Suggestions for Writing Philosophy Papers (Part 2)

Philosophy paper assignments will vary, depending on the area of philosophy and the professor’s preferences. However, one of the most common models for philosophy prompts asks students to engage with a philosopher’s view, and use it as the basis for an original argument. This model reflects the academic discourse and continuing debate within the field of philosophy.

In order to simplify the structure of this type of philosophy paper, this handout provides a general outline of what the final product should look like. Of course, any paper will necessarily be tailored to the specific requirements of the assignment; however, this should provide a basic understanding of the logical flow of an analytic philosophy paper.

Note: Even if your assignment doesn’t ask you to present an original objection, many prompts will ask you to evaluate an objection and reply the philosopher makes in response to her own argument. In these cases, your presentation of the argument and analysis will still follow this outline.

Body

Part 1: Explicate the philosopher’s argument (or whatever is relevant to the part of the argument you are engaging in)

Here it is important to:

- Define key terms
- Identify, explain, and defend the premises of the philosopher’s argument
- Show how the philosopher’s conclusion follows from these premises

Part 2: Pose an objection to the philosopher’s argument

Several ways you could do this:

- Identify a premise of the philosopher’s argument that you object to, and provide (and support) an alternative claim
  - If you take this approach, you will need to reiterate that the philosopher’s conclusion rested on the premise you are disproving
- Object to the conclusion by arguing that it is absurd or contradictory, and provide (and support) an alternative claim
  - One way to argue absurdity is to evaluate the implications of a conclusion to see if they are reasonable

Part 3: Reply to the objection you just posed

- Identify an assumption or premise of the argument in support of the objection’s alternative claim, and show why it is false
- Evaluate whether the objection’s alternative claim follows from the arguments presented in favor of that claim
- Concede the objection, but argue that it does not affect the important parts of the original argument

Part 4: Evaluation

- Evaluate whether the reply was successful in addressing the objection, or whether its success was limited (i.e. at this point what view is winning the debate?)
- What are the important implications of the conversation; depending on the success of the reply, what does this mean for the philosopher’s argument and the subject it is dealing with?

Intro/Conclusion

You can think of the introduction and conclusion for this type of paper as an academic abstract. Abstracts outline the process you go through in your paper. Thus, it is wise to include a sentence or two talking about what you will show (or have shown) in each section of your paper. In many cases it is easier to put off writing the introduction and conclusion until you’ve written the body of the paper, because both are contingent on how you present your arguments and what conclusion you reach from those arguments.