■ APPENDIX

Writing Philosophical Papers

LEEMON MCHENRY

■ *THE THESIS*

The art of philosophy is perhaps like the art of fencing, at least in one respect: you cannot learn it just from watching or reading books. Just as the novice fencer must take up the foil, épée or sabre; learn basic techniques of offense and defense; and then engage in a bout with an opponent, the student of philosophy must eventually take up the issues and problems, learn basic logical skills, and argue a thesis. In neither endeavor is there only one recipe for success. The progress is slow, but the more you practice, the more likely you are to get the swing of it.

One of the best ways to learn philosophy (though certainly not the only way—as Socrates clearly demonstrated) is to commit your ideas to writing. Here your imagined audience is your instructor, your classmates, and ultimately yourself because you are writing about what you believe to be the truth. Your task is to devise a convincing argument that shows you have done your work and know the material.

Philosophy papers are probably not very much like other papers you have written for English or history classes, even though basic writing skills such as spelling, grammar, and overall structure are just as important. What distinguishes a philosophy paper is its emphasis on critical analysis and argument of a thesis. In this respect, it is not a mere summary or paraphrase of an author's point of view. Nor is it a *collection* of quotations from several philosophers or commentators. Rather, a philosophy paper is the result of your taking up some problem, issue, or interpretation, subjecting it to careful analysis, and developing your own point of view. Thus, your *thesis* is the main *conclusion* of your paper that you support with *premises*. This gives your paper its essential logical structure such that the development of your essay is a process of articulating reasons for your main conclusion.

One point cannot be emphasized too much: *Your thesis is a proposition or statement that demands demonstration.* Therefore, the thesis should be less obvious than the reasons used to support it. An argument is a set of statements that support a conclusion, but if you begin to defend some point that is already well-established or uncontroversial, the paper is doomed from the start because there is no argument or any point that needs demonstration. A genuine thesis, on the other hand, should elicit the response from the reader: "Interesting, but let's see you prove it!"

■ *TWO TYPES OF PHILOSOPHY PAPERS*

There are two fundamental types of philosophy papers. The first is the topic or problem paper in which your aim is to take up some philosophical issue or problem (for example, "What is knowledge?" "Must morality be based on religion?" "Is capital punishment just?" or "What is an abstract object?") and attempt to argue for an answer. You develop your thesis by taking a stand on the issue and giving reasons to support what you believe. You may also want to criticize the views of those who hold the thesis that directly contradicts your view. In this way, you strengthen your thesis by refuting your opposition and, in the process, clarify for yourself the merits of the position you are defending.

The second type of philosophy paper is expository or interpretative. This type of paper requires the use of primary sources (original works) and secondary sources (commentaries on these works). In expository or interpretative papers, you concentrate on an original work or works written by some important philosopher(s) and attempt to uncover and explain the real point(s). For example, such a paper might discuss the definition of justice in Plato's *Republic*, Descartes's examination of the piece of wax in *The Meditations*, or the concept of duty in Kant and Ross. Here you defend some interpretation of these difficult-to-understand passages or works, answering such questions as "What do they mean?" and "What is the author really trying to say?" Your task is to illuminate and expose so that you make clear the key ideas, assumptions, implications, or meaning of terms. You may want to accomplish your exposition by referring your reader to other works or commentators to clarify the passages under analysis. This leads you to secondary sources that you may use either to support your interpretation or reject as inadequate to the proper understanding of the ideas, texts, and so on. Note especially that the expository paper still argues a thesis; it is your idea about how we should most properly understand and appreciate an idea or text.

In either kind of paper, you will typically have a beginning, middle and end, or:

1. a statement of your thesis or position—the view or conclusion for which you are going to argue;
2. an exposition and/or argument, with proper documentation of your sources; and
3. a conclusion—a final statement of the thesis, together with a brief summary of how you have reached it.

Because the thesis and defense are crucial parts of any philosophy paper, it is essential that you include a brief statement of your thesis at the very beginning of your paper. Doing so clarifies for your reader what you intend to accomplish in the paragraphs that follow. For the most part, the paper will be evaluated in terms of how successful you are in doing what you said you were going to do. You might clearly identify your thesis by saying: "In this paper, I will argue that. . . ." or "This essay will defend the view that. . . ." Now you can proceed to discuss the thesis and provide background information that explains its importance. Make certain that the reader is left with no doubt as to what you intend to accomplish. This sets up the main body of your paper, which contains the support for your particular thesis. To bring your paper to a close, you will need to summarize briefly what you have done and how you have done it.

■ *SUGGESTIONS FOR GETTING STARTED*

Getting started is often the most difficult obstacle to overcome. In many cases, a thesis will not be the first thing you think of, although it is often helpful to have some rough idea (and outline) before you plunge into the main body of the paper. You should regard your initial ideas as tentative and subject to revision as you explore the thicket of arguments for and against the view you hope to defend. Mozart once said that his musical compositions were committed to paper quickly because everything was already finished in his head before he picked up the quill. Most writers, however, rarely write papers in the fashion that Mozart wrote music. Leaving aside cases of extraordinary genius, for the most part philosophy papers grow out of successive revisions in which ideas clarify themselves as you engage in the process of writing.

The following suggestions should help you get started. First, find some topic with which you feel comfortable. If the problems of metaphysics and epistemology are too obscure and remote from your own personal concerns, then find a problem in ethics, aesthetics, or the philosophy of religion that excites your imagination or addresses some issue in your own life. In addition, do not try to cover too much territory. Narrow your topic, and do not try to defend a thesis that would require a book-length discussion. Find a topic suitable for the length requirement of the paper and pursue it in sufficient depth, showing that you have mastered some aspect of the problem or text. In many respects, your achievement will grow in proportion to what you decide to leave out.

Second, study the readings carefully, think about the material, and make notes.

Third, formulate a thesis about a problem and begin to explore what you think about the problem. In the most basic sense, your main task in writing a philosophy paper is to come up with some fairly original thesis or novel interpretation of the text. As we have noted already, this will probably be rather tentative at first.

Fourth, consider preparing an outline to help you formulate the logical structure of the paper.

Let us pretend that you are a Christian and want to defend the soul theory. You bring to this project certain assumptions that you have acquired from your background—home life, church, and personal experience. These may include a belief in an immortal soul or the resurrection of the body that survives death in an otherworldly paradise or in an otherworldly hell, depending on one's moral behavior and pious devotion in this earthly existence. You therefore begin to think about your beliefs within the context of the philosophical issue of personal identity and construct your thesis: "This essay will demonstrate the truth of the Christian view of the soul."

This is an ambitious project because you begin with the strong claim that you will demonstrate the "truth" of the Christian view of the soul, but it is a good starting place. Having read the various essays in this volume relevant to your thesis however,—"Personal Identity" (Chapter 11) and "Philosophy of Mind" (Chapter 12)—you are confronted with some serious objections to the very notion of a soul. Is there really such an entity in the first place? If so, what exactly is it?

You might be troubled by these problems but you remain confident that your original thesis can be defended against these objections if you modify it and proceed with careful analysis. Furthermore, you are advised by your instructor to read the relevant parts of Descartes's work that defend the soul theory, and now you revise your thesis to be slightly more modest: "This essay will attempt to demonstrate that there are souls distinct from our bodies that survive the death of our bodies." Notice that this thesis is narrower in scope because it does not commit you to all of the claims connected to the Christian view. For example, your thesis involves defending the independence of the soul from the body, but it does not commit you to arguing for the existence of heaven or hell.

This now gives you something on which to build an outline and begin writing the essay. At this point, your argument will involve addressing the objections to the notion of the soul and an attempt to overcome them with the help of Descartes. You will also need to show that your view holds up better than that of the opposition, for example, a purely materialistic interpretation that holds that persons do not survive the death of their bodies.

To sum up then, you have found a topic, constructed a tentative thesis, and modified the thesis in light of further reading and reflection. You can now get down to the business of writing and thinking through the problems.

This, of course, is the hard part. You must always guard against dogmatism. If, in the process of defending your thesis, you discover that your view really doesn't hold up against the opposition or that you have been assuming the truth of your position without critical examination, you must follow the argument where it leads you. Ultimately, your first and foremost obligation is to truth and honesty.

As you write and revise your paper, be aware of logical errors or fallacies that are commonly found in philosophical arguments. There are basically two types.

Formal fallacies are errors owing to the form or structure of the argument. Some of these mistakes are discussed by Takashi Yagisawa in Chapter Two. *Informal fallacies* are errors mainly owing to the content or context of the argument. For example, you are guilty of the straw man fallacy when you misrepresent the view of the opposition in the attempt to refute that view. Be careful, then, to ensure that you understand and fairly represent the view you set out to attack; otherwise, you are simply attacking your own misunderstanding. A thorough discussion of fallacies would take us well beyond the scope of this appendix. Two good sources on fallacies are listed in the logic books shown in For Further Reading.

In light of what you discover in thinking about your topic, you might have to abandon your original beliefs and begin to think afresh about your paper. If, in fact, this happens, in no way does it mean failure, for the whole point of writing the paper is to confront yourself with this very process of critical examination. What survives this process is worthy of defense; what does not survive and forces you to reconstruct your beliefs is an intellectual step forward.

Once your paper is finished, read it over to look for spelling and typographical errors, faulty grammar, logical errors, or incoherence in the flow of your argument. It is always a good idea to write your paper well in advance of the deadline so that you can lay it aside for a while and come back to it again with a fresh eye before you deliver it to your instructor. It is also helpful to have someone else look over the paper for you, but make sure that you choose someone whose judgment you can trust. After you have made corrections and incorporated suggestions, you are ready to prepare the final draft.

■ *FOR FURTHER READING*

Edwards, Anne Michaels. 2000. *Writing to Learn: An Introduction to Writing Philosophical Essays.* Boston: McGraw Hill.

Hurley, Partick J. 2000. *A Concise Introduction to Logic.* Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

Kahane, Howard. 1995. *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric.* Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

Martinich, A. P. 1989. *Philosophical Writing.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Strunk, William Jr., and E. B. White. 1979. *The Elements of Style.* New York: Macmillan Publishing.