the statements I made is true and which is false, nor does it explicate any concepts or explain any inferences.

Diagnosing inconsistency is a valuable exercise of critical thinking. It is perhaps the first step in recognizing that an explanation someone has offered is logically or conceptually inadequate and fails to command our rational assent. Notwithstanding the fundamental role of critical thinking in thinking philosophically, *doing* philosophy involves more than logical appraisal. It also requires explanation and development of the relevant concepts, and an effort to justify a better understanding of the pertinent issues.

1.2.5 Papers that *discuss* issues

Papers setting out to *discuss* an issue or a text are already off to a bad start. Consider this: how will you know when you are finished? If the paper has a clear thesis and strategy, then you know that you are finished when you have carried out the final step in your strategy. Discussions are usually concluded when the author (or reader!) gets bored or the author runs out of space.

There are a few omens that signal the rise of a discussion and the fall of an argument. First, if you are explaining Marx's argument for the labor theory of value and you find yourself writing, "Marx *also* thinks that . . . ," stop right there. Why do *other* things that Marx thinks deserve to be discussed in your paper? If these other things are part of, or otherwise illuminate Marx's argument for the labor theory of value, then explaining them may be perfectly germane to your strategy. However, you should resist the temptation to discuss passages of Marx's text or aspects of his philosophy simply because they are important or you happen to understand them or you have something insightful to say about them.

Another omen of waxing discussing and waning argument is: "Marx went on to argue . . ." Again, stop there. Marx probably *went on* to argue a lot of things after making the last argument you have dis-

cussed. But how does discussing them advance your thesis? Do not confuse sequential progression in the presentation of a thesis with logical argument for the truth of that thesis. You should discuss all and only those passages of a text that the reader has to understand in the manner you propose in order to be rationally convinced of your thesis. Sometimes this will mean that your argument about a philosopher's theory will be limited to those passages laying out the author's argument for that specific theory. Oftentimes, however, great insight is to be gained from considering how a seemingly-unrelated aspect of a philosopher's thought is, in fact, integral to the workings of the theory that is the primary focus of your paper. So do not be narrow-minded in developing your thesis. But, once you have identified the thesis you will develop and defend, your paper should be narrowly-tailored to that objective.

1.3 Moving through Drafts

If you are having trouble getting started, start writing anyway. Other than exercising and showering, I know of no better cure for writers block than actually writing. You will inevitably think that whatever you write is garbage, and it may well be. That is fine – throw it all away. The point is to get into the process, to let the creative sparks fly. I usually have to go through at least one disastrous beginning for each paper I write. Think of it as a mental cleansing process: the surface clutter has to be cleared away for the worthwhile expression to emerge. Once you have had an opportunity for catharsis, put away all of your books, even take a walk if you like, and ask yourself: "What do I want to say in this paper?" You are ready to start writing in earnest when you can answer that question in a few simple sentences.

If you write a first draft of a paper without having attentively read and reread the text or carefully planned out your argument, it would be detrimental to think of your second effort as a second "draft." Especially when a paper is in the early stages of development, it is likely to contain more than one mistake that cannot be adequately remedied without rewriting substantially all of the paper. It may sound inefficient to abandon previous efforts, but I think that rewriting from scratch usually saves time. The biggest waste of effort is trying to salvage pages

just because they are already written, only to realize after hours of shuffling passages around that the paper no longer follows a single, clear strategy. You may be surprised at how quickly you can write a paper once you have figured out your argument.

On the other hand, if you have already solidified your argument in your first draft and only need, for example, to add additional textual support for your interpretation of a philosopher, bolster your premises with additional facts or examples or more carefully express your reasoning, then subsequent drafts will engage in the sort of refining and polishing that is generally associated with a second draft. That is to say, if your first draft qualified as a philosophy paper, then it makes sense to work on a second draft; whereas, if your first draft was actually catharsis, brush-clearing or brainstorming, then it is the better part of prudence to start from scratch with a clear thesis and a well-honed strategy.

1.4 The Only Outline You Need is a Sketch of the Argument You Plan to Make

The structure of your paper is determined by the argument you intend to make. So an outline of your paper is just an overview of that argument. You can construct such an overview by answering these questions:

- ☑ What is the conclusion you want to demonstrate?
- ☑ What are the premises from which your conclusion follows?
- ☑ How are you going to show that your conclusion follows from those premises?
- ☑ How are you going to show that your premises are true?

Sometimes it is helpful to keep track of the passages from the assigned texts that you think it is necessary to quote and explain. As you do so, keep track of what function the quoted passage will serve in your paper. And bear in mind that a passage does not deserve to be quoted in your paper unless something in your argument depends on its existence or meaning. Even the most profound passage in a book does not deserve to be quoted in your paper unless its explication advances your argument.

1.5 The Cardinal Virtues: Logical Rigor and Clarity of Expression

I heard somewhere that the philosopher John Searle[8] once said, "If you can't express a thought clearly, then you've failed to have one." And while it may be apocryphal, as well as hyperbolic, the gist is that if you cannot express a thought clearly, then *no one else will be able to tell* that you have had one. And since you are writing the paper to demonstrate to the instructor that you have thought carefully about the material and have an interesting contribution to make to the philosophical discussion, he or she will not be able to discern this if you do not write clearly. If you are going to have a shot at being profound, then your reader has to be able to grasp your meaning. Obscurity is its own reward.

It is sometimes difficult to write clearly and logically about philosophy. For example, I wrote a thesis as an undergraduate on the French philosopher Jacques Derrida[9] and the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin[10] treating a topic in the philosophy of history. These figures are part of the Continental tradition in philosophy, which is notorious for being about as clear as mud. After I gave a draft to one of my thesis committee members, the professor said something like this to me: "I can't understand this. Now, I'm quite familiar with Continental philosophy and teach it in my classes. So, if I can't understand

[8] Searle is Mills Professor of Philosophy of Mind and Language at the University of California at Berkeley. His research in recent years has focused on explaining consciousness. He has also contributed to the philosophy of language, specifically a development of ordinary language philosophy called "speech act theory." His publications can be found at his website: http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~jsearle/.

[9] Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) was an Algerian-born French philosopher who taught at several French and American universities. He is among the most controversial and obscure recent philosophers and is associated with the philosophy of Heidegger, phenomenology, and "deconstruction." A list of his publications can be found at: http://www.hydra.umn.edu/derrida/jdind.html.

[10] Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a philosopher and scholar primarily of German literature. He is often associated with the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, a group of interdisciplinary scholars concerned with the irrational and self-destructive tendencies of modern culture. A list of his works can be found at http://www.wbenjamin.org/wbrs-biblio.html#I.

something you write, then the problem is with your expression, not my ability to comprehend it. If the final version of your thesis contains anything that I simply cannot understand, then it will not pass." After I picked myself up off the floor, I rewrote the entire thesis, and thankfully it passed. I have never forgotten this admonition because, although it was sobering, I needed to hear it; and I had to agree with it then, just as I do now. Remember that you are writing for highly-educated, widely-read, intellectually curious people who have an intense desire for enriching interactions with their students. But if your expression is unclear and your argument obscure, you undermine the very possibility that this sort of interaction could occur.

You may find it useful, as you are writing your paper, to pretend that instead of turning it in to your instructor, you will be reading it to a wider audience of professors at your college. This will be an audience of smart, intellectually curious people. Yet, it is unlikely that they will understand: (a) any technical jargon; (b) the intellectual context of the texts you are discussing; or (c) the value of the argument you want to make. You will have to define your terms, explain all quotations, justify all inferences, and state precisely the conclusion of your argument. Sometimes you can simulate this audience by showing or reading drafts of your papers to classmates, friends, or family members.

1.6 A Checklist for Spotting Problems Early

- ☑ Have you chosen a topic that:
  a) meets the requirements your instructor set for the assignment; and
  b) demonstrates your grasp of the primary source texts and issues covered in your class?
- ☑ Can you state in three sentences or less exactly what is the point of your paper?
- ☑ Can you explain specifically how your position fits in with the positions of philosophers with whom you generally agree?
- ☑ Can you explain where specifically your position differs from the positions of philosophers with whom you disagree?
- ☑ Can you explain why your view is preferable to the one you are criticizing on the issue(s) where you differ?

- ☑ Can you explain the view you are criticizing in a way that makes it sound like a reasonable view that an intelligent person could hold?
- ☑ Do you understand why the view you are criticizing was an important one to have been voiced, even if you think it is wrong?
- ☑ Can you state what impact you contribution should have, if it is correct, on the debate to which your paper contributes?