

How to Write an Essay in Philosophy?

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Abstract

This excerpt is devised to cope with the challenge of writing an essay in philosophy. The construction of a philosophical essay begins with reading philosophy, in particular with reading arguments. The main aim of a philosophical essay is to defend a thesis by using some arguments. A good philosophical essay hereby avoids fallacious reasoning.

1 Plan

This excerpt should help to write an argumentative essay about a philosophical topic. It is based on Lewis Vaughn's book *Writing Philosophy – A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays*.¹ In Section 2, we introduce philosophy as search for acceptable or true beliefs via critical reasoning or argumentation. Equipped with this background information, we provide in Section 3 some tenets how to read philosophy. The main aim hereby is to identify the (structure of the) argument. We categorise and present different argument forms such that the reader can identify these argument forms when reading a philosophical text. In Section 4, we provide some heuristics and tips for philosophical writing. In particular, we present you the basic structure of argumentative essays and give you mental tools in order to defend the thesis or claim of your essay. Finally, we list some fallacies. The knowledge of these defective arguments is supposed to help you to avoid fallacious reasoning in your own essay.

¹Cf. [Vau06].

2 What is Philosophy About?

‘Philosophy’ refers to the field of inquiry that is concerned with the examination of beliefs. As such philosophy focuses in general on the question whether a belief is acceptable. In other words, when we do philosophy we search for (good) reasons to accept certain beliefs or propositions. In particular, we often investigate whether a belief is true. So we may say that to philosophize means to critically reason in the search for acceptable or true beliefs. An integral component of the rational enterprise of critical reasoning is the formulation and/or assessment of logical arguments.

Before we can assess the acceptability or truth of a belief or proposition, we often need to clarify the meaning of concepts. For, we cannot assess a belief or proposition until we understand its meaning.² Once we are clear about the concepts, we may engage in critical reasoning, which means foremost either (i) to construct an argument in support for a proposition, or (ii) to assess an argument to see whether there are good reasons for accepting its conclusion.

3 How to Read Philosophy?

The skill to read philosophy helps a lot to write philosophy. The profitable reading of philosophy is eased by an open mind and an active and critical approach. However, way more important is to identify the structure of the argument, i.e to identify the central thesis or main conclusion of the essay and its premisses.³ Only if you identify the structure of the argument, you may analyse whether the conclusion actually follows from the premises, whether the premises are true, whether an argument hasn’t been considered, whether an analogy is weak, whether there are counterexamples to key claims, and whether the claims agree with other propositions you accept.

The easiest way to enter a philosophical essay is most often to identify the main conclusion first, and then the premises. Once you discover the statement

²Sometimes the whole philosophical work of a paper consists in an analysis of concepts.

³We assume in the document that a philosophical essay has only one main thesis or conclusion. Most often good essays in philosophy focus on a single claim.

that expresses the proposition the author is trying to show, it becomes easier to find the allegedly supporting premises. To understand the main argument of an essay is so crucial that you should outline it. An outline of an argument arranges the conclusion and the premises in a pattern such that the relationship between them is revealed.

Example 1 (Outline of a Simple Argument Structure).

1. *Premise*
2. *Premise*
3. *Premise*
4. *Conclusion*

Example 2 (Outline of a Bit More Complex Argument Structure).

1. *Main Premise*
 - (a) *Supporting Premise*
 - (b) *Supporting Premise*
2. *Main Premise*
 - (a) *Supporting Premise*
 - (b) *Supporting Premise*
3. *Main Premise*
4. *Conclusion*

To philosophise comprises to assess such arguments, i.e. an assessment (i) whether the conclusion follows from the premises, and (ii) whether the premises are true. Only if both (i) and (ii) are true the conclusion of the argument is acceptable. This kind of evaluation is precisely what is demanded in a philosophical essay.

3.1 How to Read an Argument?

A statement or claim expresses a proposition that is either true or false. Statements are, for instance, “All philosophers are women”, “Cats have normally two ears”, “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”, “You are puzzled”, “The universe is fifteen billion years old”. Questions, exclamations and commands do not express a proposition, and are thus no statements, which means also that they are neither true nor false.

An argument is a combination of statements in which the conclusion is supposed to be supported by the premises. In other words, an argument is a set of statements of which the premises are intended to provide reasons to belief that the conclusion is true.

Example 3 (Argument 1).

1. *Premise: All men are mortal.*
2. *Premise: Socrates is a man.*
3. *Conclusion: Socrates is mortal.*

Example 4 (Argument 2).

1. *Premise: Birds normally fly.*
2. *Premise: Tweety is a bird.*
3. *Conclusion: Tweety normally flies.*

Example 5 (Argument 3).

1. *Premise: 98% of the students smoke weed.*
2. *Premise: Julia is a student.*
3. *Conclusion: Julia probably smokes weed.*

Regardless of an argument’s specific structure, there must be a conclusion and at least one premise that supports the conclusion. Otherwise the set of statements is no argument as in the following example.

Example 6 (No Argument). *The stock market has tanked. Brokers are skittish. The Dow is the lowest it's been in ten years. We're pretty scared about all this.*

In order to identify a conclusion and its premises, it may help to look out for indicator words. Conclusions are often indicated by words such as 'consequently', 'hence', 'thus', 'so', 'therefore', 'as a result', or 'it follows that'. Premises are often indicated by words such as 'assuming that', 'given that', 'presupposed that', 'the reason being', 'because', or 'due to the fact that'.

We may discern two types of arguments: deductive and inductive. A deductive argument provides logically conclusive support for its conclusion, i.e. the conclusion is necessarily true given that all premises are true. If this is the case, we say the deductive argument is valid. In a valid argument it is impossible for the premises to be true while the conclusion is false. Note that 'valid' is not a synonym for 'true'. A valid deductive argument, in which also the premises are true, is called sound.

Argument 1 of Example 3 is a valid deductive argument. Note that it is the structure of the argument (not the content) that guarantees the truth of the conclusion (presupposed all premises are true). You may check this by uniformly substituting 'men', 'mortal', and 'Socrates'. The structure of Argument 1 may be symbolised as follows: If p , then q . p . Therefore: q .

In contrast to deductive arguments, an inductive argument is designed to provide plausible or probable support for its conclusion. If an inductive argument is successful in providing support for its conclusion, it is said to be strong. In a strong argument, if the premises are true, the conclusion is normally or probably true. Unlike deductive arguments, inductive arguments cannot guarantee the truth of their conclusions (given the premises are true). For, it is still possible in a strong inductive argument that the premises are true, but the conclusion false. A strong inductive argument, in which also the premises are true, is called cogent.

Argument 2 of Example 4 is an inductive argument that provides plausibility for the conclusion. It is a strong inductive argument, since birds indeed are normally able to fly. However, note that there are exceptions possible, for instance, penguins, which lack the ability to fly. Argument 3 of Example 5 is an inductive argument that renders the conclusion probable. It is also strong. For, if it is true that almost

all the students smoke weed, then it is likely that Julia smokes weed, too. Note again that it is yet possible for the premises of Argument 3 to be true, while the conclusion is false.

Valid Conditional Argument Forms.

1. *Affirming the Antecedent* (Modus Ponens)

(a) *If p then q .*

(b) *p .*

(c) *Therefore, q .*

2. *Denying the Consequent* (Modus Tollens)

(a) *If p then q .*

(b) *Not q .*

(c) *Therefore, not p .*

3. *Hypothetical Syllogism*

(a) *If p then q .*

(b) *If q then r .*

(c) *Therefore, if p then r .*

In-Valid Conditional Argument Forms.

1. *Denying the Antecedent*

(a) *If p then q .*

(b) *Not p .*

(c) *Therefore, not q .*

2. *Affirming the Consequent* (Modus Tollens)

(a) *If p then q .*

(b) q .

(c) *Therefore, p .*

There exist many other argument forms which we will not review here. Keep in mind that you as well as most philosophers do not know all argument forms. To have no exhaustive list of argument forms is, however, no unsurmountable problem. Most of the argument forms you will encounter belong to types of argument form presented here. If you are ever in doubt whether there is an argument form and/or whether it is valid, ask a logician.

We will just mention three further argument forms, which are common subtypes of inductive arguments.

Enumerative Induction.

1. *Premiss: x percent of the observed members of some group A have property P .*
2. *Conclusion: x percent of all members of group A have property P .*

In enumerative induction, we generalise after observing some members of a group to the entire group. For example, if 40% of the scientists I know are biologists, then I may be tempted to generalise that 40% of all scientists (at least in Munich) are biologists.

If we are about to evaluate the strength of such an enumerative induction, we are entering the problem whether the sample adequately represents the entire group. Typically it is assumed that a sample is representative only if each member of the group has an equal chance of being included in the sample.

Induction by Analogy.

1. *Premiss: X has properties P_1, \dots, P_{n-1} , plus property P_n .*
2. *Premiss: Y has properties P_1, \dots, P_k , for $k \leq n - 1$.*
3. *Conclusion: Y has probably property P_n .*

If we reason inductively by analogy, we first observe that two (or more) entities are similar in some ways; we then conclude that they are probably similar in one further way. For instance, humans can walk upright, use simple tools, learn new skills, and can devise deductive arguments. Chimpanzees can walk upright, use simple tools, and learn new skills. Therefore, chimpanzees can probably devise deductive arguments.

The strength of an induction by analogy depends on whether the similarities are relevant with respect to the conclusion. One may attack such an argument by pointing out that some relevant dissimilarities are unmentioned. In the example it may, for instance, be argued that the brain of a chimpanzee is somewhat smaller and/or less complex than that of a human, and that this difference probably inhibits cognitive functions such as logical argument.

Inference to the Best Explanation.

1. *Premiss: Phenomenon Q.*
2. *Premiss: E provides the best explanation for Q.*
3. *Conclusion: Probably, E is true.*

We use the argument form inference to the best explanation in our everyday life and it is at the heart of scientific investigations. Recall that an argument gives us reasons for believing that some proposition is the case. An explanation, in contrast, states how or why the proposition is the case. An explanation tries to clarify or elucidate, not to offer proof or support. In an argument that infers the best explanation, we reason from premises about a phenomenon to be explained to the best explanation for that phenomenon (not any old explanation). The best explanation is the one most likely to be true. We conclude that the preferred explanation is indeed probably true.

The strength of an inference to the best explanation depends upon whether the explanation offered is indeed the best. Two criteria to evaluate explanations (or whole scientific theories), also called criteria of adequacy, are conservatism and simplicity. The criterion of conservatism says that, all things being equal, the best explanation is the one that fits best with what is already known or established.

The criterion of simplicity says that, all things being equal, the best explanation is the one that is the simplest, i.e. the one that rests on the fewest assumptions. The explanation that rests on fewer assumptions is less likely to be false, since there are fewer ways for it to be false.

4 How to Write Philosophy?

There are some heuristics and tips you should keep in mind when you write an essay in philosophy. Here we list the most important general heuristics and tips, in particular those that help you to avoid common mistakes. Afterwards, we focus on how you may defend a thesis in an argumentative essay. Finally, we list fallacies, or equivalently defective arguments, and explain why they are defective. This last step should help you to avoid fallacious reasoning in your essay.

Write to Your Audience

If not specified otherwise by your instructor, you should assume that your audience consists of intelligent and curious readers who know little about philosophical topics. In particular, you should not assume that your audience consists of people who know more than you, or are even professional philosophers (even when your instructor is one). Writing to the audience as specified here means that you should (explicitly) define unfamiliar terms and explain any points that may be easily misunderstood. Moreover, you should present your argument such that its structure and significance would be clear to any intelligent reader.⁴

Avoid Pretentiousness

Good philosophy is profound. However, the profundity stems from the expressed ideas or arguments, not from the usage of fancy, overblown words and phrases. Writing that merely seems grand is called pretentious, and pretentious writing is often empty. Therefore, *pretentious writing is bad writing*, and thus you should avoid it.

⁴This approach of writing forces you to attempt to understand your subject better and helps you to show this understanding.

Philosophers are No Authority, Arguments Are

Recall that philosophy is about logical arguments. Consequently, if a philosopher carries any weight in your essay, it is only because of her arguments. The mere fact that the philosopher is a recognized authority (or is famous, reputable, or popular) may not, by itself, have any influence whether a proposition is acceptable. Of course, you may cite a good argument of said philosopher in favour of your case. But this strengthens your case, because the argument is good, not because the argument was devised by a certain philosopher. Moreover, please avoid writing in the jargon of a certain philosopher. Some students tend to write like a renowned philosopher, e.g. Martin Heidegger or Ludwig Wittgenstein. The problem is that repeating the style of such a philosopher suggests yourself that you understood something; however, when someone asks you to explain it in your own words, you will have troubles to explain what exactly you meant, and, after all, philosophy is about developing your own, precise and clear position towards a question or subject matter.

Do Not Overstate Premises or Conclusions

In everyday speech we often exaggerate. For instance, we may say that “Americans think the French are snobbish” when in fact only a few of our American friends think that some French people are snobbish. In everyday conversation, such exaggerations are often understood as such and are used innocuously for emphasis. However, too often exaggerations are overstatements that claim too much and lead us into error and/or prejudice. In philosophical essays, overstatement is never acceptable. An exaggeration, for instance, may raise doubt in your reader about your judgement, your truthfulness, and your arguments.

In philosophical writing, overstatement occurs mainly in two forms. First, particular statements – including premises – may be exaggerated. You might declare that a premise is undoubtedly true when in fact it is merely probable, or omit quantifiers such as “some”, “perhaps”, and “many”. You may express the (emotional) statement that “killing another human being is always morally wrong”, even though you would admit that killing in self-defense is morally permissible. Second, the conclusions of arguments may be overstated, i.e. they may go beyond

what logical inference would permit. As we saw in the previous section, a conclusion must follow from its premises in a valid argument, and probably so in a strong or cogent argument. Due to the commitment to your conclusion, however, you may overstate it. The result is an invalid or weak argument.

Treat Opponents and Opposing Views Fairly

The ideal in philosophical discourse is the disinterested and fair-minded search for truth among all parties. Unfortunately, it seems that most what people learned about arguing has been learned from political debate-type television programmes. In such debates, it is common to attack the character and motivations of opponents, distort or misrepresent opposing views, and dismiss opponents' evidence and concerns out of hand. In philosophical writing, these abusive or unfair tactics are out of order and, moreover, ineffective. Philosophers who encounter such tactics are likely to be suspicious of the writer's motives, to wonder if the writer is close-minded, to question whether her assertions can be trusted, or to doubt the worth of arguments which are defended with such unsubstantiated eagerness.

We can divide what we should avoid in philosophical discourse in order to treat opposing views fairly in two categories: (i) straw man fallacies and (ii) ad hominem fallacies. The straw man fallacy consists of the distorting, weakening, or oversimplifying of someone's position such that it can be more easily attacked or refuted. The point why you should avoid a straw man fallacy is that opposing views and arguments should be described fairly and accurately, acknowledging any strength of each view. This approach is likely to result in that philosophers view you as more honest and conscientious, and it helps you to find ways to address any weaknesses in your own argument. An ad hominem fallacy, also known as 'appeal to the person', consists of rejecting a claim on the grounds that there is something wrong not with the claim but with the person who makes it. These arguments try to undermine or refute a claim by appealing to a person's character or motives. But a person's character or motives have only rarely any bearing on a claim's worth. Thus these arguments are baseless. Again: claims should solely be judged by the reasons they have, or do not have, in their favour.

Write Clearly

To write clearly is a virtue in philosophical writing; for philosophy deals with difficult and unfamiliar ideas. However, inexperienced writers often produce unclear papers, because they assume that since they know what they mean, others will know too. Typically, others do not know. The problem is that inexperienced writers often haven't yet developed a distant stance towards their own words. In other words, they are not able to view their own writing as others might. Good philosophers are very good in criticising themselves. Two methods how to learn to view your own writing critically are to look at your paper after some days you haven't worked on your paper, and to use peer review.

A source of unclarity is ambiguity. A term or statement is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning (and the context isn't uniquely specifying the meaning). There are ambiguities that are semantic and ones that are syntactic. A semantic ambiguity is, for instance, the statement that "Kids make nutritious snacks". The word "make" could mean 'prepare' or 'constitute'. If the former, the sentence means that kids prepare food. If the latter, the sentence says that kids are food. Syntactic ambiguities are the result of how words are combined. In the sentence "The boy saw the girl with the binoculars", for instance, it isn't clear whether the boy or the girl has the binoculars. In a philosophical essay this sentence would be a poorly written one, and should be replaced by, for instance, the unambiguous sentence "Using his binoculars, the boy saw the girl". Another source of unclarity is the usage of terms that are too general or vague, and therefore fail to convey one definite meaning. Of course, to write a philosophy paper will always involve the use of general terms. The key is to make your writing as specific as your subject and purpose will allow.

Avoid Inappropriate Emotional Appeals

Another fallacy you should strictly avoid in a philosophical paper is the appeal to emotion, i.e. the attempt to persuade someone of a conclusion not by providing an argument, but by trying to arouse the reader's feelings of fear, guilt, pity, anger and the like.

Example 7 (Appeal to Pity). *Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you must find*

my client not guilty. He is the unfortunate result of grinding poverty, a mother who rejected him, and a legal system that does not care that he was once a ragged, orphaned child wandering the streets in search of a single kind heart.

The appeal here is to pity, and the passage is shot through with language designed to evoke it such as “grinding poverty”, a “mother who rejected him”, and “ragged, orphaned child”, as well as “in search of a single kind heart”. However, note that no reasons are provided for believing that the accused is innocent. No logical support at all is given for this conclusion. If such an appeal were intended as the lone argument in a philosophy paper, the paper would have to be judged a failure.

Example 8 (Appeal to Fear). *Dear voters, if you elect my opponent to the highest office in the land, will terrorist attacks on America increase? We cannot afford another September 11. Vote for security. Vote for me.*

This is a blatant appeal to fear, a common tactic in politics. No good reasons are provided, just a scary scenario is painted.

Example 9 (Evocative Words). *The anti-life forces in this country that favor abortion – the murder of a child simply because he or she exists – are not better than the Nazis, who also exterminated millions of people simply because they existed and were inconvenient to the state. The Machiavellian notion of abortion-on-demand should be replaced with the enlightened pro-life view that life is better than death.*

The passage provokes outrage and disgust, which are generated by the use of a few powerful evocative words and phrases. Word choice does not only most of the work, but also enhances the effect of some fallacies. Ponder “anti-life”, “murder of a child”, “Nazis”, “exterminated millions”, “Machiavellian”, and “enlightened”. All these words are used misleadingly and persuasively. Most of them are used as part of a straw man argument, while some add teeth to an ad hominem attack. Although the majority of emotive words are designed to cast abortion and abortion-rights advocates in bad light, the term ‘enlightened’ is used to evoke positive feelings about the pro-life side.

Mind Your Presuppositions

Behind every argument are presuppositions that need not be made explicit because they are taken for granted by all parties. They may be too obvious to mention or are in no need for justification.⁵ You should, however, be careful not to presuppose a claim that may be controversial among your readers. If you wish to establish that abortion is morally permissible, for instance, you should not assume your readers will agree that women have a right to choose abortion or that a fetus is not a person. If there is any doubt, write your presuppositions down, make your framework explicit.

4.1 How to Defend a Thesis?

In a philosophical essay, you try to show that your thesis is acceptable by providing reasons that support it. In other words, the aim of such an essay is to defend a thesis or conclusion. Your thesis may assert a position on any issue, but in every case you affirm or negate a thesis and you give reasons for the affirmation or negation respectively.

A thesis defense essay is not merely an analysis of claims, or a summary of points made by someone else, or a reiteration of what other people believe or say. For many students, this kind of writing is unknown. In order to succeed in such writing, you need to think things through and understand the claims as well as the reasons behind them. Note that students are normally not used to think beyond the information given in texts and to understand reasons behind the discussed claims.

Basic Essay Structure

1. Introduction
 - (a) Thesis statement (the claim to be supported)
 - (b) Plan for the paper
 - (c) Optional: Background for the thesis

⁵Importantly, these presuppositions are distinct from implicit premises, which are essential to an argument and should be made explicit.

2. Main part (or body)
 - (a) Argument in support of the thesis
 - (b) Optional: Assessment of Objections
3. Conclusion

Introduction

The introduction should be no longer than necessary. The thesis statement should be explicitly and carefully composed in one sentence and as early as possible.⁶ It usually appears in the first paragraph and serves the reader as a compass which guides them from paragraph to paragraph showing her a clear path from introduction to conclusion. It also helps you to stay on course instead of being lead astray (by too many ideas). The thesis statement reminds you to relate every sentence and paragraph to your one controlling idea.

The plan for the paper specifies how you intend to argue for your thesis statement. The plan comprises a summary of your argument, in which you state the (most important) premises and the conclusion. The background information for your thesis might contain some definitions and/or clarifications of concepts, its implications, and motivation for and/or importance of the investigation.

Main Part

The main part contains (a) the premises of your argument plus the material that supports or explains them and (b) an evaluation of the objections to your thesis.

(a) In contrast to the introduction, each premise needs to be clearly stated, carefully explained and illustrated, and properly backed up by mathematical proofs, statistics, arguments, examples, or other reasons or evidence.

In the main part you should stick to the central rule of paragraph development: Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence that expresses only one point, and develop the point in the paragraph.

⁶You may, however, use some words to explain or elaborate on the statement if you think its meaning or implications are not fully clear.

Recall that in a good argument the conclusion follows deductively or inductively from the premises, and the premises are true. Your task in the main part is precisely to put forth such an argument. Hereby you should leave no doubt about what you are trying to show and how you are trying to show it.

(b) Often argumentative essays include an assessment of objections, i.e. a sincere effort to take into account the strongest objections or doubts that readers are likely to have about claims in your essay. Your task is it to show that these objections are unfounded. When you seriously deal with objections in your essay, and your claim still holds, you strengthened your argument. You lend credibility to it by considering all (important) sides and making an attempt to be fair and thorough. If you don't confront manifest objections, your readers may infer either that you are ignorant of the objections or that you don't have a good reply to them. An extra benefit is that in dealing with objections, you may see ways to make your own argument better. On the other hand, you may discover that you do not have an adequate reply to the objections. Then you look for ways to change your arguments or thesis to overcome the criticisms. You may weaken your thesis by some restriction, or you may need to abandon your thesis altogether in favour of another.

Conclusion

The conclusion appears in the end of the argumentative essay. It summarizes again the argument and the assessment of the objections. It may point to connections in other fields of inquiry or to further research to be done. A common mistake of students is to state a new point concerning the issue at hand. Such a point does not belong into a conclusion, because every relevant point should be developed at necessary length in the main part.

7 Steps of Writing

1. Select a topic and narrow it down to a specific issue such that you can adequately treat the issue within the given bounds, for instance, a certain number of words.
2. Research the issue.

3. Write a thesis statement.
4. Create an outline⁷
5. Write a first draft.
6. Study and revise your draft.
7. Produce a final draft.

You may not be able to follow the steps in the suggested sequence. At any stage in the process of writing, you may discover that your argument is not as good as you thought, that you forgot to include an important fact or reason, or that there is another way to alter your essay in order to make it better. You should then revise your outline and/or draft. Rethinking and revising are normal procedures even (and especially) for the best philosophers.

4.2 How to Avoid Fallacious Reasoning?

Recall that in an argument the premises are intended to support the conclusion. As a reader of philosophical texts, you want to determine whether the arguments you read are good. As a writer of philosophy, you want to ensure that the arguments you devise for your thesis are good. In general, you want to avoid being fooled by, or fooling others with, a bad argument.

You can become more proficient in argumentation if you can identify fallacies. Fallacies are defective arguments which may only appear sound or cogent. Here we explain why they are defective and how to detect them in reading and writing. We already treated the straw man fallacy and the ad hominem fallacy.⁸

⁷Here a practical advice: If you have the opportunity to meet your supervisor, you should have at least an outline that you send her some days before the meeting. The common basis for discussion may help the supervisor to understand what you are up to such that she may give you good advice and, perhaps, may point to interesting literature for the issue at hand. In any case, your supervisor should approve of your thesis statement before you invest many more hours of think-work in vain.

⁸We understand the ad hominem fallacy in a rather broad sense such that it comprises what is sometimes called the genetic fallacy, i.e. an argument which derives the truth of a statement by some source other than an individual, for example, organisations, political platforms, groups, schools of thought, and so on.

Appeal to the Masses

The appeal to the masses, or appeal to popularity, argues that a claim needs to be true because many people believe it. For example, ‘if most people believe that Jones is guilty, he is guilty’ is an appeal to the masses. The number of people who believe a claim, however, is not directly relevant to the claim’s truth. Large groups of people have been – and are – wrong about many things. Many people once believed that Earth is flat, mermaids are real, and atoms are the smallest particles.

Appeal to Tradition

The appeal to tradition argues that a claim is true merely because it has been held for a long time. Appeal to tradition is fallacious because the longevity of a traditional claim is logically irrelevant to its truth. Claims backed by a long tradition can be wrong – and often are.

Example 10. *Ancient shamanic medicine works. Native Americans have used it for hundreds of years.*

Note that the dismissal of a claim just because it is traditional is also fallacious. Remember that rejection or acceptance needs to be based on adequate grounds.

Equivocation

The fallacy of equivocation is to assign two different meanings to the same word in an argument. The word is used in one sense in a premise and in another sense somewhere else in the argument.

Example 11 (Equivocation).

1. *Premise: Only man is rational.*
2. *Premise: No woman is a man.*
3. *Conclusion: Therefore, no woman is rational.*

The example argument equivocates on the word ‘man’. In the first premise, man means humankind, in the second male. Thus the argument only seems to prove that women are not rational.

Appeal to Ignorance

If you appeal to ignorance, you argue that either (i) a claim is true because it hasn’t been proven false or (ii) a claim is false because it hasn’t been proven true.

Example 12 (Appeal to Ignorance).

1. *Premise: Scientists have never been able to disprove the existence of an afterlife.*
2. *Conclusion: Therefore, there is an afterlife.*

Logically, the appeal to ignorance often demands (from the opponent) to prove a negated universal statement, i.e. a claim that nothing of a particular kind exists. Can you prove that unicorns don’t exist? To prove this claim, you needed to search all space and time, which is an practically impossible task. Therefore, to request such sort of proof is unreasonable and unfair.

False Dilemma

In a false dilemma it is erroneously assumed that there are only two alternatives to choose from. The reasoning pattern is then, since one of the alternatives is false, the other needs to be true.

Example 13 (False Dilemma).

1. *Premise: Either medicine can explain how Christian was cured, or it is a miracle.*
2. *Premise: Medicine can’t explain how he was cured.*
3. *Conclusion: Therefore, it is a miracle how he was cured.*

The example argument is fallacious because there seem to be more possibilities than the two of the first premise. Perhaps, medicine is not far enough to explain how Christian was cured, but it was no miracle either.

Begging the Question

The fallacy of begging the question, also called vicious circle, tries to show a conclusion by using the conclusion as its own support. The reasoning pattern says “X is true because X is true”.

Example 14 (Begging the Question).

1. *Premise: The Bible says that God exists.*
2. *Premise: The Bible is true because God wrote it.*
3. *Conclusion: Therefore, God exists.*

The conclusion “God exists” is supported here by premises that assume that very conclusion. To be clear, in this scenario God wrote the bible in the second premise, i.e. it is in the second premise assumed that God exists – or how could God have written the bible without being existent?

Hasty Generalisation

The fallacy of hasty generalisation consists in drawing a conclusion about a whole group or class based on an inadequate sample of the group.

Example 15 (Hasty Generalisation).

1. *Premise: All three college professor I’ve met in my lifetime were bald.*
2. *Conclusion: Therefore, all college professors are bald.*

A sample can be inadequate because it is too small or not representative enough. In the example argument both is the case. You just cannot draw a reliable conclusion about all college professors based on a sample of three.

Slippery Slope

If you argue by a slippery slope, you argue that a particular action should not be taken, because it will lead inevitably to some undesired outcomes. The slippery slope argument becomes fallacious if you *erroneously* argue that a particular action

will lead inevitably to some undesired outcomes, i.e. if there is no reason to believe that the chain of events will ever happen.

Example 16 (Slippery Slope). *This trend toward gay marriage must be stopped. If gay marriage is permitted, then traditional marriage between a man and a woman will be debased and devalued, which will lead to an increase in divorces. And higher divorce rates can only harm our children.*

The example argument is fallacious because there is no good reason provided for believing that gay marriage will ultimately result in the chain of events described. If good reasons could be given, the argument might be saved.

Composition & Division

The fallacy of composition argues erroneously that what is true of the parts is also true of the whole.

Example 17 (Composition).

1. *Premise: Each piece of wood that makes up this cabin is lightweight.*
2. *Conclusion: Therefore, the cabin is lightweight.*

Note that sometimes the whole does have the same properties than its parts. For instance, if each part of the cabin is made of wood, the whole cabin is made of wood.

Vice versa, the fallacy of division argues erroneously that what is true of the whole is also true of its parts.

Example 18 (Division).

1. *Premise: The cabin is heavy.*
2. *Conclusion: Therefore, every part of the cabin is heavy.*

5 Summary

We learned that in philosophy, understood as the search for acceptable or true beliefs, logical argumentation is at heart. Moreover, it is necessary to identify the structure of an argument for a profitable lecture of philosophy. The reading and outlining of arguments helps you to learn the skill of devising arguments on your own. Only if you provide a sound or cogent argument in favour of your thesis statement, your essay is a great success. Of course, you will only achieve such a great success if you avoid fallacious reasoning. Another source of success is the complementation of a sound or cogent argument with a clear writing style: clarity helps you and your reader to understand even the most abstract and intricate issues.

References

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