

# SCHOOL OF PHILOSOPHY AND ART HISTORY

## WRITING PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAYS

### Aim of these Notes

These notes assume that you have already read 'Authorship and Plagiarism' which is available when you first access FASER and from the following weblink:

<http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/facultyadvice.html>. They provide advice on authorship, what is plagiarism, how to avoid it and give some useful general guidelines on referencing. The suggestions made are really helpful and practical.

The notes below have a narrower aim, which is to help you specifically with philosophy essays. However, they may also be useful to joint degree students who find that they have to write a number of essays on theoretical topics in their non-philosophy modules.

These notes are only guidelines, not rules. They may help you to think about your essay from a reader's point of view (it is important always to bear in mind how your essay will look to the person reading it, and in particular consider whether it clearly communicates what you want to say, without too many unstated presuppositions). Another source of help may be to look closely at the techniques used in essays (your own or others) which have achieved high marks.

### 1. The First Steps

a) You will have to choose a topic and think about the issues it raises. Your *range* of possible topics may be defined by the list of questions provided for the module – but there is always a multiplicity of ways of answering the same question. You should pick a topic that you find interesting and/or important – the strategy of choosing a 'safe' or apparently 'easy' topic which doesn't really interest you usually leads to an inert, uninvolved piece of work which is tedious to produce. *Personal engagement is a great energizer.*

b) When your topic is chosen you will probably read around it a good bit, get together a variety of notes, quotes, fragments of argument, questions, etc., to make sure it is what you want to do.

c) The next stage is crucial. You must choose your essay title (from the list or sometimes in consultation with your tutor, *never* merely by paraphrasing or making up a title) and make sure that you understand what the question is about. This isn't always obvious, even when the question looks straightforward. For example, if you started trying to answer: 'what use did Descartes make of his hypothesis about a malicious demon?' you might begin by thinking that this was just a question about how the malicious demon argument fits into a set of arguments in *Meditation 1*. But you might come to think that the hypothesis is used to raise and address difficult questions about the nature and limits of scepticism. This deepening of your understanding of a question is a sign that you are ready to sketch an essay plan.

d) If your chosen title has more than one part make sure that you think through the point and implications of each part at this stage. For example, if your question is 'What are the principal objections Popper raises for historicism? Can these objections be met by the historicist?', you will need to think through the historicist answer as well as Popper's objections.

### 2. Sketching an Essay Plan

a) This is the stage many people find most difficult and often they put it off. This is dangerous: you won't begin to read and reread really critically, and with purpose and focus, until you have begun to define your writing aims. It is often helpful to realize that there are genuine reasons why this stage is difficult. One reason is that there is usually no obvious structure which a philosophy essay must follow – no equivalent of a chronological narrative or a survey of the empirical literature on a subject. A second reason is that philosophical problems are closely linked so that it can seem that if you are to write about anything you will have to write about everything. (For example, 'to write about the slave boy episode in Meno I shall have to bring in learning theory and so the theory of knowledge and so the question of ontology and so Plato's theory of Forms and I can't do that in 2,500 words – or perhaps at all!')

b) To overcome these difficulties and produce your sketch you are going to have to decide what the structure of essay will be and what you are going to deal with. It helps to think about the latter quite a lot. Since you cannot bring in everything that is relevant, you are going to have to be pretty strict. For example, if you are tackling the Descartes question given above you might initially think: 'I'll need something on the history of scepticism and Descartes' life, the scientific revolution, and the argument of the *Meditations*.' A bit of thought may suggest that you can ditch the first three and be pretty selective about the fourth. As you sketch your essay ask yourself repeatedly: 'do I need this?' If you don't, leave it out.

c) A strategy of being selective isn't enough. You will also need to have some principles for deciding what you will include. In general philosophy essays will ask you to deal with some problem or controversy or a puzzling aspect of some text. This gives you your first principle of selection: to set the context for your reader. This isn't a trivial exercise. It will involve summarizing a position or argument or explicating an aspect of text. But decontextualized summary or explication won't be enough – you've got to try to show why this is the position or argument or text on which you need to focus to answer the essay question you are addressing. This will be easy if your title directs you to a text – harder when it merely poses a question. Setting the context will generally mean that you have to think quite a lot about why the question is significant and what the implications of answering it one way or another may be. Hence your sketch of this part of the essay will often have to be quite full – perhaps even a draft of the entire introductory paragraph. (which, however, you are likely to amend later: see below). You should *not* decide in advance what your conclusion is going to be. One of the points of philosophical essay writing is to weigh the pros and cons; you won't be able to do this in an exciting and interesting way if your mind already made up (although you will probably already have a rough sense of the right direction to go in).

d) Once you've got a focus on the context of your question you are well placed to decide what to do next. This may be obvious from the question asked, but if it is not it may help to organize your thoughts under a set of headings such as:

*Explication*: this could include analysis of argument, textual exegesis, further development of the presuppositions or implications of a position.

*Critical Comments*: This could include comments on the limitations and errors of an argument or approach, or text, or position.

*Constructive Comments*: This could include suggestions of how an argument or a line of thought or approach might be developed in order to deal with some of the limitations you have discovered. Of course sometimes you will think that the critical comments are reason for abandoning a certain approach rather than improving it and your constructive comments might be more like

*Sketches of Alternatives*, in which you suggest how a different starting point or argument or

approach to the problem might be more suitable. Or you may think that you have shown that the supposed problem actually dissolves on closer reflection and hence you will neither make constructive comments nor sketch an alternative, but rather:

*Comment on the Original Problem*, and perhaps suggest why it should not be posed, or not be posed in that way.

At this stage all you need to do is put your points in rough order, perhaps with connecting arrows to remind yourself of back and forward connections you will need to make.

e) The Conclusion: Often your essay sketch won't include detailed conclusions. A short list of points is enough. There is little point in writing out a polished concluding paragraph at this stage. However, it is important to check at this point that the (rough) conclusion you've worked towards is relevant to the question you were addressing and to make sure that you'll be able to show this.

**N.B.: It cannot be emphasized enough that reading extensively around the topic is a vital part of preparing to write an essay. It is only by doing this that you will get a sense of how a philosophical question can be approached in many different ways, just as a philosophical text can be interpreted in different ways. Being aware of debates around relevant issues in the secondary literature will help you to form your own opinion, and will also help you to avoid elementary mistakes, or to present as innovative claims what are in fact commonplaces. You cannot write a high quality philosophical essay simply by offering your own thoughts about the primary material.**

### 3. Writing the Essay:

In many ways you are through the difficult bit. But stamina is important now. As you work through the main body of your essay the following pointers can help.

a) *Explication*:

i) Are you being accurate? There is little point in setting up straw men, or women, to knock them down. So make sure that you've got the position or argument or text you are discussing as accurate as you can.

ii) Don't write without relevant texts to hand. Be alert for cases where different writers use the same term in different senses.

iii) Don't rely on paraphrases but on selective, accurate quotation. But don't restrain yourself: quote either to sustain an interpretation or to provide a target for criticism. But never end up with a collage of quotations. An essay is a piece of reasoning, not an assembly job. Neither quotation nor paraphrase is a substitute for your own explication and reasoning.

iv) If you are convinced that a thinker is assuming something, but can't find a quotation to establish this, give your reasons for attributing the claim to that thinker.

v) Make the attributions detailed enough for your reader to check. (Parenthetical page numbers, when the text they refer to has already been made clear, may be enough)

vi) Only explicate those passages that are relevant to your title: you are writing an essay not a commentary.

vii) Remember that your interpretation should be reasonably sympathetic and try to make good

sense of the author or argument. You wouldn't want to waste your energy dissecting a flimsy, entirely unconvincing position. If you find that you are attributing loopy thoughts to a great thinker put the brakes on. Either you are on the wrong track (and risk sounding patronizing or foolish) or (at best) you have chosen an unpropitious aspect of that thinker and will get more out of focusing on something else.

b) *Critical comments*: Critical comments can be of many different sorts.

i) Does the position, text, argument you are discussing depend on false assumptions? On invalid moves? Is it incoherent? Does it leave out all consideration of things that are pretty important?

ii) As you seek to develop these comments try to be self-critical. Ask: 'what am I assuming in making this comment?' – it is vital to ask: 'what would somebody holding the view on which I'm commenting consider most serious among my criticisms?', and – even more importantly – 'How might they reply to my criticisms?' *Anticipating and warding off ripostes is an essential skill of philosophical argumentation*. Try to notice where and why your comments might be regarded as beside the point.

iii) Don't claim that you have refuted a whole position by a criticism of one set of arguments for the position: there may be other arguments that are more convincing. (Avoid moves such as: 'G.E. Moore's arguments for sense-datum theory are defective, so the sense-datum theory is untenable.')

iv) Both criticisms of arguments and positions and critical commentary on texts are exacting tasks. You will need to develop skill and confidence in both areas. Here are some suggestions for doing so:

Check the way you read and the way in which you keep notes. Are you looking all the time for the most fundamental assumptions and the structure of positions?

Try summarizing the position or argument you intend to discuss. Then check whether your summary does match the original.

Be alert to alternative readings of a text (as stated above, this will require extensive secondary reading). State your reasons for preferring one reading, if you do. Are they textual reasons? Or historical? Or is it simply supported by the most convincing arguments?

If the text appeals to a description of how things are or a reconstruction of an historical state of affairs, try to decide on the role and status of the description or reconstruction. (Ask, for example, whether the author concedes the legitimacy of alternative descriptions and within what parameters). Examine the terms used within the description; often these conceal unspoken ontological, metaphysical, or other kinds of philosophical commitments. *Identifying unspoken assumptions is another key skill of philosophical argumentation*. If you find the description or reconstruction illuminating, try to convey in what way. Whether you are dealing with an argument or a description and irrespective of whether you are ultimately sympathetic or not with the position adopted, you will do well to try to make it sound as convincing as possible (this is what Hegel called 'entering into the strength of the opponent'), because this will make your own response more vivid. But if your improvements amount to major revisions, then they should be signalled as such.

Try reconstructing difficult passages of argument. List each of the premises you find. Then add any other you think required to reach the conclusion validly. (Caution: elementary logic helps here, but this is not a mechanical exercise). Then consider how plausible the premises you've had to add are. Remember that there may be a different and more plausible route to the conclusion.

If you can't reconstruct any plausible argument to a conclusion see whether you can construct a plausible argument for its negation. This may give you new insights.

When you face a difficult passage in a text, check the key terms. Check that the translation, if it is the one, is one which your teacher thinks adequate. When stuck try reading a commentary then go back to the text to compare it with what is said about it. Write your essay referring to the basic text, and not to X's commentary on it. But acknowledge where you have leaned on or significantly disagreed with a commentary.

c) *Constructive Comments*: Try to check that your constructive comments contribute to the position under discussion. Make sure in particular that you don't undermine or reject the very position you are trying to contribute to. (E.g. 'Utilitarianism can be saved from its difficulties by adding to it the Kantian injunction to treat persons as ends and not as means.' A move like this doesn't rescue utilitarianism but undercuts it – better to offer the thought not as a constructive comment but as a sketched alternative.) Constructive comments should not demand new philosophical commitments, let alone ones at odds with the position under discussion. (But sometimes you may want to argue that positions conventionally thought incompatible aren't really so – in that case their combination may be a constructive comment.)

d) *Sketches of Alternatives*: Here you can be bolder. Your alternative doesn't have to move within the terms of the position you have criticized. But you must try to explain what commitments the alternative position has, check that it does address the question on which you are writing, and indicate in particular whether the alternative requires a significantly different construal of the question. But note that a sketch of an alternative must in some recognizable way address the same problem or question as the one addressed by the position you have articulated and commented on. It's like the countryman who answered the motorist who asked how to get to X by saying: 'If I were you I wouldn't start from here' – but not like telling the motorist to go somewhere else. If you don't want to sketch an alternative, you may want to round out your essay by pointing to the implications it has for what are usually regarded as alternative positions.

e) *Comments on the Original Problem*: Very often in philosophical writing it turns out that a certain line of thought doesn't so much answer the question you originally addressed as lead you to ask a (more or less) different question. It is important to be alert for when this happens. It's very obvious, for example, in the case of logical positivists who wanted to take certain traditional philosophical problems off the agenda as meaningless, and were left not giving alternative answers to those questions but (at most) trying to suggest why such questions had been asked perennially. But this type of thinking is widespread in less obvious forms. For example, many anti-sceptical arguments work not by refuting scepticism but by 'defusing' it, that is by trying to show the inadequacies not of the sceptic's answers but of his questions. Wittgenstein's writings are full of moves of this sort. A very clear and penetrating account of some of the implications of answers always being the answers to specific questions is given in R. G. Collingwood's *Autobiography*, ch.5, which deals with 'the logic of question and answer' (Collingwood was a maverick twentieth-century philosophy, still interested in Hegelianism, when this was totally out of fashion in Oxford.) If you discover that your line of thought has led you to criticize not just a proposed solution, but the very question addressed, there are a number of moves you might make. Perhaps you can suggest what you think is the appropriate question – and why – and what should follow by way of an answer from your restatement of the question. Perhaps this is too difficult and you can do no more than suggest why the question you have criticized as misplaced seemed to others a significant philosophical question.

f) *Conclusion*: It's a safe bet that when you get to this point any detailed conclusion you wrote in your sketch or draft will need some revision. It is also a common experience to find at this stage that the first paragraph needs rewriting – if only to point to where the essay (as it is actually written) is

headed and what (as it actually turned out) had to be left out. Check that you reached the destination that you claim you will have reached – and that you show how the destination is related to the essay question. Some people find that the checking goes best if they read the essay aloud.

#### 4. Finally

Remember, it was an essay (which, etymologically, means a test or trial). Don't share the feelings of the (real life) first year student who had difficulties writing on Descartes' arguments for the existence of God because he couldn't prove himself that God exists.

#### 5. Postscript: How are Essays Assessed?

*Here are some of the positive things assessors standardly look for:*

☐☐ Has the writer got a good understanding of the question and its point?

☐☐ Has the writer read around the question and gained an understanding of the literature that he or she has brought to bear on the question?

☐☐ Has the write represented a cogent, well-structured and clearly written case?

☐☐ Is the essay an answer to the question addressed?

*Here are some of the negative things which standardly lose marks:*

☐☐ A confused account of what the essay is about.

☐☐ Any writing that contributes nothing to the answer.

☐☐ Inaccurate accounts of the positions or arguments which are presented.

☐☐ Muddled structure (failure to organize exposition and argument so as to move towards a conclusion), murky prose, gaps in presentation or argument

☐☐ Using windy rhetoric, or sweeping, unsupported generalizations (a common error), or employing technical terms inaccurately. (Just because you are writing on Kant or Hegel or Heidegger you should be particularly careful not to produce a pastiche of their writing. You will gain credit for showing that you understand and can unpack technical terms, as opposed to simply parroting them.)

#### 6. Recommended Philosophical Dictionaries

*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, Oxford University Press, 1996

*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, Cambridge University Press, 1999

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu>) - do *not* use Wikipedia, which is unreliable.