

A Beginner's Guide to Taking a Philosophy Course

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1 Some useful distinctions

“Words are the tools of philosophers and when they are not sharp they only disfigure the material.”

– Fred Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (1981)

1.1 Positions, arguments, objections, and defences

The first important distinction to be clear on is between *positions*, *arguments*, *objections*, and *defences*.

- ▶ A *position* is a view, opinion or theory.
 - E.g. the position that euthanasia is permissible. If its name ends in -ism, it's probably a position. But not all positions have -ism at the end.
- ▶ An *argument* consists of a number of claims (called *premises*) provides motivation for believing in that position, point of view, or theory.
 - E.g. reasons for thinking euthanasia is permissible.
- ▶ An *objection* is a way of rejecting either a position or resisting an argument. Thus, objections come in two sorts:
 1. Objections against a position.
 2. Objections against an argument that motivates a position.
- ▶ A *defence* is a way of resisting an objection.

Some things to know:

- ▶ An objection against an argument, no matter how successful, does not refute the position that it seeks to motivate. It merely undermines *that* argument for the position. But there may be other arguments for the same position.
- ▶ The terms “argument”, “objection”, and “defence” may be interchangeable relative to context. An objection is an argument against a position or argument. A defence may be an objection to an objection.
- ▶ When defending a position, the burden is not to prove the other person wrong, but just to repel the assault.

E.g. if defending belief in God from the atheist, the burden is not to prove that atheism itself is wrong, but just to show that the atheist's arguments in this case are not successful.

Analogy: Repelling enemy invaders doesn't require that you invade them back.

You should expect to see positions and arguments being adapted and refined during philosophy courses in response to objections. Moreover, objections are often refined in response to these refinements. And so on.

1.2 Premises and inferences

Within arguments, it is important to distinguish between *statements*, on the one hand, and *inferences*, on the other.

- ▶ An argument will contain some statements that it takes for granted. These are called premises. They are starting points in the argument.
- ▶ An inference is the act of drawing conclusions from premises.

Here are some useful things to know about premises and inferences:

- ▶ Not all starting points are equally good.

- An argument is good only insofar as it is based on premises the intended audience is likely to accept.

E.g. "All humans are mortal" is a good premise insofar as it is a statement that the intended audience would accept.

"Most people can use magic" is not.

- A common form of bad premise (a "question-begging" premise) is one that is unlikely to be persuasive to anyone who doesn't already agree with the conclusion.

E.g. someone who is trying to persuade the atheist of God's existence uses the argument:

1. The Bible says God exists
2. The Bible was written by God
3. Everything God says or writes is true
4. ∴ God exists.

These premises are question-begging because they would only be accepted by someone who already believes in God. They are of no use in persuading the atheist.

► Not all inferences are equally good.

- Some inferences are impeccable and logically water-tight. These inferences are called *deductive* or *valid inferences*.

E.g. Consider the inference in the following argument:

1. All men are mortal
2. Socrates is a man
3. ∴ Socrates is mortal

This inference is a very good one since there is no possible way that the conclusion could be false while all of the premises are true.

- Some inferences are not logically water-tight, but are nonetheless fairly compelling. In general, there are two types of these inferences: *inductive inferences* and *abductive inferences*.

- * An inductive inference is one that, while not logically water-tight, is made on the basis of compelling evidence.

E.g. Consider the inductive inference in following argument:

1. All the burgers I have eaten from Burgers R Us have been terrible
2. ∴ The next burger I will eat from Burgers R Us will probably be terrible

This inference is compelling so long as I have eaten some nontrivial number of burgers, but it is not immune from error. After all, perhaps all of the burgers that I have eaten from Burgers R Us were made by the same chef. Maybe that chef was just awful at his job and was recently fired and replaced with an excellent burger chef. All of this is possible given the premise and may make the conclusion doubtful.

- * An abductive inference is one that aims to provide a compelling explanation.

E.g. Consider the abductive inference in following argument:

1. A baseball crashed through my window
2. ∴ There were children outside playing baseball

While it might be very reasonable for me to assume that there were children playing baseball outside of my window, perhaps because I live next to a baseball park and there are many neighbourhood children who play baseball there, it is not impossible that my broken

window is the result of a disgruntled neighbour and there were no children at all.

- Finally, some inferences that people make are nonsensical and are just bad inferences.

E.g. Consider the following lousy inference:

1. All men are mortal
2. \therefore All fish can swim

This is a case where the premise is true, the conclusion is true, but the inference itself is terrible.

1.3 Positions, issues, and areas

It's also useful to know the distinction between *positions*, *issues* (or questions) and *topics* (or fields).

- ▶ Positions will be defined with respect to issues or questions.

E.g. the pro-life position is a position with respect to the issue (or question) of abortion. "Abortion" is not itself a position.

To see this: Jamie: "I'm pro-life, what about you?" Sam: "I'm pro-choice. What about you?" Alex: "I'm abortion!" Alex's response makes no sense.

- ▶ Issues are therefore questions on which one can take a position.
- ▶ Areas are clusters of related issues—e.g. ethics is an area, epistemology is an area, etc.—these may also be referred to as fields, subfields, or disciplines.

2 Pedagogical methodology

Many classes at the university level are pedagogically dogmatic. In other words, what you are taught is not to be disputed. Your job is to learn the facts, master the skills or techniques, and then deploy this new knowledge in novel contexts. A philosophy class, however, is typically not like this. The central content is not taught as fact, but is presented for your consideration.

- ▶ During class time, you may be treated a bit like jurors in a court of law. You will hear both sides of an argument, and be expected to make your own judgements.

For this reason, don't be confused to hear the instructor argue for one thing, then, shortly afterwards, argue for the exact opposite. That's part of arguing for both sides.

But this can be hard to follow. If you zone out, you may not realise the instructor has switched sides. So, it is important that you remain engaged in the discussion.

Tip: If you have lost track of the discussion or which side the instructor is arguing for, just ask!

- ▶ At times, you may find yourself vigorously opposed to the view being presented by the instructor. In general, this is encouraged! A big part of learning how to do philosophy is learning how to critically engage with opposing viewpoints. However, it is important that this is
 1. done with politeness, and
 2. with a readiness to move on when the instructor indicates.
- ▶ In a typical paper assignment, you will not be asked to dogmatically present one point of view. But to strongly present both sides of an issue. This may involve:
 1. you strongly presenting an argument,
 2. then strongly opposing it.
 3. Maybe even strongly defending it against this opposition.

4. And, maybe even re-attacking it in light of this defence.

In this way a good paper has a dialectic structure. It presents a sort of conversation between both sides of an issue. See §4 below.

Though philosophy is non-dogmatic, this does not mean that “anything goes”.

- ▶ A guiding rule for all philosophy classes is that some arguments are better than others, some positions are better than others, and some objections are better than others. Your job is to think for yourself and evaluate these intelligently.
- ▶ In philosophy, it is very easy to be obviously wrong or mistaken, but very difficult to be obviously right. So, a good strategy is to aim to, at least, be not be obviously wrong.
- ▶ The belief that “anything goes” may be bad for your grade. It's likely to lead you to write weak, poorly argued opinion pieces, not well argued philosophy papers.
- ▶ Remember that the instructor is not interested in your personal opinion. Instead, the instructor is interested in what you can most persuasively argue for.

Although philosophy courses are not in general dogmatic, some of the content philosophy courses might be presented dogmatically. It may be difficult to decide whether some particular content is the kind you may dispute, or the kind you just have to learn. Some hints:

- ▶ For the most part, the rule is that what's being said is not up for debate. Whether it's right is. E.g. the interpretation of a position (or philosopher, or argument, or objection) is (usually) taken as given, and the question is (usually) whether that position (philosopher/argument/ objection) is right.
- ▶ If it's a position, it's up for debate whether it's correct.
- ▶ If it's an argument for a position, it's up for debate whether it's successful in establishing that position.
- ▶ If it's an argument against a position, i.e. an objection, it's up for debate whether it's successful in refuting that position.
- ▶ If it's a response to an objection, it's up for debate whether it's successful in defusing that objection.

In some courses, however, the question of how a particular philosopher should be interpreted is more central. Here are some rules of thumb:

- ▶ This is more common in *history of philosophy* courses.
Check the name of the class. Whether Aristotle took a particular ethical position is usually more important in a class on “Aristotle” than it is in a class on “Ethics”.
Though “Aristotle's Virtue Ethics” may be discussed in both, in “Aristotle” the question may more often be whether Aristotle was really a virtue ethicist. Answering this involves looking at the text very closely. In “Ethics” the question will usually be whether what we have ended up calling “Aristotelian Virtue Ethics” is the correct ethical position (regardless of whether Aristotle himself really believed it.)
- ▶ Logical and philosophical tools and core concepts are often presented dogmatically. The idea is usually that you use the tools to help decide between positions, arguments, objections, etc, not question the tools themselves.
Some special classes may scrutinise the tools themselves. But in all other contexts you can take the tools for granted.
- ▶ Stipulative definitions are usually not up for debate.
E.g. When Kripke says “By a ‘rigid designator’ I mean...” it's Kripke's term and he gets to say what it means. Whether his definition is coherent, however, is a fair question. As is the question of whether it really helps Kripke reach the conclusions he favours.

- ▶ If you aren't sure whether a particular piece of course content is up for debate, ask. It's one of the best questions in a philosophy class.

The new philosopher may feel that the instructor is being deceptive, in that s/he argues for a position that, later in the course, s/he conclusively refutes. S/he may use arguments that, later in the course, s/he shows to be fallacious.

A natural question: Why bother to present a bad view? Why use a bogus argument?

- ▶ Partly because the instructor's job is to present all viewpoints as powerfully as s/he can.
- ▶ Partly because success in the class means knowing not only which theories and positions are most promising, but knowing why. This means knowing:
 - What the position's natural competitors are.
 - Why the natural competitors fail.
 - Why they fail despite the best arguments of their proponents. Which means knowing what the best arguments are, and why they fail.
- ▶ Partly to give the student the opportunity to repair an abandoned position or argument, by showing where and why it was abandoned.
- ▶ Partly for historical reasons. To see how certain viewpoints and arguments emerged and how they were historically motivated, even if they were later rejected.
- ▶ Partly for pedagogical reasons.

Even though the earliest versions of an argument or position are often the most flawed, they are also the most intuitive and easy to understand. It makes sense to present them first.

You can understand why later versions have certain complexities by learning why they were added to earlier versions to patch up flaws.

Many instructors think that it is a useful exercise for the student to get "target practice", by finding the fault in an argument or position herself, before it is revealed in class.

The instructor may defend a position vigorously against your objection even though, later in the course, the instructor says that your objection was essentially right. What gives?

- ▶ Though your objection may be essentially correct, the instructor, on behalf of the position you are attacking, may exploit weaknesses in your presentation to avoid the central thrust of your point. It's your burden to make your point in a way in which it won't be easily evaded (and this is an opportunity to practice.)
- ▶ There may have been historical attempts to resist your objection, that the instructor is presenting. To complete your point, you need to discharge these mistaken responses.

3 How to interact with others in a philosophy class

Since philosophy courses are somewhat unique in their approach, you might be unsure about how you should behave in class. Here are some useful tips.

3.1 Asking questions

Asking a question when you don't understand is a sign of intellectual maturity and personal confidence.

- ▶ This kind of question is also the most helpful for other students and for the instructor.
- ▶ Questioning-for-understanding is distinct from questioning-whether-it's-right. Both kinds of question

are important but the former takes priority.

- ▶ If you are not following an in-class discussion between a student and the instructor, interrupt it to ask for clarification. Requests for clarification always have priority.
- ▶ If you realise that, to understand the current point, you need to go over something from earlier in class, ask for a reminder of the earlier material and how it relates to the current point.
- ▶ Sometimes the material may seem so perplexing that you don't even know how to formulate a clear question. Don't struggle in silence. Tell the instructor that you are missing something and ask to go over the main point again.

It may help, if you are not sure what your issue is, to review the "good questions to improve understanding" below to see if you recognise the kind of question that's bothering you.

Some good questions to improve understanding:

- ▶ With respect to a position: What is the position, exactly? What is the argument for it? Against it?
- ▶ With respect to an argument: What is the argument, exactly? What position is it for/against? Do I understand that position? If I don't, is that why I don't understand the argument?
- ▶ With respect to an objection: What is the objection, exactly? Is it against a position (which position?) or an argument (which argument?)? Do I understand that position/argument? If not, is that why I don't understand the objection?
- ▶ With respect to a defence: What is this a defence of? What objection does it attempt to repel? Do I understand the original objection? How does the objection work, and how does the defence work against it?
- ▶ With respect to a concept or tool: How do I use it? What is it for? How does the concept or tool figure in the argument/position/objection?
- ▶ With respect to an issue: Why do people care about this issue? What's at stake here? Who are the potential winners and losers?
- ▶ Is there a *substantial* issue here, as opposed to some confusion over concepts or the use of words? Are people just talking past one another, or are they disagreeing about the way the world is?
- ▶ If there is a substantial issue here, how can it be decided? What kind of evidence, or argument, is required? Is that kind of evidence, or argument, being provided?
- ▶ Is this piece of course content up for discussion and dispute? Or is it something we are taking for granted, that I have to learn?

3.2 Dealing with disagreements

Tips for in-class/office hours disagreements with the instructor, and with others:

- ▶ Go for it. The students that get the most out of the class are those that engage the instructor, and one another, in good-natured adversarial discussion.
- ▶ Be ready to be persuaded, or at least to retreat, in the face of a strong argument. Don't stubbornly stick to your point when it isn't working out.

However, you may sometimes feel that your opponent (including the instructor) is wrong, but you can't quite say how. In that case, hang onto your intuition, but retreat-and-reformulate.

- ▶ Trust your intuition, not your vanity.

If you sense something sneaky about your opponent's argument (including the instructor's) some slippage in the use of words, or some way in which s/he is misinterpreting your question, that's

intuition. Follow that intuition and work hard to reformulate your point, retreating temporarily if you need more time.

If, on the other hand, you just feel slightly embarrassed at your point not working out and you want to continue the argument until you win a point and save face, that's vanity, and is a waste of everyone's time.

- ▶ Don't feel bad at a point not working out. It happens to everyone and it is often how progress is made in philosophy.

By attempting to defend a position and then later realising that the position is not feasible on the basis of the failed defense, we can learn that a particular defence of a particular position will not do. If the position is to be retained, then a new defence will need to be established. This is progress.

- ▶ Formulate your argument in writing. Perhaps email the instructor. The instructor may not always have time to respond to an email, but sometimes will, and it is always a useful exercise to try to write what you think.
- ▶ Go to office hours and make your point (again).

4 Writing a philosophy paper

Remember that part of your grade is show the grader that you understand the material. To do this, don't write as if your instructor is your audience. It will lead to you taking-as-understood things that you need to show you understand. Instead, try to write a paper for a smart friend who has never taken a philosophy course, defining all the terms you need to as you go.

- ▶ Don't just expand on your opinion. Provide a strong argument for some position regardless of whether it aligns with your opinion.
- ▶ Be charitable to the opposing view and present both sides.
- ▶ That means telling your reader how someone might object to your argument, and how you would respond to that objection.
- ▶ Remember that though it's counterintuitive to write against your own position in a paper, your argument is more persuasive when you tell us how you would deal with difficulties and opposition.
- ▶ Read your paper aloud to yourself or a friend. This can help significantly with grammar and typos.
- ▶ Except for the most technical classes, it's a good idea to get a smart (critical, brutally honest) friend, not a philosophy major, to read your paper before you submit it. If they can't understand it, that's a good indicator that it isn't sufficiently clear.
- ▶ Don't try to be "deep". Try instead to be clear.

4.1 Resources

For more guidance about how to write a philosophy paper, consult the following documents:

- ▶ G.J. Matthey: hume.ucdavis.edu/matthey/phi001/paphints.html
- ▶ Peter Horban: www.sfu.ca/philosophy/resources/writing.html
- ▶ Jim Pryor: www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html
- ▶ Elijah Chudnoff: philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/guide_to_philosophical_writing.pdf