

A GUIDE TO

# PHILOSOPHICAL WIRING



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*By Elijah Chudnoff*

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

A guide to philosophical writing might make its dominant focus one of two quite different things: the process of philosophical writing or the product of philosophical writing. On the one hand, there are the activities involved in producing some bit of philosophical writing. A guide that focused on these activities might say things like: ‘Don’t wait till the last minute!’ ‘Make an outline.’ On the other hand, there is the bit of philosophical writing itself. A guide that focused on the product of philosophical writing might say things like: ‘Your paper’s thesis should be stated by the end of its introduction.’ ‘You should always consider possible objections to what you argue.’

A similar distinction applies to many different types of guides. A guide to model airplane making, for example, might focus on the steps leading up the production of a model airplane (the process) or it might focus on what it is that those steps lead up to (the product). I don’t think a guide that described in great detail what a model airplane should look like would be very helpful. We already know what one should look like. We want to know how to make something that looks that way. In this case, then, it is wiser to focus on the process. That’s what would be most helpful.

When it comes to philosophical writing, however, the opposite is true. For any type of written work it is true that you shouldn’t wait till the last minute and that making an outline is useful. A guide that told you these things wouldn’t tell you much about philosophical writing. Philosophical writing is distinctive because of the character of bits of philosophical writing—the dialogues, papers, and books you will read in your classes—not because of how it is produced. And while we all start out with a pretty good idea of what a model airplane should look like, it is far from true that we all start out with a pretty good idea what a bit of philosophical writing should look like. In fact most of us start out with no idea or a positively harmful idea of what philosophical writing is all about.

The aim of this guide is to help you to develop a good idea of what a philosophical paper should look like. While dialogues are fun and books are impressive, what you will write are papers. These will range from 2 to 30 pages in length. And in them you will defend a focused thesis by developing a more or less extended piece of reasoning in favor of it.

*Five features characterize every philosophical paper:*

- Each paper has a **purpose**. This is what the author sets out to do and why.
- Each paper has an **audience**. These are the people who will find the paper interesting and helpful.
- Each paper contains some **argumentation**. These are the local bits of reasoning that serve the purpose of the paper.
- Each paper has a **narrative**. This is the global structure into which the arguments are arranged.
- Each paper has a **style**. This is the manner in which the paper is written.

Take any paper. You can ask: 'What is the author up to here?' 'Who is the author addressing?' 'What arguments does the author use?' 'How does the author fit them into an overall story?' and 'What stylistic choices has the author made?' If you can answer these questions about a paper, then you have achieved a pretty comprehensive understanding of it.

When you are reading a philosophical paper there is some text given to you about which you can ask these five questions. When you are writing a philosophical paper, however, you are not given a text. Instead you are producing some text about which you and your instructor can ask these five questions. What the answers to them are is up to you; it depends on what sort of paper you write. You can think of philosophical writing as the production of some text that will yield particular answers to these five questions. Your goal is to produce something that yields satisfying answers.

If you know what answers a philosophical paper should yield, then you know what a philosophical paper should look like. So what we are going to do in this guide is explore what philosophical papers ought to be like by exploring what answers they should yield to questions about purpose, audience, argumentation, narrative, and style. For each aspect, there is a section of the guide that deals with it.



*The purpose of your paper is what you aim to accomplish in it and why. The point of an introduction is to make your purpose clear to your reader.*

## 1. AIMS IN GENERAL

Generally speaking, the aim of every philosophy paper is to defend some thesis by setting out reasons in favor of it. This statement is too general to be of much use. But it can be of some use.

For example, topics are not theses. A topic is a broad area of concern. The nature of time is a topic. Hume on induction is a topic. They are not theses. A thesis is something that can be formulated in a declarative sentence. The claim that time-travel is possible is a thesis. So is the claim that Hume's skepticism about induction is unwarranted.

And, since it is part of your aim to defend your thesis, it is not OK to just state your opinions on some matter. If your thesis is that Hume's skepticism about induction is unwarranted, you

*Your thesis should be precise enough so that it is clear what counts as an adequate defense and what counts as an adequate refutation of it*

have to develop some line of defense for that claim. You have to give your reader reasons for thinking your thesis is true.

Further, your thesis should always be focused and precise. Your thesis should be as focused as it has to be so that you can defend it adequately in the space given to you. You cannot argue that the passage of time is an illusion in a 10-page paper. You can argue for

a more focused thesis. For example, you could argue that even if there are some biographies a time-traveler could not have, like one in which the time-traveler kills his own grandfather, that does not mean time-travel is in general impossible. This is a focused thesis: you are arguing that a particular claim—the claim that some biographies involving time-travel are paradoxical and so impossible—does not imply another claim—the claim that every biography involving time-travel is impossible.

Your thesis should be precise enough so that it is clear what counts as an adequate defense and what counts as an adequate refutation of it. If your thesis is vague then it will not be clear whether your argument in favor of it supports it or whether there are good arguments against it. Take the claim that Hume's skepticism about induction flouts common sense. This thesis is not precise enough. It is not precise enough because 'Hume's skepticism about induction' and 'common sense' do not obviously pick out specific things about which we can tell whether they are in conflict or not. You have to work out what Hume's skepticism consists in and in what ways common sense might be committed to assumptions about induction. These are non-trivial enterprises. Indeed they are topics about which you might advance a number of different theses. One way to develop a more

precise critical thesis about Hume is to examine the premises he uses in arguing for skepticism about induction. You might pick one and argue that it is false or under-supported. Maybe you think exercising some common sense will help in developing your case.

## 2. MORE SPECIFIC AIMS

The statement that in a piece of philosophical writing you should give reasons for believing a thesis sets some general constraints on what you should aim to accomplish in a philosophical paper. Our concern now is to develop a more specific idea of what sorts of things you might aim to do in a philosophical paper, what sorts of theses you might defend.

A key sort of accomplishment you will often aim to achieve in the papers you write is to explain and evaluate the arguments given in the works you are studying. When you explain and evaluate an argument you focus on an individual philosopher's particular argument for a specific claim. Your aim is to explain what the argument is and to evaluate it. For example, suppose you are studying the work of Mr. McFate. I reproduce one of his more notorious pieces below:

### AN ARGUMENT FOR FATALISM

*by Mr. Mcfate*

I am a fatalist. I think the future is already determined. That is, what we do now can make no contribution to determining what will happen in the future. The reason why is this.

First, note that the past logically determines the future. That means what is true about the past entails what is true about the future. This is so because of the following. In the past there exist propositions about the future. These are just claims you can make about what the future will be like.

It does not matter whether anyone makes the claims; the claims exist nonetheless. Further, every claim is either true or false. When you make a claim either things are as you say and so the claim you make is true, or they are not as you say and so the claim you make is false. So one fact about the past is this: there is in the past a specific set of propositions about the future each member of which is true. Thus there is a fact about the past that entails what the future is like. That means the past logically determines the future.

Note, second, the past is independent of what we do now. That means nothing we do now determines what the past is like. The past is over and done with and we have no power over it. So nothing we do now contributes to determining what the facts are about the past. Those facts are already fixed.

So both of these claims are true: the past logically determines the future and the past is independent of what we do now. From these claims it follows that the future is independent of what we do now. For what the future is like is already determined by what the past is like and the past is fixed prior to what we do now. Thus fatalism is true.

Thus does McFate argue for fatalism. Distinguish three things:

- McFate's **thesis**: this is what he argues for, the claim that we cannot contribute to determining what the future will be like.
- McFate's **premises**: these are the claims he appeals to in support of his thesis. One of McFate's premises is that every proposition is either true or false.
- McFate's **argument-type**: this is the type of support McFate intends his premises to lend to his conclusion.

You already know what theses and premises are. You might be less familiar with what argument-types are. We will discuss dif-

ferent types of argument in the section on argumentation. For now you should appreciate two points about argument-types.

1. The first point is just that there are different argument-types. Some arguments are **deductive** arguments. A deductive argument is one in which the conclusion follows from the premises in a finite number of steps by applying logical rules of inference. An example of a logical rule of inference is this one: if you've established that  $x = y$  and  $y = z$ , then you may infer that  $x = z$ . Deductive arguments also have a special property called **validity**. A valid argument is one in which the premises entail the conclusion. That means: if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. Deductive arguments lend the greatest possible support to their conclusion. Most arguments philosophers give are intended to be deductive. But there are exceptions.

Sometimes philosophers give arguments that are not deductive. For example, sometimes philosophers argue by **inference to the best explanation**. These arguments have the following form:

*P and Q and ... are true. The best explanation for why P and Q and ... are true is that R is true. Therefore R.*

Inferences to the best explanation are not valid. It is possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion to be false. They lend a different sort of support to their conclusions. It is not as strong as the support in deductive arguments, but it can still give you a very good reason to believe the conclusion. We will discuss some other types of argument in the section on argumentation.

2. The second point is that the type of argument a philosopher intends to give is not always the type of argument the philosopher succeeds in giving. It is important to

know what type of argument a philosopher intends to give, whether his intention is successful, and if not, exactly why not. Sometimes a philosopher intends to give a deductive argument but fails for a superficial reason. A small supplementation to his premises will render his argument deductive. Other times a philosopher fails for a deeper reason. This means he needs to expand his set of premises with a substantial addition in order to make his argument deductive. While his argument appeared to him to depend on certain premises, in fact it depends on others. And it could very well turn out that the additional premises required are implausible or ones the philosopher is not prepared to accept. If you discover such faults in the works you study you should be proud. Recognizing them often leads to deeper insights into the relevant subject matter.

### 3. EXPLAIN-AND-EVALUATE PAPERS

Having distinguished between theses, premises and argument-types we can distinguish between some different sorts of papers. Since the main point in each of these papers is to explain and evaluate an argument let's call the group of them **explain-and-evaluate papers**. In each you have to identify the thesis argued for, the premises given in its favor, and the type of support the premises are intended to lend to the thesis. This is the explanation part. It is common to every explain-and-evaluate paper. Where such papers differ is in the evaluation part. The thesis of your own paper consists of what you want to say about the argument given in the work you are examining. Here you might aim to do a number of different things. For example, you might:

Agree with the thesis but criticize the argument for it. You might criticize one or more of the premises. In this case you should try to say what premises you prefer and why.

Agree with the thesis and defend the argument for it against someone else's criticism of it.

Disagree with the thesis and criticize the argument for it. You might attack one or more of its premises. You should always consider whether some natural revision to a premise you criticize is immune to your criticism and works just as well in the argument.

Or you might argue that the premises do not lend the intended kind of support to the thesis. You should consider whether they lend any support and whether it is adequate. Perhaps a failed attempt at a deductive argument can be reformulated as a cogent inference to the best explanation.

These are just some of the many legitimate aims you might set out to accomplish within an explain-and-evaluate paper. It is good for you to write many papers of this sort because writing them is the best way to learn an area of philosophy. The best way to learn some philosophy of mind, for example, is to explain and evaluate the important arguments philosophers of mind have given. The same goes for every area of philosophy.

As an exercise, consider what different sorts of explain-and-evaluate papers you might write about McFate's 'An Argument for Fatalism.' For example: maybe you think fatalism is true not because the past *logically* determines the future, but because the past *causally* determines the future. Or perhaps, like Aristotle, you think fatalism is false and that McFate's premise that every proposition is true or false should be rejected.

*A valid argument is one in which the premises entail the conclusion.*

*In explaining an argument you will draw on exegetical skills, but you will also have to work out your own understanding of the relevant issues and use this understanding to frame the argument you are explaining*

explaining an argument you will draw on exegetical skills, but you will also have to work out your own understanding of the relevant issues and use this understanding to frame the argument you are explaining. The professional philosophical literature is filled with alternative explanations of the same bits of argumentation. Two philosophers rarely agree on how to explain some third philosopher's argument. Typically, the reason why is that the two philosophers approach the third philosopher's argument with different understandings of the relevant issues.

#### 4. OTHER TYPES OF PAPER

There are many aims you might pursue that are similar to those pursued in explain-and-evaluate papers but that differ in more or less subtle ways. Here are some examples:

You might distill an argument from many discussions in the philosophical literature and evaluate it. No philosopher has given the exact argument you want to explore, though many have approximated it.

It is important not to confuse explain-and-evaluate papers with **exegetical** papers. The point of an exegetical paper is to defend a thesis about the meaning of some writer's work. Explain-and-evaluate papers are different in two ways. First, unlike exegetical papers they contain an evaluative part. This is an obvious difference. The second difference is less obvious, but even more important for you to grasp: explaining an argument is not the same thing as setting out an exegesis of some writer's work. In ex-

Your aim might be to defend or attack a claim, but you might think the best way to do that is to revise someone else's good but not quite satisfactory attack or defense.

You might compare and contrast two different arguments for the same claim. Papers of this sort are most illuminating when the arguments are quite different. You should try to explain why one thesis should have two such different arguments for it. That helps to further our understanding of the thesis.

You might adjudicate between two arguments for opposing claims. Papers of this sort are most illuminating when the arguments have points of contact. Your ability to tell what arguments have points of contact will develop over time. An example scenario ideal for writing this type of paper is one in which two philosophers draw on the same body of evidence but infer different conclusions from it. For example, some philosophers think the existence of moral disagreements is evidence for moral relativism. Others think it is evidence for thinking morals are a fiction. Both parties consider the same evidence, but each draws a different conclusion.

The types of aims we've been considering have three things in common: (1) In each there are one or more pre-existing theses you consider. (2) In each there are pre-existing arguments that you analyze. (3) In each you take a definite stand on the theses and arguments you consider. Aims having these three features are the safest ones to pursue. Most of the papers you write in your classes will have aims with these three features. But not all papers do, and at some point you might want to write one of these more risky papers. Here are some examples of aims lacking one or more of the above three features.



You might aim to uncover a previously hidden commitment common to the participants in some philosophical discussion. Perhaps you think all philosophers of mind have assumed some claim without acknowledging it, and that making this assumption explicit will show something important about what they've been discussing.

Perhaps your aim is not to attack or defend a thesis, but merely to explore some of its consequences. You might show that the thesis has implausible consequences that have been insufficiently recognized. Or you might show that the thesis does not have certain implausible consequences many philosophers have thought it to have.

You might try to come up with a completely new argument for an old thesis. Perhaps you think there are considerations that bear on the thesis that other philosophers have not noticed.

You might try to come up with a completely new thesis. Perhaps there is a new distinction you think should be drawn and that when drawn allows for the formulation of new theses.

It is impossible to list all the aims you might try to accomplish in a philosophy paper. Also, there is no need to. What is most important is for you to have some idea of what kind of thing you should aim to do in a philosophy paper. The best way to do that is to begin by writing lots of explain-and-evaluate papers and slowly branch out to more ambitious projects.

## 5. INTRODUCTIONS

Ideally you should know what you aim to accomplish in your paper before you start writing it. The reason why is that

your aims will influence every other aspect of your paper, like its structure and argumentation. Often what happens in practice, however, is this: you start out thinking of your aims one way, then as you write you realize that it is best to think about them another way. This is OK. It is normal. But none of the traces of this process should remain in your final version. In your final version your introduction should make your purpose crystal clear to your reader and in the rest of your paper it should always be obvious how each part of your paper serves the purpose you articulate in the introduction.

*Introductions have three components:*

There is the part where you **state** your thesis. This comes toward the end. You should flag it with prefixes like 'I will argue that...' or 'What I will try to show is that...'

There is the part where you **motivate** your project. This comes toward the beginning. You should say something that will make your reader care to know whether your thesis is true or not. Sometimes this is easy: everyone cares whether the passage of time is an illusion. But sometimes you need to say more: only a peculiar sort cares whether the number of angels that can stand on the head of a pin is always prime.

There is the part where you **supply background** for understanding your thesis. You have to ensure that your reader will understand what your thesis means. If you formulate it using a technical term like 'isotropic' part of what you have to do in supplying background is make clear how you are using that term.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Things that have directions like space and time are called isotropic when their nature does not change with direction. Some people think the nature of the future—the forward direction of time—is different from the nature of the past—the backward direction of time. That means they think time is not isotropic. Other people think that the nature of the future is the same as the nature of the past; so they think time is isotropic.

Let's consider an example introduction. The Time Traveler (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) sets out to expound a recondite matter to us. He writes an essay on why the Grandfather Paradox does not show that traveling backward in time is impossible. Here is how he begins:

## RESOLVING THE GRANDFATHER PARADOX

### *The Time Traveler*

Physicists study the nature of time, so, it is plausible to think, physicists should be the ones to answer the question of whether it is possible to travel backward in time. Some philosophers, however, think otherwise. They argue on a priori grounds that traveling backward in time is impossible. That is, they give arguments that it is impossible to travel backward in time which do not depend on the outcome of scientific speculation, but on the deliverances of reason alone. What I want to do here is consider one of the more celebrated of these argument, what I will call the argument from the Grandfather Paradox.

The Grandfather Paradox is exhibited by certain biographies involving time travel. Suppose Alice travels back in time to kill her paternal grandfather when he was a small boy. This supposition about Alice is paradoxical: if Alice kills her grandfather, then it is not the case that Alice kills her grandfather. The reason why is that if she kills her grandfather, then her grandfather never sires her father and so her father never sires her and so she is not around to kill her grandfather. So the biography we described is paradoxical. It is not a biography that can possibly be lived. What makes it impossible is the role of time travel in it. It is tempting to argue that

*In this paragraph the Time Traveler **motivates** his project. He describes himself as resolving a tension between our expectation that physicists should say whether time travel is possible and the existence of philosophical arguments that it is not possible.*

*The Time Traveler introduced some jargon, 'the argument from the Grandfather Paradox.' In this paragraph he explains what he means by that phrase, and he gives some further **background** for understanding his project.*

if time travel were possible, then Alice's biography would be possible, but since her biography is not possible, time travel is not possible. This, in brief, is what I am calling the argument from the Grandfather Paradox.

My aim in what follows is to undermine the argument from the Grandfather Paradox. I reject the claim that if time travel were possible, Alice's biography would be possible. Still, I recognize the intuitive appeal of this claim. First I will aim to undermine its intuitive appeal. Then I will consider a number of attempts to give it a more theoretical support and show that these attempts fail.

*Here the Time Traveler **states** his thesis. The background and motivation he provided make it intelligible and interesting.*

If your reader does not know what your thesis is and does not find it intelligible and interesting by the end of your introduction then your introduction has failed.

Introductions should be relatively short. Meeting the demands of motivating, stating, and supplying background for understanding your thesis in a concise and perspicuous manner is difficult. Introductions are often the most difficult part of your paper to write and you are often in a position to write one only after you have written at least a rough draft of the rest of your paper first.

In general, knowing how much motivation and background to give in an introduction takes judgment. The key factor on which such decisions depend is your audience. That is what we discuss next.

# A U D I E N C E



*You should assume your audience knows less than you do about your topic. Everything in your paper should be readily intelligible to your audience.*

## 1. WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE

Always imagine what it is like for someone reading what you write. You want your reader to find what you write readily intelligible. That means your reader should always know what you are saying and why you are saying it without making any interpretive effort. So for each sentence you add to your paper, you should be able to imagine honestly your reader reading that sentence and immediately knowing what it says and how it fits in, that is, why you are putting that particular sentence in that particular place in your paper.

There are four factors that determine whether what you write is readily intelligible to a given audience:

First there is the very sentence in which you give **written expression** to what you want to communicate. This is

the particular sentence you write that expresses your claim, clarification, transition, etc.

Second, there is the **motivation** you have provided for what you say. This is the antecedent material in your paper leading up to your written expression. Everything you write should be motivated in that your reader should never have to wonder where you are going or why you are going there.

Third, there is the **background** you have provided for what you write. As you can see motivation and background in introductions are just special cases of features present in every part of your paper. Again, defining the technical terms you use and explaining the philosophical positions you discuss are part of what it is to give background.

Fourth, there is your **elaboration** of what you say. It is not enough for your reader to know what your words mean. You have to make sure your reader has a good understanding of what you are saying. This is what illustrative examples are for.

At every point in your paper you make choices, whether conscious or not, about how you will give written expression to what you want to communicate, what motivation and how much background you will provide for it, and what further elaboration you will add. The choices you make depend on what you assume about your audience. You always write for someone, and depending on whom it is you are writing for, different forms of written expression, different sorts of motivation and background, and different degrees of elaboration will be appropriate. The question now is: what should you assume about your audience?

## 2. WHO TO WRITE FOR

Imagine your audience is a person with the following characteristics:

He is not a philosophy concentrator. A while back he took one introductory philosophy class, but he doesn't remember much about it. If you are writing on a topic in metaphysics or epistemology, then his introductory class was on history or ethics. If you are writing on history, then his introductory class was on metaphysics or epistemology or ethics. If you are writing on ethics, then his introductory class was on history or metaphysics or epistemology. You get the idea.

He is somewhat interested in a casual way about philosophy. The big issues excite him, but he needs to be convinced the details are important. He is also impatient and easily bored. Even though he doesn't know much about philosophy he is not interested in hearing about what is already old news. He's something of an intellectual thrill-seeker; he likes the feeling of discovery.

He does not read any philosophy. So he is not used to reading a text carefully with pencil in hand. He never reads a sentence twice. He never skips around in a text to see how its separate parts might relate to each other. Rather, he reads everything as he would a magazine article. He is lazy and he is not very good at making connections or drawing consequences or appreciating subtle distinctions.

**Remember:** your audience should find everything you write readily intelligible. And now you know that your audience (i) doesn't know anything about your topic, (ii) has very little general background in philosophy, (iii) will not immediately know why you

are addressing the issues you take up, (iv) wants to know about the new and exciting things you have to say, not what others have said, (v) and is not equipped or inclined to make much of an effort in figuring out what you are trying to communicate.

## 3. WHO NOT TO WRITE FOR

Here is what you should *not* assume about your audience:

Do not assume your audience is your instructor or consists of people like your instructor with lots of philosophical background.

Do not assume your audience consists of your fellow classmates. So do not assume your audience has been studying what you've been studying.

Do not assume your audience is yourself. So do not assume that the easiest way for you to think about a point is also the easiest way for your audience to think about that point.

You might find it surprising that you should not assume your audience is your instructor, especially since in fact it is your instructor that will read your paper. Your instructor, however, is not reading your paper as a typical reader would. A typical reader reads to learn something from you about your topic. Your instructor is reading your paper to see how well you've understood the material you're studying, how well you can think independently about that material, and how well you can communicate your thinking to others. Your instructor may very well learn something from you too. But your instructor's primary aim in reading is to make judgments about your understanding, thinking, and communication. In general when your instructor reads your paper he or she will imagine what it would be like for a typi-

*You might think it too obvious to mention that you should not assume your audience is yourself.*

cal reader to read your paper. So you should write for your typical reader, the interested individual looking to learn something, not your instructor, the person who has to grade you.

You might think it too obvious to mention that you should not assume your audience is yourself. It is obvious

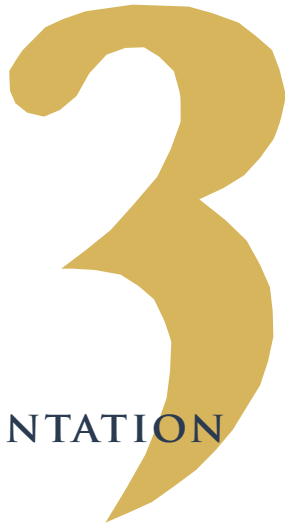
when you say it. But it is also something you can easily forget in practice. What happens when you forget it in practice is this. There is some particular way you found to understand a position, argument, distinction, or objection. You started out not understanding it, and then some way of looking at it enabled you to assimilate it into your background, the stuff you already understood. When you come to write about the position, argument, distinction, or objection you will be tempted to explain it to your audience by just rehearsing the steps that made it intelligible to you. This is rarely a good idea. You are an individual with your own idiosyncrasies. You cannot assume your audience is relevantly like you in background understanding and in what ways of thinking about something seem natural. When you explain a position, argument, distinction, or objection you have to take a few steps back to a point before which it is just a matter of looking at it in a certain way given some background. You have to provide the background and you have to explain what the different ways of looking at the position, argument, distinction, or objection are. Then the effectiveness of your explanation will not depend on your audience sharing more with you than is likely.

## 5. SOME PRACTICAL ADVICE

Let's end with two pieces of practical advice. First, always try to imagine yourself addressing a particular person or a specific group of people. Maybe you have friends that partially fit

the descriptions above. If they are willing, then get them to read your work. Attend very carefully to the way they respond to it. You want them to respond with interest and comprehension and with a sense of having been told something worthwhile. Second, you should value ALL feedback. Keep this in mind when you discuss your work with others. It is often a frustrating experience at first. The reason why is that you will have a pretty definite idea about what the main issues are and your interlocutor will typically focus on something else entirely. You might come to question the value of such an exchange. I guarantee you: it is valuable. It is valuable because it lets you know whether you have effectively achieved your aims. If your interlocutor focuses on something you think is peripheral, then most likely something in the way you wrote your paper is deflecting his attention from the main storyline. Another possibility is that you are mistaken about what is central and what is peripheral. Either way, it will help you to discuss the matter.

# ARGUMENTATION



*Arguments are the anchors of philosophy. Everything in your paper—every claim, clarification, distinction, definition, explanation, and elaboration—should be tied to some argument.*

## 1. ARGUMENTS IN GENERAL

In the arguments philosophers are concerned with you give reasons for thinking some conclusion is true by exhibiting a set of premises that counts in its favor. Let's pick this explanation apart.

First, the reasons you give in a philosophical argument are reasons for *thinking that something is true*. Some reasons are different. Some reasons are reasons for *taking some course of action*. Philosophers discuss reasons for action, but generally when they give arguments they are not giving reasons for action; they are giving reasons for belief, for thinking something is true. Some examples from applied ethics might prove to be exceptions to the rule.

Second, what you give in a philosophical argument are *reasons*. There are ways to make someone believe something that do not consist in giving reasons. You might subject someone to certain physical or psychological forces that *cause* him or her believe something. This is different from giving reasons. An inquisition persuades by physical force. Commercials and rhetoric persuade by psychological force. Neither tactic is appropriate in a philosophical discussion.

The third point is a bit subtler. An argument's entire set of premises might give a reason to think its conclusion is true, though its premises taken individually do not. One way to see this is the following. Suppose I am arguing that all the marbles in a jar are black. My argument has one hundred and one premises: the first marble taken out and set aside is black, the second taken out and set aside is black, ..., the hundredth taken out and set aside is black, and there are only one hundred marbles in the jar. No individual premise gives a reason to believe that all the marbles are black. But all together they give a very compelling reason.

The point here is that you shouldn't think the reason an argument gives for believing something is just the sum of the reasons its premises give. Arguments are more structured than that. This is why it makes sense to talk about more or less crucial premises. Consider two variant arguments for the claim that all the marbles in the jar are black. In the first variant I remove the one hundredth premise but keep all the rest. In the second variant I remove the one hundred and first premise but keep all the rest. Which argument is stronger?

## 2. TYPES OF ARGUMENT

There are many different types of argument. A basic distinction between arguments is that between those that are **valid** and

*It is important to know the difference between valid and reasonable but not valid arguments*

those that are **reasonable but not valid**. An argument is valid if its set of premises entails its conclusion. That means: it is impossible for both all its premises to be true and its conclusion to be false. An argument is reasonable but not valid if the set of its premises gives some reason to believe its conclusion even though it is possible for all of its premises to be true while its conclusion is false.

It is important to know the difference between valid and reasonable but not valid arguments. For the purposes of analyzing, assessing, and giving arguments, however, it is better to work with a finer-grained set of types. We will look at six argument-types: deductive arguments, materially valid arguments, inductive arguments, inferences to the best explanation, arguments from analogy, and arguments from charity. Only the first two types of argument are, when successful, valid. Arguments of the last four types give stronger or weaker reasons for believing their conclusions without entailing them.

The list is not meant to be exhaustive. But it should afford a useful way to organize your own thinking about argumentation. Here is a brief catalogue; some discussion follows.

1. **Deductive arguments.** A deductive argument has two features. First, the conclusion of a deductive argument follows from its premises in a finite number of steps by applying logical rules of inference. We will look at some logical rules of inference below. Second, deductive arguments are valid. The two properties are connected: deductive arguments are valid *because* their conclusions follow from their premises in a finite number of steps by applying logical rules of inference. In other words, deductive arguments are valid because of their logical form. So if you have a de-

ductive argument, it is valid and every argument with the same logical form is also valid. Consider an example: Every Subaru is all wheel drive; my car is a Subaru; therefore my car is all wheel drive. The logical form of this argument is: Every F is G; a is F; therefore a is G. Every argument with this logical form is valid.

2. **Materially valid arguments.** These are arguments that are valid but not because of their logical form. They are valid because of the nature of their subject matter. An example is this argument: Fred is a bachelor, therefore Fred is unmarried. If the premise that Fred is a bachelor is true, then the conclusion that Fred is unmarried must be true too. So the argument is valid. It is not valid because of its logical form however. The logical form of this argument is: a is F, therefore a is G. There are many arguments with the same logical form that are not valid. For example: Fred is short; therefore Fred is fat. Materially valid arguments can be made into deductive arguments by adding supplementary premises. In this case, adding 'If Fred is a bachelor, then Fred is unmarried' works. Now the argument form is: a is F; if a is F, then a is G; therefore a is G. Every argument with this logical form is valid.

3. **Inductive arguments.** How to define the class of inductive arguments is a point of philosophical debate. That is OK for us, since philosophers rarely give inductive arguments. An example inductive argument is this one: all ravens observed so far have been black; so all ravens are black. In this argument you conclude something about the population of ravens from a claim about a sample of that population. In other inductive arguments you move from claims about populations to samples (e.g.: Most of the marbles in this jar are black, so the next one I pick will

*Materially valid arguments can be made into deductive arguments by adding supplementary premises*

be black) or from samples to samples (e.g.: These ravens are black, so those ravens are black). Further sorts of inductive argument depend on more or less involved forms of probabilistic reasoning.

**4. Inferences to the Best Explanation.** The 19<sup>th</sup> century astronomer Leverrier argued that there is a planet with the orbit we now know Neptune has, prior to the actual observation of Neptune. He argued by giving an inference to the best explanation: he took what was known about the irregularities in Uranus's orbit as his premises and concluded that there is a planet with Neptune's orbit that accounted for them. His premises supported his conclusion because the existence of a planet like Neptune is what best explains Uranus's orbit. Generally, in an inference to the best explanation your premises consist of some known facts and your conclusion consists of a hypothesis that you take to explain the facts better than any other. You might recall the form presented in the section on purpose: P and Q and ... are true. The best explanation for why P and Q and ... are true is that R is true. Therefore R.

**5. Arguments from Analogy.** In an argument from analogy you take the fact that two things are similar in one respect to give a reason for thinking they are similar in another respect. Arguments from analogy have the following form: P is true in case A; case B is relevantly like case A; therefore P is true in case B. Some philosophers of mind think that our knowledge about other people's mental states derives from arguments from analogy. Here is an example: I am in pain when I yell 'ouch!'; my neighbor Alice just yelled 'ouch!'; so Alice must be in pain. Arguments from analogy go wrong when case A and case B are not alike in a way that gives you good reason to think if P is true in case A then P is true in case B. For example, if Alice yells 'ouch!' because she is acting a part in a play, then you have no reason to believe she is in pain.

#### 6. Arguments from Charity.

Arguments from charity are relevant when you are discussing work that can be interpreted in more than one way. The conclusion of an argument from charity is always a statement of what someone means by some utterance, piece of writing, or other meaningful performance. One way to represent the form such arguments have is the following:

Mr. X wrote ... here; and ... could mean P or Q or R; the most reasonable thing for Mr. X to say here is P; therefore what Mr. X meant by ... here is P. The crucial premise is the one in which you pick P out as the most reasonable thing for Mr. X to say. Unless it is exceedingly obvious, as in the case were every other interpretation makes Mr. X out to be asserting a contradiction, you should always give a supplementary argument supporting this premise.

*Arguments from analogy go wrong when case A and case B are not alike in a way that gives you good reason to think if P is true in case A then P is true in case B*

### 3. MORE ON DEDUCTIVE ARGUMENTS

Philosophers prize deductive arguments over all others. The reason why is that they combine two properties: **strength** (because of their validity) and **explicitness** (because their conclusions follow from their premises in a finite number of steps by applying logical rules of inference). Valid arguments in general—both deductive arguments and materially valid arguments—are as strong as an argument can be because their premises entail their conclusions. Arguments that are valid because of their logical form—just deductive arguments—are special in that they are also explicit. That means they make clear everything required for appreciating the truth of their conclusions. They leave no assumptions hidden. Materially valid arguments do leave some assumptions hidden. For example, the argument that Fred is unmarried because Fred is a bachelor depends on the assumption



*Explicitness is a virtue because it makes it easier to tell which arguments are valid and which arguments are invalid.*

that bachelors are unmarried. This assumption is true and very obvious and so no problems arise. Consider, however, this argument: James is an unmarried male, so James is a bachelor. At first glance this argument looks to be on par with the argument about Fred. But it is not. It depends on the following assumption: unmarried males are bachelors. This assumption is false. Priests are unmarried males

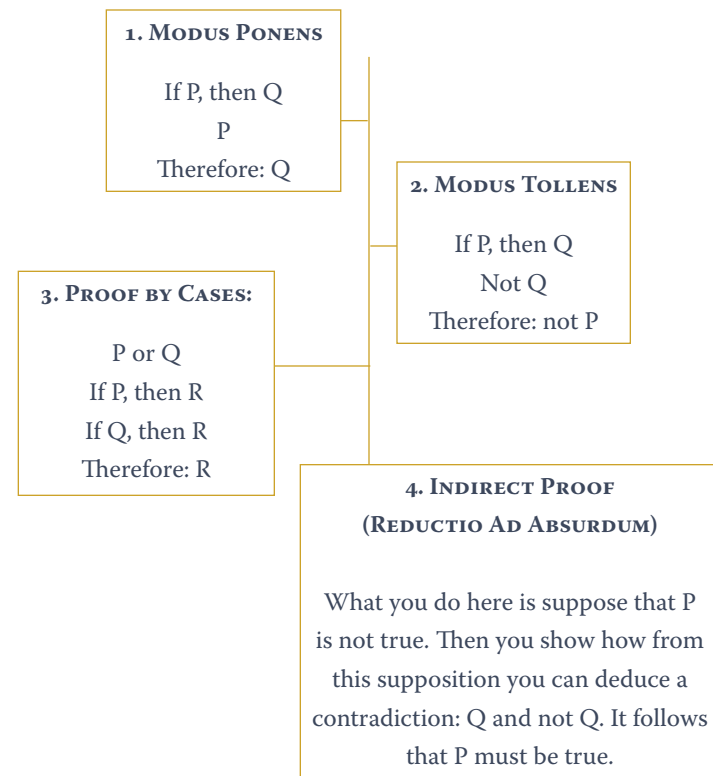
but they are not bachelors. So the argument about James is invalid. Its invalidity becomes apparent when you make explicit the assumption on which it depends. Explicitness is a virtue because it makes it easier to tell which arguments are valid and which arguments are invalid.

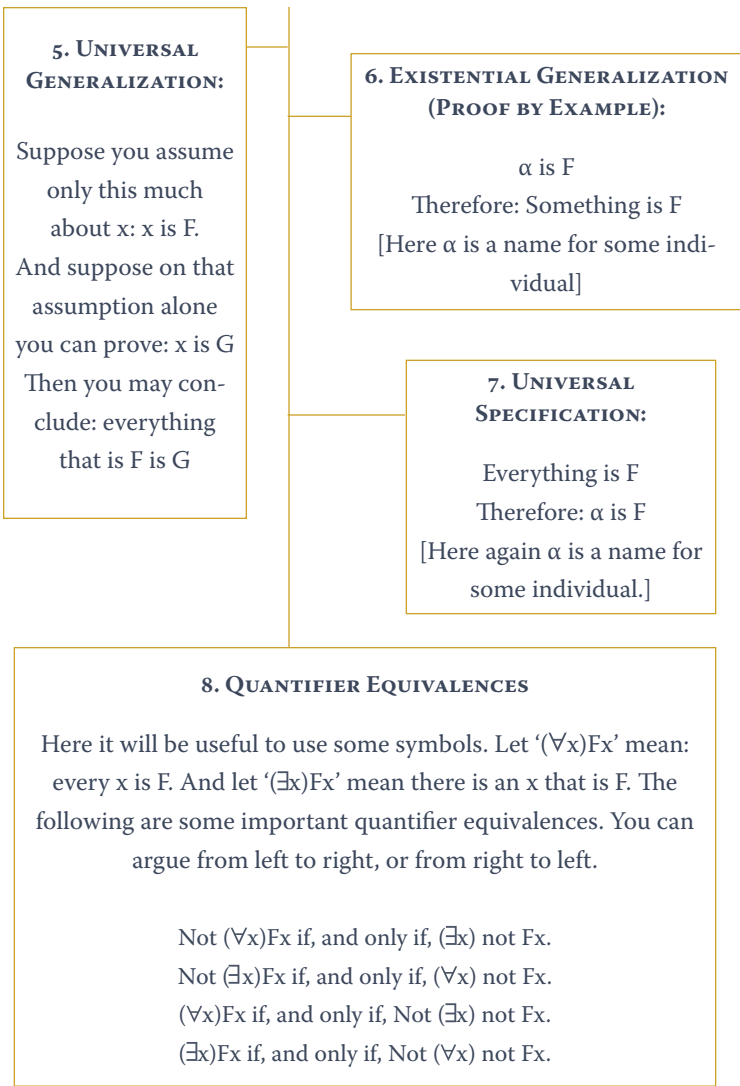
When you argue for a conclusion by giving premises that entail it, you should generally give a deductive argument rather than a materially valid argument. And when you examine the arguments of others, try to figure out how they can be formulated as deductive arguments. Since every materially valid argument can be converted into a deductive argument by making its assumptions explicit, preferring deductive arguments will not put any limitations on you. It will only benefit you. It will help you avoid errors by forcing you to make all your assumptions explicit. And making all your assumptions explicit will help you to tell in what ways you might need to supplement your argument, since some of your assumptions might require independent support.

If you have been wondering what it means to talk about the *logical form* of an argument and which logical forms are the ones such that each argument having them is valid, good. You should take a course on deductive logic. In it you will gain a better understanding of both topics. For now you can think of the logical

form of an argument as what you represent when you replace all but the **logical words** with schematic letters like P and Q and F and G. The logical words are words like 'if,' 'and,' 'or,' 'not,' 'every,' 'some,' and '='. Even without taking a course on deductive logic you will develop some sense for how to represent the logical form of an argument from reading and discussing philosophy in other classes.

Here are a few simple deductive argument forms. Familiarity with these will help you in analyzing and giving arguments. Note, however, that the arguments you analyze and give will rarely be simple. They will often be complex and built from multiple simple argument forms.





The first four argument forms are valid in virtue of their **propositional form**. That means they are valid in virtue of the form you represent when you abstract from all but the logical words 'if', 'and', 'or', and 'not'. The other argument forms are valid in virtue of their **quantificational form**. That means the logical words 'some' and 'all' matter too.

Deductive arguments can seem pretty straightforward. And in many ways they are. But some complications do arise. They arise because even though every deductive argument is strong and explicit, not every deductive argument is **cogent**. Consider this argument:

*The sky is blue.*  
*Grass is green.*  
*If the sky is blue and grass is green, then dogs have tails.*  
*Therefore, dogs have tails.*



+



=



*Figure 3a.*  
*Sky + Grass = Tail*

The argument is deductive: its premises entail its conclusion, and its conclusion follows from its premises by applying logical rules of inference. Further, all its premises are true. The sky is indeed blue. Grass is indeed green. And it is true that if the sky is blue and grass is green, then dogs have tails. The reason why this is true is that conditionals are false only if they have true antecedents and false consequents, but it is both true that the sky is blue and grass is green and it is true that dogs have tails. So the conditional is true. Further, the conclusion of the argument is not among the premises: the argument is not formally circular. Even though the argument is deductive and all its premises are true and it is not formally circular, it is a pretty terrible argument. It is not at all cogent. It is not cogent because the only reason there is for thinking the third premise is true is that dogs have tails, and that is the very claim being argued for.

The lesson here is this: constructing a deductive argument for a claim is easy; constructing a *cogent* deductive argument for a

claim is not so easy. Make sure your arguments are cogent. There are no rules for doing this. It takes judgment and good dialectical sense. These are capacities you will hone over time.

#### 4. MORE ON OTHER TYPES OF ARGUMENT

Here are a few guidelines for using the other types of argument:

It will almost never be appropriate for you to give an inductive argument in a philosophical paper.

Philosophical uses of inference to the best explanation rarely depend on abstruse scientific theories. Consider an example. Here is something that needs explaining: different cultures disagree about what is morally permissible. Some philosophers think the best explanation is that morals are relative. Other philosophers think the best explanation is that morals are a fiction. And still others think that the best explanation is that some cultures are less morally enlightened than others. Leverrier was able to appeal to a fixed body of physical theory in his inference to the best explanation. Philosophers aren't so lucky. Think hard about what relevance psychology or sociology or anthropology could have in settling our example philosophical dispute. Note that whatever you think here is itself a philosophical commitment. So even if you think, say, psychology is relevant, you would have to give reasons for thinking so if you were to write a paper on this topic. This is generally the case. Even when there is some relevant scientific theory, you have to argue for its relevance. That's why, either way, philosophers are not so lucky as Leverrier.

Use arguments from analogy sparingly. Analogies can be very useful for clarifying one of your claims. But it is risky to rest a claim on an analogy. If you do give an

argument from analogy you should make sure the two cases you are comparing are indeed relevantly similar and you should make it clear to your reader that they are.

Arguments from charity are common in papers on the history of philosophy. But they are sometimes relevant in discussions of contemporary philosophers. In particular, if you are criticizing a philosopher and if there is more than one way to interpret him on the point you are criticizing, only criticize his point on the most charitable interpretation and let your reader know that this is what you are doing.

Even if you have a good idea of what arguments are, their varieties, and the risks and benefits of each variety, when you get down to setting out arguments in your papers you will confront some difficult questions. The most common is: What do I need to argue for?

#### 5. WHAT TO ARGUE FOR

First note that the point of developing an argument is not always to persuade someone to believe something. Often the point is not so much to give an argument as to exhibit an argument. The reason why is that a good way to understand something is to consider what arguments can be constructed about it. Consider the following argument from Zeno:

It is impossible to traverse any distance in space. The reason why is this. Suppose you want to move from point A to point B. First you have to move from point A to the point midway between A and B, call it C. But to do that you would first



Figure 3b. Zeno

have to move from point A to the point midway between A and C, call it D. And to do that you would first have to move from point A to the point midway between A and D, call it E. Clearly this consideration can be iterated. That means to move from point A to point B you would have to pass through an infinite number of points. But it is impossible to do that in a finite amount of time. So it is impossible to traverse any distance in space.

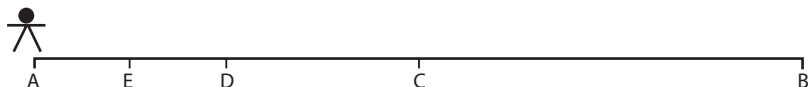


Figure 3c. Zeno's Timeline

Maybe Zeno thought of himself as giving his audience a reason to think moving through space is impossible. But nowadays we consider Zeno's argument and arguments like it in order to better understand the nature of space, time, motion, and infinity.

One reason to develop an argument, then, is that considering it will illuminate your subject matter. In such cases the argument you exhibit is not an argument you give. But you might go on to give some arguments about an argument you exhibit.

When you properly give an argument the point of doing so is indeed to persuade your reader of something. For every claim you make you should figure out whether your audience could reasonably dispute it. If your audience could reasonably dispute it, then you have to make a choice. Either you flag the point and say you will assume it for the purposes of your paper even though you know some people will disagree with it. Or you give an argument for it.

You shouldn't argue for everything you know your audience could reasonably dispute. Doing so will clutter your paper and deflect attention from the main storyline. You should

always let your reader know, however, when you recognize an area of possible disagreement.

If you know your audience could reasonably dispute a claim and you think developing an argument for it will help to illuminate the central issues of your paper, then do give an argument for it.

You might wonder how to tell whether your audience could reasonably dispute something. Here is where reading widely on your topic helps. If a professional philosopher has disputed something, then it is reasonably disputable. Even if you think something is very obviously true, if a philosopher has doubted it, it is your job to figure out how someone can get himself into a position where the point looks doubtful and to figure out how to help such a person out of this position.

## 6. WHY ARGUMENTS ARE THE ANCHORS OF PHILOSOPHY

Arguments determine the local structure of your paper. Each argument consists of a set of premises and a conclusion. When you give an argument you should make it impossible for your reader to be uncertain about which statements make up your premises and what your conclusion is. There is, however, more to setting out an argument than listing premises, labeling them as such, stating a conclusion, and labeling it as such. You have to do at least the following:

You have to **introduce** each premise. Don't pull your premises out of thin air. Make sure your reader knows *why* you are using a certain premise; key your reader into its relevance, what work it is going to do for your argument. You should also explain what *entitles* you to your premise. There is more on this below (7. **Where Do Premises Come From?**).

Of course you have to **state** each premise. You should make your premises as simple as possible. That means each should be short and each premise's logical form should be clear. If you find yourself stating a premise using lots of clauses, then break it up into multiple premises. Do not build your explanations of a premise into the premise itself.

You may have to **expand** on certain premises. If you can imagine questions about, misunderstandings of, or minor objections to a premise, and if you think addressing these will deepen your reader's understanding of your argument, then you should say more about that premise. For example, maybe you've formulated a premise with a special qualification. You should explain why you have added that qualification. It may seem obvious to you now, but it will not seem obvious to your reader who hasn't spent the time you have thinking about the matter.

You have to **explain** what sort of reason your collection of premises gives your conclusion and why. Identify the type of argument you are giving, say whether it is a deductive argument or an inference to the best explanation or of another type. If it is a deductive argument, unless it is obviously so, explain how the reasoning works. If it is not a deductive argument, then you should make sure to do the necessary supplementary work relevant to the type of argument it is. Suggestions about supplementary work occur above (**4. More on Other Types of Argument**).

If the argument is long, you should **summarize** it. Give your reader a way to think about the argument in one thought: she thinks this is so because of this and that. Summarizing is particularly important in longer papers

where there is more than one argument and in which you refer to arguments after they have been given.

Finally you have to **defend** the argument against possible objections. This is where you consider major objections to your premises. Also, if your argument is not a deductive argument, you should consider whether someone might deny that your premises give the support you think they do to your conclusion. For example, in defending an argument from analogy you should give additional reasons for thinking the two cases you compare are relevantly similar enough for the argument to work.

Claims, clarifications, distinctions, definitions, explanations, and elaborations are tied to an argument by the use you make of them in accomplishing the task of setting out that argument. This is how arguments anchor philosophy. You shouldn't put superfluous distinctions and definitions and such in your paper, even if you think you have made some pretty clever discoveries. Everything in your paper should serve some purpose, do some work. A way for a distinction or a definition to do some work is for it to serve in the presentation of an argument. The definition, say, need not itself be a premise in an argument. It can occur in your introduction of or expansion on one of the premises in an argument.

## 7. WHERE DO PREMISES COME FROM?

Finally, there is the question of entitlement. Your arguments are only as good as your premises. So you should make sure you are entitled to the premises that you use.

Some premises for an argument might come from the conclusions of other arguments. In the section on narrative we will

*A unique characteristic of philosophical argumentation is how much it depends on imagination and insight*

discuss how different arguments might fit together. For now, it should be clear that if you have argued for a claim P, then P is available for use as a premise in another argument. It should be equally clear that at some point you will have to rely on premises you have not argued for.

While many of our beliefs depend on observation and testimony, neither plays much of a role in philosophical discussion. Common sense, logical acumen, clear-headedness, and sound judgment are all fine sources for premises. Just make sure that in introducing and expanding on a premise you get your reader to acknowledge the same bit of common sense, activate the same logical acumen, think with the same degree of clear-headedness, and operate with the same amount of sound judgment as you have. A unique characteristic of philosophical argumentation, however, is how much it depends on imagination and insight.

Sometimes you are entitled to a premise because it is a comment on a case that you have imagined and described for your reader. Philosophers spend a lot of time imagining more or less outlandish circumstances. One reason why they do is that many philosophical disputes converge around generalizations (every F is G) and biconditionals (P is true just when Q is true). For example, some early behaviorists argued that what it is to be in pain is just to exhibit certain characteristic behaviors like grimacing and grabbing hold of your toe. A generalization follows: anyone that is in pain exhibits pain behavior. Hilary Putnam, one of the more imaginative of philosophers, described a race of super Spartans that are able to suppress all behavioral expressions of their inner life. The super Spartans, Putnam argued, could still feel pain. So being in pain can't just be exhibiting certain charac-

teristic behaviors, since these super Spartans never exhibit such behaviors even though they are sometimes in pain.

Though imagination often serves to refute claims, it can also be used to support claims. Recall the universal generalization argument form: If you can prove that x is G without making any assumptions about x other than it is F, then you may conclude that everything that is F is also G. One way you might use this argument form is to use the property of being F as a recipe for imagining an individual x and then note that the thing you imagined turns out also to be a G. Here is a simple example. You might argue that every circle has an area by imagining a circle and then noting that it has an area. So long as you followed the recipe of imagining a circle strictly and didn't imagine something with additional properties, your argument will be valid. You should be careful about imagining in strict accordance with the recipe set by the property F, and you should convince your reader that you have been careful. One way to do this is to imagine several examples.

Imagination often leads to insight. You have an insight about some subject matter when you learn about it just by making your ideas of it clearer. It often takes insight to draw useful distinctions. For example, we considered the distinction between valid arguments and arguments that are reasonable but not valid. You now know that there is this distinction between arguments. To appreciate the distinction you just have to think more clearly about arguments, typically by examining many examples. If you draw a distinction you came to appreciate by insight, you should make sure to help your reader to have the same insight by giving him examples of the two things you are distinguishing. This is where imagination helps.

Appealing to insight is often riskier than this example lets on. Consider Zeno's claim: it is impossible to pass through an

infinite number of points in a finite amount of time. He probably thought he knew this to be true by insight. Given the ideas he had about space, time, and infinity it seemed obvious to him that you can't pass through an infinite number of points in a finite amount of time. He was mistaken. We now have better ideas of space, time, and infinity and there are a number of ways to make it clear why it is indeed possible to pass through an infinite number of points in a finite amount of time. For example, note that the time it takes to move from A to C is half the time it takes to move from A to B, and the time it takes to move from A to D is half the time to move from A to C, and so on. As the distances taper off, so do the times it takes to traverse them. In a course on calculus you learn how to prove that the amount of time it takes to traverse all these distances is equal to a finite sum. As you can see, making your ideas clear is often difficult. Appeal to insight with caution, and always be prepared to learn that your ideas could be clearer.



*A good narrative sustains interest by creating and fulfilling expectations in its audience. Narrate your paper so that your readers always know what sort of thing is going to happen next and are always interested in finding out the details.*

### **1. WHAT NARRATIVE IS**

Suppose two individuals, Fafhrd and Mouser, set out to write philosophical papers. They take up the same aims: both are criticizing McFate's argument for fatalism. Both are equally conscientious about writing for the proper audience. And they appeal to the same arguments. Both think that McFate's premise that the past is independent of what we do now is false.

Even though Fafhrd and Mouser have the same aims, audience, and arguments, they might write two very different papers. Their papers might differ in overall structure. We reproduce their efforts below.

## MCFATE'S FAILURE

## Fafhrd

McFate's celebrated argument for fatalism fails. Fatalism is the view that nothing we do now contributes to determining the future. In his argument for this view, McFate assumes that the past does not depend on the present. I will argue that his assumption is false.

On one understanding, it is natural to think that what we do now does not determine what the past is like. Specifically: we cannot now cause anything in the past. This is so because effects cannot precede their causes, and everything in the past precedes the present.

On another understanding, however, what we do now does determine what the past is like. If you take what the past is like to include facts about which propositions are true in the past, then the present partly determines what the past is like. Take, for example, the proposition that at 12:51 AM July 15, 2007 I sit at my computer typing. This proposition was true in the past. So one fact about the past is that this proposition was true. But what made it true then is that at 12:51 AM July 15, 2007 I sit at my computer typing. The proposition was about what happens at 12:51 AM July 15, 2007, and so what happens at that time determines whether it is true or not. This is not a matter of causation. It is what we might call truth-making. The present can make-true propositions in the past when those past proposition are about the present.

Now consider McFate's argument for fatalism. McFate's premises are that the past logically determines the future and that the past is independent of what we do now. He concludes that what we do now does not determine the future. But McFate's premise that the past is independent of what we do now is false. It is false because some of what we do now makes-true propositions in the past. And note that McFate cannot claim he meant the premise in the sense in which it might be true, since if he means 'the past' in a way to exclude what propositions the past contains, then his first premise is false.

McFate makes it seem as if the past preempts the present in determining the future. But the past does not preempt the present. The reason why is that the past is not even fully determined independently of the present. So McFate's argument is a failure.

## AN ARGUMENT AGAINST AN ARGUMENT FOR FATALISM

## Mouser

Fatalists think that nothing we do now determines the future. In his 'An Argument for Fatalism,' McFate defends fatalism. I do not think his argument works. The reason why is that it depends on a false premise, namely the premise that the past is independent of the present. First I explain McFate's argument; second I explain why one of its crucial premises is false.

McFate's argument depends on two premises. (1) The past logically determines the future. (2) Nothing we do now contributes to determining the past. He concludes: (3) Nothing we do now contributes to determining the future. There is some imagery at work in the background: it is as if the past preempts us. But, I will argue, it is mistaken to think that this is true.

Premise (2) is false. On one understanding, it is natural to think that what we do now does not determine what the past is like. Specifically: we cannot now cause anything in the past. This is so because effects cannot precede their causes, and everything in the past precedes the present.

On another understanding, however, what we do now does determine what the past is like. If you take what the past is like to include facts about which propositions are true in the past, then the present partly determines what the past is like. Take, for example, the proposition that at 1:02 AM July 15, 2007 I sit at my computer typing. This proposition was true in the past. So one fact about the past is that this proposition was true. But what made it true then is that at 1:02 AM July 15, 2007 I sit at my computer typing. The proposition was about what happens at 1:02 AM July, 2007, and so what happens at that time determines whether it is true or not. This is not a matter of causation. It is what we might call truth-making. The present can make-true propositions in the past when those past proposition are about the present.

McFate's understanding of the past is the more comprehensive one. It is only on that understanding that premise (1) is true. But on that understanding premise (2) is false. That is what I have just argued. McFate's argument, then, does not work; it rests on a false premise.



Aside from the notion of narrative it will be useful to borrow two more notions from studies of literature: character and story. The **characters** in your paper are the items that populate it: claims, distinctions, examples, arguments, definitions, etc. The **story** is what happens to the characters: this argument *supports* that claim; this example *illustrates* that distinction; and that distinction *motivates* this premise; etc. The **narrative** of your paper is the way in which you relate your story, the order in which you tell how it all happens. Fafhrd and Mouser tell basically the same story about the same characters, but they tell it in different ways. Their narratives differ.

Fafhrd's narrative might be described as follows. First Fafhrd explains what he aims to do. Then he introduces one way to understand the claim that the present does not determine the past. He explains why on this understanding the claim is true. Then he introduces another understanding of the claim on which it is false. He explains why it is false. Next he analyzes McFate's argument. He shows that McFate's argument depends on the false claim that the present does not determines the past. He concludes by rejecting McFate's argument for fatalism.

Note the characters: McFate's argument; the two readings of McFate's second premise; the explanation of why one is true and one is false; the explanation of why McFate's argument depends on the false reading.

*Your aims and arguments will determine who your characters are and what story you want to tell about them*

Note the story: Appreciating that the present determines the past in that it makes-true propositions that exist in the past shows that McFate's second premise is false. That gives grounds for rejecting McFate's argument for fatalism.

Mouser's paper contains the same characters. And the same things happen with them. It differs in narrative. For example, after introducing his aims Mouser starts with McFate's argument. After analyzing McFate's argument, he then considers two ways of understanding McFate's second premise. He explains why it is false on one reading, and why this is the reading McFate needs. He ends by rejecting McFate's argument.

## 2. MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT NARRATIVE

Decisions about narrative are decisions about how to order the way you tell your story about your characters. Your aims and arguments will determine who your characters are and what story you want to tell about them. Questions of narrative are those that are left over after you have decided on your aims and arguments. The decisions you make about how to narrate your paper are, however, equally important. The reason why is that how you narrate your paper will determine how interesting and easy to follow it is. You want to make your paper as interesting and easy to follow as you can.

Now you know what the narrative of your paper is. What remains is to gain a better idea of what makes one narrative better than another. One way to tell when the narrative of your paper is good is to see if readers find your paper interesting and easy to follow. But you will not be an objective reader of your own paper. And you want your paper to have a good narrative before showing it to anyone else. What follows are some suggestions that should help you out of this quandary.

### 2A. NARRATIVE ORDER

First, in addition to **narrative order** you should distinguish between two other notions of order:

There is the **order of discovery**. This is the order in which you figure out who your characters are and what will happen with them. For example, you will figure out what thesis you want to defend, what argument you will give for it, which objections you will consider, and how you want to respond to them. The order of discovery is often a mess. The order in which you discover your story will generally not match what would be a good order in which to narrate it.

There is a **logical-explanatory order**. This is the order determined by logical and explanatory relations between your characters. Consider the way geometry is often taught. First you learn the basic axioms and definitions. And then you prove some theorems. And then you prove some more theorems that depend on the previous theorems. And so on. This way of teaching follows an order determined by the logical relation of entailment. One problem with teaching geometry this way is that the motivation for the beginning steps can be obscure. The same point can be made about philosophical works. There is a logical-explanatory order to be discerned in them, and often enough this logical-explanatory order does not match the best narrative order.

A good narrative order strikes a balance between a psychologically plausible order of discovery and an intellectually satisfying logical-explanatory order.

A psychologically *plausible* order of discovery is not *probable* order of discovery. It is one that your reader will find natural. This is something that you can control. You always get to have the first move; you are the one that says: 'Hey, this is what we're going to think about.' Once you make that first move, however, from thereon you always have to keep in mind what your reader

will expect to happen next. Do not flout your reader's expectations. If you do, then you will be forcing your reader's mind in unnatural directions and this will make your paper difficult to follow.

So one thing you want to do is narrate your paper on the basis of plausible psychological assumptions about your reader. Still, you are dealing with abstract matters. Your theses, objections, arguments, distinctions, and examples will fall into a logical-explanatory order. Part of what you want to do in your paper is make this logical-explanatory order evident to your reader. The way to do this is to lead your reader on. Expectations are formed in response to previous experience. You may not be able to alter the psychological facts about your reader's power of expectation, but you are in control of what your reader's previous experience is.

## 2B. SIGNPOSTING

A second thing you can do is explicitly tell your reader about your narrative intentions. This is called **signposting**. You signpost when you tell you reader about what you have done, what you are going to do, and about how different parts of your paper relate to each other. Here are some schematic examples:

I will begin by showing ...

Before considering objections to ..., I want to explain ....

Now that I have shown ..., I can explain why ....

Because ..., it follows that ...

There is a distinction between ... and ...; let me illustrate it with examples ...

The claim that ... should be qualified by ...

... What that means is ...

First I will ..., second I will ..., and finally I will ...

First I ...ed, second I ...ed, and now I can ...

Having seen ... and ... it should be clear that ...

Do not overdo it. You do not want your paper to become a commentary on itself. But signposting is a sure way to keep your reader apprised of what is going on. It will also help you to figure out what the best narrative order is. When you form explicit statements about what you are doing, they should sound reasonable. If they do not, then maybe there is something wrong with the way you are going about things.

## 2C. ARGUING AND NARRATING

Third, narrative and argumentation are closely related. Some papers are one-argument papers. Deciding on a narrative for these is not that difficult. You do have to make some decisions about how to set up your argument and how to arrange it, but the argument itself will often suggest which decisions are best. Other papers are multiple-argument papers. With these you have to decide on how order your arguments. It is not always obvious how to do so. Remember the logical-explanatory order is not always the best narrative order. So you might find that it is better to give one argument before another even though one of the premises in the first argument is the conclusion of the second argument. If you are in a situation like this, you should definitely do some signposting. Say: I will argue for p by appealing to q; later I will argue for q.

One way to organize your thinking about these issues is to think in terms of theses and lemmas. A **thesis** is a relatively major claim in your paper. A **lemma** is a claim you make in order to establish a thesis. In general you should argue for lemmas after arguing for theses, especially when your argument for a lemma is long. The reason why is that your theses are your major claims and so are the ones for which you can provide the most motivation. Your reader is less likely to get confused about why you are going on about a thesis. Lemmas are motivated by the work they do in supporting theses. The rule that you should argue for

theses before lemmas is not strict, but it often works.

## 2D. WHEN YOU'RE STUCK

Fourth, here is a piece of practical advice. If you are writing your paper with a certain narrative in mind and you find that you get stuck, then try narrating in the reverse order. You may experience some apprehension about doing this. But try it. I do not know why it works so often, but for some reason it does.

# S T Y L E

*Your style is how you control meaning and tone by making choices about diction, syntax, and composition. Your meaning should be clear and precise; your tone should be forthright and friendly.*

Questions of style can be broken down into those of stylistic intent and those of stylistic practice. Your **stylistic intent** consists of the goals you aim to achieve with respect to meaning and tone. And your **stylistic practice** consists of the choices you make about diction, syntax, and composition. You want your practice to serve your intent. Let's first explore what you should intend, and then look at what practices would be most effecting for bringing that intention off.

## 1. MEANING AND TONE

Your meaning should be clear and precise. Clarity is opposed to obscurity. And precision is opposed to ambiguity.

A word or sentence is **obscure** in a context when basic questions about its meaning are open to reasonable doubt. Con-

sider, for example, this sentence: 'Fatalism leads to resignation.' It is not clear enough what this means. Presumably the idea is that if you accept fatalism, then an attitude of resignation is warranted. But this gloss still does not answer basic questions about the sense in which such an attitude is warranted by accepting fatalism. Is it warranted by acceptance of fatalism alone, or are there other background beliefs you must have? Is it *prima facie* warranted, but potentially unjustified once all considerations have been taken into account?

A word or sentence is **ambiguous** in a context when it has more than one reasonable interpretation. Each of the possible meanings might be clear. The problem is not obscurity. The problem is multiplicity.

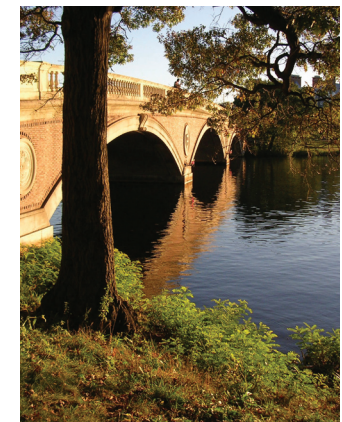
Ambiguous words suffer from **lexical ambiguity**. Some sentences are ambiguous because they contain ambiguous words. But some sentences are ambiguous because of their structure. This is **structural ambiguity**. Consider this sentence: 'everyone likes someone.' This can mean: there is some person that everyone likes. Or it can mean: for each person there is someone that person likes.

Obviously you should avoid ambiguity. Intending to mean one thing rather than another will not remove ambiguities. You have to ensure that your reader knows what you intend to mean. If you think a word might be lexically ambiguous then try to find a



Figure 5a.  
*Lexical Ambiguity*

A BANK BUILDING V. A RIVER BANK



*Do not be overly ironic; do not write for an insider's club of people you find to be right thinking.*

different word to use. If you cannot—and sometimes you will not be able to—then explain which meaning you intend. If you think a sentence might be structurally ambiguous then use a different sentence. It is always possible to find an alternative sentence.

Your tone should be forthright and friendly. Forthrightness is opposed to caginess. Friendliness is opposed to nastiness.

Your writing is **cagey** when it is hesitant or encumbered with qualifications. Philosophical issues are often complex, much more complex than they might appear to be at first. This warrants caution and attention to subtleties. But caution and attention to subtleties need not find expression in writing that is hesitant or encumbered with qualifications. You should aim to understand your topic well enough so that you know how to embed it into a background that enables you to discuss it with both accuracy and simplicity. This is not easy, but it is what you should aim to do.

Your writing is **nasty** when it is supercilious or insulting. You are not a supercilious or insulting person. But you might find yourself tempted to express an objection with a clever barb, or be overzealous in pointing out how obvious some argument's deficiencies are, or what degree of confusion would have to be in place for someone to miss some obvious distinction. Such writing is often humorous and there is a kind of delight you can take in its execution. Do not indulge in these pleasures when writing philosophy. Do not be overly ironic; do not write for an insider's club of people you find to be right thinking.

## 2. DICTION, SYNTAX, AND COMPOSITION

You control meaning and tone by making choices about diction, syntax, and composition.

Your **diction** is your word choice. The following are some guidelines for word choices:

Prefer the low-key and commonplace to the hyperbolic and exotic. English is a rich language and you can find all sorts of curiosities like 'higgledy-piggledy' in it. Something is higgledy-piggledy when it is confused or in disarray. But it is probably not a good idea to call an argument or an explanation higgledy-piggledy, even if it is. Reserve the use of such words to the occasional inessential summary.

Prefer the specific and concrete to the general and abstract. There are two points here. First, even though philosophy is general and abstract and you will often have to use words that are general and abstract to accurately discuss it, you should be as specific and concrete as you can be while retaining accuracy. Do not be more general and abstract than you have to be. Second, if you want to make a point that is general and abstract, it is often better to make a point that is specific and concrete first and then explain why it is possible to generalize on the specifics and abstract from the concrete details.

Avoid jargon, and explain it when you have to use it. It is better to use plain English than to use jargon. Sometimes you will have to use jargon, either because it is so established that to not use it would confuse your audience or because plain English would be too cumbersome or imprecise. When you use jargon fully explain it.

The number one rule about **syntax** is: keep it simple. Here are some more specific suggestions about how to apply that rule:

Prefer short sentences to long sentences. This is very important. Do not write sentences with many clauses. You will be tempted to do so as you discern more nuances and complications and needs for qualification in your subject. Instead of writing one complicated sentence, write many simple sentences. In doing so you will learn even more about your subject since you will have to express those nuances and complications and needs for qualification in full thoughts.

Make the logical forms of your sentences obvious. Remember: the logical form of a sentence is what you represent by abstracting away from all but the logical words like 'all' and 'if' and 'not.' It should always be easy for your reader to tell what the logical form of one of your sentences is.

Prefer the direct to the indirect. That means you should avoid the passive voice and you should avoid constructions like: 'It is not uncommon to find philosophers saying P.' Instead write: 'Philosophers often say P.'

Avoid clutter and useless words. Use adverbs and attributive adjectives sparingly.

The unit of **composition** is the paragraph. Make your paragraphs focused and give them an obvious structure. Here are some guidelines:

*Think of each paragraph as doing some bit of narrative work*

Think of each paragraph as doing some bit of narrative work. You might introduce a main character, like a thesis or a distinction or an example. Or you might describe a major story event. For example you might explain why one claim is inconsistent with another or why an argument requires supplementation.

You should make clear what work a paragraph is doing right at the begin-

ning. Do it in the first sentence if the transition from the previous paragraph is very obvious. Do it right after making clear how the previous paragraph transitions into the current one if the transition is not very obvious.

Your paragraphs will have an internal narrative. This is the same sort of thing as the narrative of your whole paper, just smaller. All the same considerations apply in making decisions about the narrative of a paragraph.

Sometimes you will find yourself in a situation with these features. You want to communicate a sequence of bits of information and the members of the sequence will not bear obvious connections to each other and drawing connections will only distract the reader from your main purpose. In this case make a list.

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