

Philosophy Papers

(Some Remarks On How to Write Them)

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Begin With a Question

A philosophical paper should deal with a question. Typically, this question will not so much be answered as clarified, refined, and elucidated. Good philosophical questions begin with “Why,” “How,” “What” or a similar interrogative; or they might simply be yes/no-questions. For instance: “Why can’t particulars be defined?”, “Can particulars be defined?”, “How do our minds relate to our bodies?”, “What is courage?” Of course, answering a philosophical question should require philosophical discussion. Also, of course, the discussion that it requires should be related to the class you write your paper for.

How do you come up with a suitable question? The two most important resources for philosophical discovery are conversation (with fellow philosophers) and reading (classical philosophical texts). So if in a conversation you find yourself in significant disagreement with someone else, or you end up being persuaded of something unexpected, and if the thing you disagree or agree about cannot simply be googled, chances are there is some interesting philosophical question in the background. Likewise, if you notice something in a philosophical text that seems obviously wrong or obscure, or something that is both convincing and new to you, there will be some worthwhile philosophical around.

When I say that you should begin with a question I mean that the paper should begin with a question. You may well first know what you want to think and write about without yet knowing what question you want to answer. We often have certain views about fundamental issues without being aware of their foundations and implications. In a paper, you should relate such views to a problem that they answer to, and ask why this problem should be tackled in this way and not differently. In the course of doing so you might find that the view you started out with was wrong; then you should change it. Or you discover that it really answers a different question; then you should change the question. In any case, the final written version of your paper should start with a clear question, and everything in it should relate to this question. This will make it easier to read the paper and to see what you are doing in it. By the way ...

Keep It Simple

Keep in mind that people rarely read student's papers for fun, and that they might not be as patient with you as with other authors. Do not annoy your reader. Write as clear and simple as possible. Double check for incomplete sentences and other simple mistakes that make for difficult reading. Clarity is the number one most important virtue in a philosophical paper. Avoid obscure phrases, difficult to parse constructions, and long sentences. Make everything as transparent and explicit as possible. Do not force your reader to skim through a paper to locate a reference (e.g. by referring to a diagram, numbered sentence, or acronym that occurred several pages earlier on).

Introduction and Conclusion

A philosophy paper should consist of three parts: Introduction, body, conclusion. In the introduction, you should pose your question, explain what it means, and point out what needs to be done in order to answer this question.

You do not need to motivate the question. What you need to do is explain what is involved in asking and answering it. Also, you do not actually need to *do* what it takes to completely answer the question. Some questions cannot be answered in a single paper. But you should not do anything in your paper that is *not* needed for answering it. Everything in your paper should be tied to your question. There can be a certain degree of remoteness, that is, you may have to establish something that will help with something else that is then useful for getting closer to an answer to the title question. But some such connection should exist for everything you write, and it should be made clear to the reader at some point.

Do not write anything new in the conclusion. The purpose of a conclusion is to make it easier for a reader to see what you aimed at in the paper, what you did in order to achieve it, and what you actually achieved. This is what you should say. Repeat the question, summarize the discussion, and state the result.

The most important part is, of course, what happens in between posing the question and giving the answer (or saying how close you got to an answer). The main body of the paper should consist of one or both of two things: exegesis and argument. Argument is more important. Good exegesis involves argument; good argument need not involve exegesis.

Exegesis

By exegesis I mean that you engage with a text by asking whether there are different possible ways of understanding it, which of them is best, and how the text, read in this way, contributed to your search for an answer to the title question. Whenever you rely on what some other philosopher says, you should make clear how you understand it. There are typically many ways of understanding what philosophers say, and the reader might not be able to follow you unless you point out how you read the passages in question.

Do not quote anything in order to merely agree or disagree with it. Always

discuss what you quote. If you quote a text, your commentary should be at least as long as the text you quote. Actually, it should be at least twice as long. Other things being roughly equal, the interpretation of a text that makes it come out true and convincing is to be preferred. That is, if there seem to be obvious objections to what an author says, you should check whether there is a better way of understanding what they say. If your reading can be changed so that the author is right after all, change it.

Argument

By argument I mean a sort of dialogue in which you state a thesis, raise possible objections, answer to these objections, look for possible ways of rejecting these answers and so on. It is a very good idea to actually talk to fellow philosophers about what you are trying to establish. If you have no one to talk to, write as if you were talking to an imaginary opponent. Write e-mails to yourself and then reply to them, trying to be as critical of yourself as possible.

Things to Leave Out

Some things should only be included if absolutely necessary. Usually you should not include historical or biographical information, unless this information really makes a difference to your argument. If you use diagrams, you should always also state in writing what can be seen in them. They may not explain themselves. Just pretend they are not there and do everything you need also in writing, to make sure no information gets lost. If you formalize an argument using formal notation, make sure you always also state it in plain language. Try to not use footnotes. You may put bibliographical references in parentheses (Jones 1995, p. 6). If you are tempted to write a long footnote, consider turning it into a paragraph. If it does not fit in the main text, chances are it does not actually belong in your paper. Add it to your personal notes but do not bother the reader.