PART I

Approaching Philosophy

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CHAPTER 1

Skills of the Successful Philosophy Student

I. Introduction

Philosophy is a very rewarding subject. It asks deep questions that get at the heart of the human condition. Understanding and appreciating these questions, and their various possible answers, requires a particular set of skills. The successful philosophy student needs to be able to grasp philosophical topics by reading and listening, to present ideas clearly in both writing and speaking, and to reflect on the meaning and significance of it all. Philosophy can also be a challenging subject, in a way that is unlike anything else you have encountered. Success in philosophy requires you to work on these important skills, and, as with the development of any skill set, it takes practice and effort to improve. Developing these skills, therefore, will allow you to get the most out of your experiences with philosophy. You'll also find these skills beneficial in your other courses and in other aspects of your life as well. The world could always use more critical thinkers who have the ability to understand and appreciate complex arguments that are made in support of profound ideas and positions.

In this chapter, we provide a brief outline of the skills that a successful philosophy student needs. Practising these skills will not only increase your performance in philosophy, but also enhance your enjoyment of the discipline. The discussion is divided into two sections: *encountering philosophy*, which contains advice for reading philosophical texts and getting the most out of philosophical lectures, and *doing philosophy*, which discusses ways to develop and communicate your own philosophical ideas, either in written essays or in spoken discussions. The distinction between encountering and doing philosophy is not precise, and there will be much overlap between the two sections, but they should provide a useful starting point for those seeking to improve their philosophical abilities.

Throughout both sections, we focus on five broad categories of skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and reflecting. At the end of each of the main parts of this book, you will have the chance to practise these skills with actual philosophical subject matter appropriate to the topic covered in that part. We hope that you will find these exercises both valuable and enjoyable.

II. Encountering Philosophy: The Skills of Reading, Listening, and Reflecting

Perhaps the most important advice we can give to new philosophy students is that engaging with philosophy, whether through text or a lecture, is an *active* endeavour.

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You need to approach philosophy with a different mindset from the one with which you may approach your other courses. Reading philosophy is not like reading history, chemistry, economics, or any other discipline. Philosophy requires a more active, inquisitive mindset.

When you read a philosophy text, or when you attend a philosophy lecture, you are searching for something. The author you are reading, or the lecturer you are listening to, is trying to convince you of something. She has an important concept that she is trying to explain, or a deep question that she wants you to reflect on, or a critical point that she is trying to convince you of. And instead of simply *describing* what this point is, she is attempting to *explain* what it is, why it matters, and why her perspective on it is correct. That is, she is offering a significant amount of reasoning in favour of her position (and, often, against opposing positions).

This is how philosophy works. Pieces of philosophy, whether they are texts or parts of a larger discussion, are designed to be argumentative. Their author has an opinion on something important, and instead of merely stating that opinion, she is attempting to demonstrate why her opinion is correct. It is critical to understand this fact about philosophical communication in order to be able to engage properly with philosophy.

As a philosophy student reading a text or sitting in class, you are searching for the author's or speaker's key ideas, the point that she is trying to make. You are also searching for the reasons offered in defence of that point, or the specific explanation of the view being presented. It is this reasoning that determines whether or not the author or speaker is successful in explaining and defending her idea, whether or not she is successful in convincing you that her opinion on the topic is indeed correct. In order to even consider the answers to these questions, you first need to identify the ideas being presented, the meanings of concepts involved, the statements of the intended conclusions, and the reasons that are given in favour of those conclusions. Unfortunately, this search is rarely easy or straightforward; this is why engaging with a piece of philosophy requires significant work (and a lot of practice!).

How to Engage with Philosophy

ALWAYS BE ACTIVE

Keep this in mind when you work with a piece of philosophy. Don't just let information pass in front of your eyes and through your ears. To get any value out of a piece of philosophy, you must *engage* with it—you need to actively search within it for the key ideas, concepts, views, and arguments that the author is presenting. One helpful way to do this is to always question what you're reading or hearing. Ask questions like:

- What does the author mean by this term?
- What is the point that he is trying to make in this section/paragraph?
- What is the purpose of this example?
- Why does the author hold this position?
- Is that really a good reason to hold this position?
- Can I think of a reason why someone *wouldn't* hold this position?

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MAKE NOTES WHILE YOU LISTEN

In any good piece of philosophy, the answers to these questions will be there. It is your job to find them. When you're in class, ask yourself these questions as the lecture progresses. Make note of them as they come to you, and see if you can discover their answers. By writing down questions, you are forcing yourself to work with them, rather than simply forgetting about them.

Instead of passively receiving information, you are now actively listening for the important details, and active listening is far more helpful to your understanding of a lecture than simply copying down notes. To listen actively, you must devote your attention exclusively to the speaker: no doodling, no texting, no thinking about what you're going to say next. Pay attention to what is being said, and then write it down in your own words once the speaker is finished. This ensures that you're putting effort into understanding the material, and it helps make you more comfortable and familiar with it. This improves your ability to comprehend and retain the subject matter.

ASK QUESTIONS IN CLASS

If you do not find the answers to your questions, ask the lecturer. Don't be shy. You're looking for something that's very important to your understanding of the material and to your success in the course, and the lecturer is the best person to go to with these questions. She holds the information that you need, so you should be active in engaging with her as well. This also gives the instructor the opportunity to check whether or not you've really understood a point. That's why it's important to phrase things in your own words instead of repeating exactly what the teacher says.

MAKE NOTES WHILE YOU READ

Whether you're reading a philosophy text or listening to a lecture, you want to do the same thing: ask questions and search for answers. Granted, in the case of most philosophical texts, you cannot ask the author directly (it is difficult to get in touch with Aristotle or Descartes); but his or her written record should contain all the answers you need. *Make notes of the questions that come to you as you read*; if you don't find the answers immediately, you should reread the relevant passage. The answers are usually there, but you may need to work to find them.

It's helpful to think of reading philosophy as a dialogue. The author makes a point, you ask why, the author responds. If ever you ask a question that the author doesn't answer, note it as a possible objection to his view—at least, as something to reflect on later. It often takes many readings to fully understand the purpose of a particular passage, and the only way to ensure such an understanding is to read aggressively, to hunt for answers to your questions. If you simply skim over the words until you reach the bottom of the page, you will not receive this benefit. Note that the answer may not come in one sitting, no matter how many times you reread the text. A little bit of uncertainty is natural; take a break and give yourself time to digest the material. When you return to it, you will often find that it is clearer than it previously appeared.

To get the most out of a text, you should read it at least once before class, and then read it once again after. You will often discover answers that you did not see before,

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simply because you have a better grasp of the material. You might finally figure out the answer to a lingering question, or you might reaffirm your belief that your question isn't answered in a satisfactory way. Whatever the outcome, your understanding of the material will almost certainly be enhanced by a follow-up reading after class.

BRING YOUR TEXT TO CLASS

When your instructor is lecturing on a particular piece of philosophy, it is helpful to have the text right there with you. That way, you'll be able to identify where exactly in the text certain ideas are to be found. Make a note of these key ideas. Write in the margins, highlight the text, or supplement your class notes with page numbers and other citations. These simple acts will dramatically improve your ability to understand a complex text because you will be able to cross-reference the text with your lecture notes—which hopefully will now be easier to understand. As a side benefit, when it comes time to write an essay of your own, you'll easily be able to find textual evidence for citation (we'll talk about why this is important in the next section).

TAKE YOUR TIME, AND READ SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY

When rereading a text (or at least a particularly important section), read slowly and carefully. Philosophical writing is technical writing; the details matter. The precise definition of a term or an idea is important. The phrasing of the text is deliberate, not casual. For example, changing an "if" to an "only if" can dramatically alter the meaning of any philosophical position. The arguments constructed in the text are often complex and their conclusions are often profound. You must be careful when engaging with these ideas to make sure that you understand them in the way that they are intended. You should not accept conclusions quickly. Ask questions of the author and reflect on the answers you find. This process of engaging with texts is critical to understanding and appreciating philosophy, and it takes time. It is not uncommon to spend an hour or so poring over even the shortest piece of philosophical writing. You need to take this to heart, and plan your reading and studying time accordingly. Even though that ten-page philosophical essay certainly looks shorter than the three chapters of ancient history you have to read, you may spend the same amount of time (or longer) on it if you are actively reading. It is not uncommon to spend 15 minutes on a single page of a philosophy text, particularly when you are just starting out as a philosophy student learning and practising the skills discussed above.

Working with Arguments

Arguments are the heart of philosophical practice. Whether it's a philosophy text, a lecture in a philosophy course, or an informal discussion about philosophical ideas, arguments are what matter. An argument consists of a claim that the philosopher is making (called the *conclusion* of the argument) as well as the reasoning he gives in favour or in support of this claim (called the *premises* of the argument). You must assess the merit of the claim on the basis of the reasoning provided. But before you can even begin to assess an argument, you must learn how to identify one. To this end, we have provided advice on how to identify arguments in Chapter 2. Identifying arguments is another critical skill that all philosophy students should endeavour to master.

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Another relevant skill is the ability to identify what is essential to the argument, and what is not. Not everything in a given passage is relevant to an argument. To identify what is essential or relevant, start by identifying the conclusion (as described in Chapter 2). Then, work backward: ask yourself, “Why does the author believe this?” and see if you can find something offered in support of this view. When you find the claim that provides support to the conclusion, ask yourself, “Why does the author believe this?” and again see if you can find support for it. For each claim you discover, ask these critical questions; each time, find an answer in the source material. Continue in this manner until you reach a claim that, upon inspection, is taken for granted by the author. This is how you know you’ve discovered a premise. The claims you’ve collected, and only these claims, are the essential parts of the argument.

It’s helpful to take notes as you go through this process. Write out the conclusion, and write out each premise that you find. You’ll end up with a point-form summary that catches everything that is essential to the argument. This makes any future work you do with this material easier, because you can quickly see what the conclusion is and the reasons behind it. These notes will help you in your critical analysis of the argument.

Here’s an example of this method in action. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book 1, Chapter 7), claims that happiness is the ultimate end of human life.

Why does he say this?

First, there must be an ultimate end: “Now since the ends seem to be more than one, while we choose some of them on account of something else, such as wealth, flutes, and instrumental things generally, it is clear that they are not all complete, but it is manifest that the highest good is something complete.”

Why must the best good be complete?

If it wasn’t complete, there would be a “better” good, contradicting its status as best: “a thing that is pursued on account of itself is more complete than a thing pursued on account of something else, and hence that, in an unqualified sense, the complete is what is chosen always for itself and never on account of anything else.”

Why is happiness this end?

We don’t seek happiness for the sake of some other end: “happiness seems to be of this sort most of all, since we choose this always on account of itself and never on account of anything else.”

Why is happiness free from qualification?

Happiness is the only end we seek because of itself, not for the sake of any other end: “while we choose honor and pleasure and intelligence and every virtue indeed on account of themselves (for even if nothing resulted from them we would choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, supposing that we will be happy by these means.”

By constantly asking “why,” we’ve taken Aristotle’s claim and worked it backward to a definition of the “best good” or “ultimate end,” as well as a claim about happiness: namely, everything we do, we do for the sake of the happiness that it ultimately brings us. These are the starting points of his argument. To see how the whole argument works, start at the end and work backward toward the conclusion. Now that you see

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the reasons that Aristotle gave for his claim, you are in a better position to assess whether or not you should believe it.

Reflection: Looking at Reasons For and Against

After reading a number of philosophical works on a similar topic, you will discover that there are many viable positions to take. Each position will have reasons presented in favour of it, which you can identify through the skills just discussed. Each position will also have counterarguments, reasons that other philosophers give for not taking it seriously. These are arguments against the view in question, and as with all arguments there are reasons to take them seriously. Once you've reached this point, the real philosophical work can begin.

The successful philosophy student is able to look at these different positions and *reflect* on the reasons in favour of them and the reasons opposed to them. He is able to assess which side makes the most convincing case by considering the reasons in favour of a view, the objections to that view, the reasons given in support of these objections, and the responses of the original view to these objections. Only by being aware of the various positions, the reasons given for them, and the reasons given against them can you adequately accept and endorse or reject a philosophical position.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF YOUR OWN OPINIONS

This sort of analysis shows the true benefit of the practice of philosophy. By encouraging you to reflect on various positions on a certain topic, as well as the reasons for and against those positions, philosophy allows you to take ownership of your own opinions. Each and every one of us has opinions on many diverse and interesting topics, but not all of us have taken the time to ask ourselves why we hold these opinions. This is what philosophy encourages you to do. We may all have opinions on what is right and wrong, what a just society looks like, whether or not we have free will, and even whether or not we can truly know that anything exists outside of our minds. But most of these opinions came from external sources: from education, upbringing, family members, and any number of religious or cultural institutions. These are the sources of your opinions, but they are not the *justification* for them; they are not themselves reasons why you should hold these opinions. The source of an opinion simply describes how you came to hold it, while the justification of an opinion explains why you *should* hold it. If you are unable to defend, or even to state, the reasons why you believe what you do, then you don't truly own your beliefs.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell (1912) wrote about owning your opinions, and described the practice of philosophy as a form of "liberating doubt." He writes:

> The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the cooperation or consent of his deliberate reason. … Philosophy … is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. … It removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt.

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The Fruits of Reflection: Understanding Why You Think What You Do

Philosophy challenges you to clearly state your position, and the reasons why you hold it. It does so by way of an intellectual challenge. By considering the viewpoints of others who disagree with you, you are forced to explain why they are wrong and why you are right. When you encounter a philosopher with whom you agree, she does you a service by presenting reasons why your mutual viewpoint is correct. She cannot do all of the work for you, because you still must assess the strength of the reasons in favour of your view compared with the strength of the reasons proposed against it, but her supporting reasons provide you with a helpful head start. Through this critical analysis, you discover the reasons why people hold the beliefs that they do, as well as the reasons given in opposition to those views, and ultimately you are led to your own conclusion. Even if you arrive back at the same opinions that you started with, you will now be able to confidently explain why you hold these opinions, why they are correct, and why opposing viewpoints are incorrect. The fruits of this intellectual labour will be that you now truly own your opinions, that you have earned the right to hold them. This is the ultimate goal of the practice of philosophy, and it can be attained by practising the skills of reading and reflection that we've outlined above.

John Stuart Mill (1859, 67) makes a similar point about the need to consider alternative points of view:

> He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. … Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. … He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them. … He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form.

Not only does understanding other points of view open your mind to possibilities that you may not have considered, it makes you better equipped to critically assess these views. In addition to forming your own opinions and working to see why they are right, you are also able to see why other positions are wrong. This is a very important reflective skill to practise when you encounter a philosophical viewpoint, whether you agree with the viewpoint or not.

EXERCISE: CONFLICTING VIEWS

Try the following exercise:

- Choose a divisive issue or problem.
- Describe or write down two opposing positions on it.
- Determine in what ways the two views differ.
- What might one position say about the other?
- What could the other position say in response?

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You should be able to reconstruct this dialogue, even if it never happened, or it only went one way (for example, sometimes authors write critiques of each other that do not get a response). By asking these reflective questions about the philosophical ideas that you encounter, you will become a more effective (and more enlightened) philosophy student.

QUICK TIPS ON ENCOUNTERING PHILOSOPHY

1. Take notes actively: highlight key terms, connect ideas, identify arguments, write questions in margins.
2. Take point-form notes of arguments as you encounter them in your readings.
3. Seek out definitions of technical terms, but don't rely only on the dictionary.
4. Always ask yourself "why" after every claim an author or speaker makes, and look for her reasons.
5. Consider secondary sources (for example, a philosophical encyclopedia) to aid your understanding of a piece of philosophy, not to replace it.
6. Read the material once before class, and reread it after class.
7. Bring your textbook to class to help connect the lecture with the source material.
8. Listen actively during a lecture and phrase notes in your own words.
9. Don't be shy. Ask a question if you don't understand something.
10. Approach philosophical discussions with an open attitude; be receptive to new ideas.
11. Think critically about the reasons given in favour of the ideas you encounter.

III. Doing Philosophy: Writing, Speaking, and Listening

Once you have had some exposure to basic philosophical ideas, and some time to practise your listening, reading, and reflecting skills, it's time to work on presenting your own philosophical ideas. This is usually done in the form of an argumentative essay, but the skills that we are going to talk about here will also help you become more effective in conversation and debate. This section deals with communicating ideas clearly and effectively. The purpose of presenting philosophy, whether in writing or speaking, is to express your ideas to your audience and convince them that you are, in fact, correct. The more effective you are at doing this, the more successful you will be as a philosophy student.

Remember what we talked about in the previous section: The point of a piece of philosophy is to present claims and argue for them, and your job as a reader is to uncover and critically assess those arguments. Now, when it's time for you to present a philosophical idea, the roles are reversed. This can help you understand what you need to do, and how to do it well.

Most of the philosophical work that you do will consist of written assignments (essays, etc.), and in this section we will explain the skills necessary for success in these projects. But you will also need to be able to defend your ideas in conversation, so we will discuss speaking and listening skills as well. Keep in mind, though, that

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many of the skills we develop here are useful for both writing and speaking: the skills of argumentative writing and clear exposition apply equally well to philosophical conversation.

Presenting Your Arguments: Don't Be Afraid to Be Bold

When writing a philosophical essay, you're going to be doing what the authors you have read have been doing: You'll have something to say on a topic, which is your thesis, your big idea, the whole purpose for writing the paper. Your job is to convince your audience that your thesis is correct. It's not enough to simply state what your thesis is—that's easy, anyone can state a view; you must present reasons why your thesis is correct. That is, you need to present an argument for your thesis, a collection of reasons that support your thesis.

The first step in writing a philosophical paper is determining your thesis. What is it that you want to say? Your thesis should be a declarative sentence, such as "Descartes' mind–body dualism is unable to overcome the problem of mental causation," or "Lying is always morally wrong, no matter what the circumstances." Take a stand on an issue; don't be afraid to be bold.

The most common mistake students make is to not have a thesis at all. Saying "In this essay I will discuss the views of Aristotle on moral virtue" doesn't tell your reader anything valuable at all. What are you going to say about Aristotle's theory of virtue? Tell your reader up front. Even better, briefly state your reasons for holding this thesis. Our example could be better presented as "Aristotle's theory of virtue is unacceptable because it relies too heavily on the idea of 'reason' in moral deliberations." Now the reader knows what you are going to say, and the broad outlines of why you are saying it.

Another common mistake is to have a "wishy-washy" thesis, such as "Some philosophers think that the world is purely physical, while others think that it is purely ideal, and each side has valid points." (It's even worse when followed by "and we will never be able to know who is right.") This thesis statement doesn't take a stand. It shows that you, as the author, weren't able to decide which set of arguments you found most convincing.

The last pitfall to avoid is the "rhetorical question" thesis. Putting forth a thesis like "Can we really believe that human beings do not have free will?" makes it unclear what point you are trying to get across. The intent of a rhetorical question thesis is to get your audience to think that the answer must be "no," but this opens the door to an opponent saying, "Yes, we can believe that human beings do not have free will." If you want to say that humans have free will, then simply come out and say it: "Human beings have free will, and the denial of this is logically contradictory." Now you've taken a stance, you've put yourself out there.

Your thesis is the most important part of your essay. It is, in fact, the reason you're writing the essay: to convey your idea and convince your readers that you are correct. Your thesis also serves to guide the rest of the essay because it tells you exactly what you need to include. Remember that you are trying to convince your reader that your thesis is correct, but before you can do so, he must understand what it is you are saying, and why it matters.

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An Example: Descartes' Mind–Body Dualism

Let's take an example from earlier: "Descartes' mind–body dualism is unable to overcome the problem of mental causation." ("Dualism" refers to the belief that the world consists of two distinct kinds of entities, such as mind and matter.) Even if you don't yet understand this, you can still identify what needs to be included in an essay for which this is the thesis. (In fact, it's sometimes helpful if you *don't* understand, since that makes it easier to put yourself in the place of your reader and determine what she will need to know.)

STEP ONE: CLARIFY THE ISSUE

The first thing you'll need to explain is Descartes' mind–body dualism: what is this view, why is it significant, and why does Descartes hold it? That last question is important because, if you're going to argue that this view is flawed, you will want to present reasons why anyone would hold it in the first place. This gives your reader a sense of the dilemma involved when there are good reasons to hold a view, but also flaws. (Think back to what we said about reflection: help your reader to consider the reasons for and against any given view.) Next, you'll want to explain what the problem of mental causation is, and why it would be a problem for a view like Descartes'. All of these points are necessary for understanding and appreciating your thesis, so you'll want to present them in an explicative summary (which summarizes not only *what* an author says, but *why* he says it) before you even begin to comment on the significance of the problem. Finally, and most importantly, you'll want to make a case that Descartes' dualism is ultimately undermined by this problem.

STEP TWO: FIND REASONS FOR YOUR THESIS

It is at this stage that you need to develop reasons in favour of your thesis. Doing so lets you determine what exactly your argument is. The process is very similar to identifying arguments in a piece of philosophical writing. Ask yourself why you hold this view and why it is correct. You should be able to provide an answer to this question (ideally, more than one). For each of these answers, ask yourself, "Why is *this* correct?" and provide reasons in favour of the claim at hand. Work backward until you reach a point that your reader will accept as true without argument. In our Descartes example, you may work your way all the way back to the very definition of his mind–body dualism (as presented in the text and supported with a quotation). No one will challenge you at this point, so you can stop and take this as the starting point of your argument. This process is how you develop your argumentative structure. You'll end up with a thesis and a series of claims in support of that thesis.

STEP THREE: WRITE AN OUTLINE

With all of these points in hand—the points that you need to include in your explicative summary, your thesis, and your arguments for your thesis—you can now create an outline, the most important step in writing an essay.

Write out, in point form, everything you need to say. For the summary, this is straightforward: list the ideas that your audience needs to know in order to under-

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stand and appreciate your thesis. It is helpful at this point to include references to the text that deal with the topics you are summarizing. (This is why it is helpful to aggressively underline, highlight, and take notes when reading.) Make sure you present everything you need and nothing more. Viewing your essay as a series of point-form topics makes it easy to determine whether a particular point needs to be included or not. For each point, ask yourself: "Is this point necessary to understand and appreciate the thesis?" This helps you avoid the pitfall of writing a "book report," in which you simply summarize *everything* that is going on in a particular piece of philosophy.

Next, outline your argument. When you went through the process of identifying the reasons you have for holding your thesis, you eventually reached a point where you relied on uncontroversial claims that the reader will accept without argument. This is where you want to start your argument. Often these claims match up nicely with the summary you have just presented. For example, if your argument about Descartes' mind–body dualism begins with a definition of mind–body dualism and moves on to point out a contradiction, you should include this definition (along with textual support) in your summary. Use this to segue into your argument.

Take each point in your argument and write it out in a clear, organized progression. Doing this will let you assess whether or not your case is convincing, and it will also let you see if you've included anything that you don't need to, or if you haven't included something that you should include. The last point in your list will be the thesis itself.

STEP FOUR: CONSIDER THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST YOUR VIEW

Once you've finished making your argument, you can strengthen your position by considering possible responses from opposing views. It is always beneficial to consider alternative positions. Sticking with our current example, ask yourself, "How would Descartes (or anyone who accepts the dualist position) respond to this argument?" This is a wise thing to do because often your readers will be asking themselves the very same question. Attempt to come up with a possible objection to your view, and present it as clearly and favourably as you can. Then, most importantly, respond to that objection from your point of view. If you are able to deal with a common, powerful objection to your view, then your position will look much more convincing to your reader.

STEP FIVE: CREATE AN ESSAY FROM YOUR OUTLINE

With an outline in hand, the process of writing is made much simpler. In fact, the bulk of the work is already done at this point. All you need to do is to take each point in your outline and expand it into a full paragraph, defining terms, presenting textual evidence, elaborating on the topic, etc. The reason you should do this is that paragraphs serve to separate your ideas, making it easier for your reader to identify them. Generally, each point in your outline should become its own paragraph, the goal of which is to explain and establish that point. Doing this ensures that each paragraph is focused and keeps you from wandering off topic. Remember, your job is to convey an idea to your reader, so you want to make it as easy to understand as possible. Outlines are very helpful in achieving this clarity.

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After a little more work, here's what an outline of this paper on Descartes' mind–body dualism could look like:

ESSAY OUTLINE: DESCARTES' MIND–BODY DUALISM

1. Introduce the problem: to understand the relationship between mind and body
2. Descartes' view: mind–body dualism (*the "what" of the explicative summary*)
   - Explain "dualism"
   - Mind and body as separate substances
   - Quotes from sixth meditation
3. Why Descartes holds this view (*the "why" of the explicative summary*)
   - Argument 1: mind and body have different properties
   - Argument 2: mind and body are separable in thought, so are separable by God
   - Argument 3: body can be doubted, mind cannot
4. Problem of mental causation (*present your argument*)
   - Body is physical, mind is non-physical
   - Physical things can only cause, and be caused by, other physical things
   - Hence, mind cannot causally interact with body
5. Descartes' rebuttal (*consider an objection*)
   - A non-physical mind can influence a physical body by way of the pineal gland
   - Quotes from the *Treatise of Man*
6. Response
   - The pineal gland is just more physical matter
   - Any solution to it would make the mind susceptible to the skepticism of first meditation
7. Conclusion: the problem of mental causation is unavoidable for Descartes' mind–body dualism

Turning this outline into an essay involves taking each bullet point and expanding it into a full paragraph. The outline structure ensures that all the necessary ideas are there (and no unnecessary ideas are included), and that the ideas can be easily separated into paragraphs.

A Note About Quotations

When presenting your ideas, it is essential to quote directly from the primary text. This shows that you understand the material, that you are able to engage with it and find the ideas as they appear in the text. It's one thing to understand a philosophical view; it's another to be able to show where exactly this view appears in a primary source. Using selected quotations is an excellent way to demonstrate your grasp of the material. Quotations alone are not enough, however; you must be able to explain what the quotes say in your own words.

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The passage below provides an example of how to properly quote and explain a philosophical idea—in this case, David Hume's position on the debate between liberty and necessity. The quotation within the passage is Hume's explanation of why debates over free will ("liberty") arise: the disputants haven't specified what they mean by the terms in question, so they don't see that they actually agree with each other.

> Hume, when discussing the classic debate between liberty and necessity, argues that it is merely a verbal dispute: "This has been the case in the long disputed question concerning liberty and necessity; and to so remarkable a degree that, if I be not much mistaken, we shall find, that all mankind, both learned and ignorant, have always been of the same opinion with regard to this subject, and that a few intelligible definitions would immediately have put an end to the whole controversy" (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 63). Hume is saying that if we could provide clear definitions of "liberty" and "necessity," then we could see that each side of the debate actually agrees with the other side. This simple act of clarification would resolve a significant philosophical debate.

A passage like this demonstrates an understanding of the key idea (that the debate over liberty and necessity is merely verbal, that everyone would agree if they could just come to a common understanding of what the key terms mean), and includes an appropriate quotation to show that Hume did indeed hold this position.

Using quotations in this way demonstrates that you truly understand the material, and that you're not just searching for keywords in the primary text. It's also important because quotations alone carry no authority. Simply quoting Plato's views on morality doesn't make those views right, even though he is a very famous philosopher. Provide a relevant selection of what he says on the subject, explain what it means, and why he says it—that's the recipe for demonstrating a solid understanding of a philosophical viewpoint. Quotations also serve the rest of your work by showing that the philosophers actually say what you claim they say, and they provide the raw materials for critical analysis.

And Finally …

Write slowly and carefully. We mentioned above that philosophy is technical, and that you need to read it as such. You also need to write it as such. Take your time, explain things clearly, and assume that your audience has no prior knowledge of your topic. You want to be precise enough to eliminate any potentially misleading interpretations of your ideas. You also do not want to smother your audience with irrelevant information. When you're reading something that contains a lot of extraneous material, you can get lost easily. The same is true of your audience, and you need to write with this in mind. Clarity and brevity are the virtues of good philosophical writing. To help with clarity, use simple language (with the exception of technical terms that have a precise meaning). Don't try to sound smart by using fancy words. Remember that your goal is to get your audience to understand what you're saying and why you're saying it. The language you use is merely a tool to that end, so use the most effective tool possible.

Finally, here are a couple of skills to work on if you are struggling to communicate your ideas. We sometimes communicate better orally than we do in writing, so when

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writing a paper, it's helpful to do two things. First, print out a copy of your paper and read it aloud. If you do this, you will more easily notice any grammatical mistakes that you made and any awkward sentences. Second, if you're struggling to communicate an idea, it's a good idea to simply start talking about it. Say out loud what you want to say, and write that down. You'll find that the sentences you produce in natural conversation are often much clearer and easier to follow than those that you produce through writing alone. This leads to clearer, more eloquent writing that will convey your ideas much more effectively.

Another way to achieve clear and effective writing is to have someone you know read over your paper once you've completed a draft that you're happy with. See if they are able to figure out what you are trying to say, and why you are saying it. If they can, then you've done a good job in conveying your ideas; if not, then you'll know which areas need improvement. You can also try this trick: once you've completed your "final" draft, print out a copy and leave it alone for a few days. Spend some time thinking about other things, then return to the paper and read it over again. Reading this paper "fresh" will help you spot poorly written sentences, confusing ideas, spelling and grammatical mistakes, and any number of other errors that you missed the first time around.

Philosophical Conversation: Speaking and Listening Skills

The skills that make for good philosophical writing also help you engage and succeed in philosophical conversation. Further, successful philosophical conversation is important preparation for good philosophical writing. In a good philosophical conversation, you can work through problems involving the order and exploration of points in your argument and receive immediate feedback. Finally, philosophy ultimately is an exercise in dialogue: we learn to do philosophy not by writing it but by talking it through. A philosophical conversation, then, is an opportunity to practise conveying your ideas to a dialogue partner (a classmate, friend, teaching assistant, or your instructor) in a way that is clear and convincing. Such conversations have the same argumentative goals as writing, but there is an added dimension of social interaction that requires additional skills.

It's important to stress that a philosophical conversation is a dialogue, not a fight. As the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas emphasizes, the purpose of dialogue is mutual understanding. Your goal is not to "win" the debate or to shut down an opposing voice. Rather, your goal is to engage in a cooperative discussion aimed at finding the truth of the matter. Thus, philosophical conversations involve not only speaking skills but active listening skills as well, some of which were discussed earlier and will be developed in more detail here.

Understanding Gives Credibility

When it comes to conveying philosophical ideas, you need to speak clearly and carefully. The precise wording of a philosophical argument or a key definition matters a great deal, so you should make sure that your dialogue partner hears it correctly. This is another reason why we recommend writing down key ideas in your own words: it's

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much easier for you to communicate an idea when you've already rephrased it in language that you're comfortable with. This helps you to understand it, and understanding gives you credibility. When people speak on a subject, it becomes clear very quickly whether they understand what they are talking about. We have all had the experience of listening to someone who lacked credibility because they didn't fully understand what they were talking about. The result is that what they say doesn't ring true. Also, be brief. No one enjoys a boring, long-winded explanation when a simple, succinct one would suffice.

In addition to ensuring that your ideas are clearly communicated (because you understand them yourself), for the conversation to be productive, it is equally important that your dialogue partners understand them. Here you will find it helpful to "check in" with them, to see if they still follow what you are saying or if they have any questions. They can also take the opportunity to repeat your claims in their own language, to see if they really do understand you. (You will also find this a very helpful thing to do when you are listening to them.) By doing so, you are giving them the chance to practise their own active listening skills, which, when we discussed reading and listening to philosophy earlier, were highlighted as effective skills for understanding philosophical positions. You are also keeping your listeners engaged by checking in with them. This reassures them that their attention and understanding are important to you. Think of them not as your audience, but as your dialogue partners. If you practise this, you'll do better at communicating your ideas.

Along with these verbal cues, you should be alert to any visual cues that your audience is giving you. If people don't understand a point, you may see it on their faces. Take these expressions of confusion as signs that you need to explain your point again. When you do, try to use slightly different language, or present a different example. Don't simply repeat your point word for word: if it didn't make sense the first time, it probably won't make sense the second time. People don't always like admitting when they don't understand something, and this can quickly change a conversation into a defensive and fruitless exchange. So be mindful of this and avoid using a condescending tone. Don't speak to your dialogue partners as though they are not smart enough to understand the perfectly obvious point you're making. Remember: it is your responsibility to be clear, and it is your job to help them understand the point you're trying to make, not to belittle them for failing to do so. As you are starting out in philosophy, we encourage you to practise speaking up when you don't understand something. It is a great way to get past the shame many people feel when they don't understand something. This shame can dishearten them from speaking up and asking a question, or even from taking their studies further. You'll usually find that when you say you don't understand something, others are in the same boat, too. People will usually try to be clearer if asked.

This last point touches on the most important aspect of philosophical conversation: the goal of such discussions is to achieve mutual understanding and to discover the truth of the matter. To do this, following the advice of John Stuart Mill (quoted above), it is important that all sides of the debate be presented clearly and fairly. All parties should be equal participants to the dialogue. This does not mean that all sides are equally correct, but rather that all sides have the same right to be heard. After

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presenting your ideas, give your partners an opportunity to respond. When you do, use your active listening skills to understand their point: ask questions, rephrase their points in your own words, seek confirmation that you really do understand what they're trying to say. In general, be the sort of audience that you would like to have when you're speaking.

By following this advice, you'll create an atmosphere of open, honest philosophical communication. The use of clear and polite speaking skills, as well as empathetic, active listening skills, creates an opportunity for productive dialogue, rather than simple disagreement. You now have a clear avenue for understanding the various sides of the issue, and for applying your critical reflection skills to determine what you should believe about it.

QUICK TIPS ON DOING PHILOSOPHY

1. Remember that the purpose of a philosophical paper is to convince your audience of a certain conclusion, not to simply state facts and convey information.
2. Create an outline of your ideas; your argument is your outline.
3. Ensure that each point in the outline receives its own paragraph.
4. Be sure to consider possible objections to your view that your audience may have.
5. Present only one thought per sentence.
6. Aim for clarity and brevity in your writing.
7. Say out loud what you want to write, and write that.
8. Throw away the thesaurus: don't use big words solely to try to sound smart.
9. When you finish your first draft, take a few days before looking at it again—your revisions will be more productive.
10. Keep in mind that you can use the first person in your writing ("I believe *this*") as long as you provide reasons why you're right ("I believe *this* because …"). Remember: the goal is not to simply say what you believe, but to convince your audience why you're correct, and it is the reasons you give that do this.
11. Try to understand your dialogue partner, don't try to win: discussions are meant to be dialogues, not fights.

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