VI
Writing Philosophy

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Preparing to write one's first philosophy essay usually raises a number of important questions. Is this like writing a research paper? Does the instructor just want my opinion about a certain issue? How do I get started? Am I supposed to improve on the views of professional philosophers? The purpose of this chapter is to help you understand what is normally expected when you are asked to write a critical philosophy essay. You will also find some practical rules to follow as you write your paper. These rules should help you when you write an examination essay, too.

The Nature of a Critical Philosophy Essay

The central purpose of a philosophy paper is unlike that of many term papers you may have been assigned in courses other than philosophy; it is usually *critical* rather than *reportive*. Reportive work generally takes two forms: either expressing your personal viewpoint on an assigned topic, such as love, or compiling and organizing the results of laboratory work or of book research on a topic such as the economic causes of social unrest. In both forms one simply presents the facts as one understands them or as someone else does. Your philosophy instructor may, of course, assign a purely reportive project. This chapter deals essentially with critical philosophy papers, however.

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A critical philosophy essay involves much more than simply presenting your own opinions and the views of relevant philosophers on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Instead, you question and become intellectually involved with your subject matter, taking little for granted. Specifically, there are five primary rules to follow in writing a critical philosophy essay. Firstly, you must *clarify* key ideas. For instance, are the philosophically troublesome terms defined? Are the theories in question exemplified and presented in straightforward language? Secondly, you must test the soundness of the arguments for or against the theories in question. Are the inferences valid? Are the premises true? Thirdly, you must evaluate the theories, using some of the methods discussed in Chapter IV of this book. Are the assumptions correct? Are the consequences plausible? Fourthly, and most important, you must support what you assert with reasons. Are your claims backed up with arguments? Do they follow from other claims already established? Finally, it is important to defend your position against the best possible arguments that might be raised in opposition to it. Try to anticipate potential misinterpretations and criticisms and decide how you would attempt to deal with them. This will assist you in recognizing opposing points of view as well as potential weaknesses in your own arguments and position. To summarize: Whereas in a reportive paper you organize and pass on others' thoughts, in a critical philosophy essay you think for yourself, though not in a vacuum.

The topic of rational *support* is especially important. Many students tend to rely on certain illegitimate methods to support a position. Here we note five such methods. In particular, you should not support your case merely by—

1. Labeling the case your own
2. Asserting the case's superiority over the competition
3. Using **ad hominem** arguments, that is, attacking a person's character or circumstances, rather than that person's arguments
4. Citing an authority, whether philosophical or scientific
5. Exemplifying the case or defining its key terms

The defects of the first three methods are for the most part self-evident. The other two methods, insofar as they are, in themselves, the more legitimate, scholarly approaches, can also be the more deceptive. Consider the fourth method. Remember that citing a philosophical authority carries little weight if you do not also adduce arguments, for even the greatest philosophers' views can be questioned. Citing a scientific authority, meanwhile, is usually sufficient to attest to the truth of certain empirical facts, but as you will recall from Chapter I, those facts do not entail the truth of any particular philosophical theory. Turning to the fifth method, remember that by illustrating your position and defining the key terms, you are only helping your readers to understand what you are arguing for, not why they should accept it. We considered the correct use of examples and definitions in Chapter IV.

The following passage, which contains no arguments (no conclusions derived from premises), illustrates some of the incorrect methods of supporting a position. The numbers in parentheses indicate the relevant defect.

Let me support the view known as **ethical relativism**. *The truth of ethical relativism is shown by the fact that two persons might disagree over the moral rightness of a certain act and, if they are from different cultures or backgrounds, both may be correct (5). Now anyone who denies this is authoritarian (3). Who am I to condemn the Eskimos for leaving their aged relatives on the ice to die? Moreover, anthropologists have been telling us for a long time that ethical relativism is true (4). Finally, the only alternative to ethical relativism is* **ethical absolutism,** *and we know absolutism is false (2).*

Many students worry about producing a critical philosophy essay because hey fear that their labors will be evaluated according to their instructor's personal ›eliefs. Let us emphasize, however, that your essay will be analyzed on the basis of ›bjective criteria. For example, have you written clearly? Is your case supported with ırguments? Have you fairly and accurately presented others' views? Is your essay vell organized? Have you attempted to think for yourself instead of just parroting he views of other philosophers? Your essay will not be evaluated on the basis of 'our personal convictions or those of your instructor. Whether or not your instructor grees with the general position you advance is largely irrelevant. In fact, instructors ›refer that you rationally support a theory that they think is false, rather than merely ›resent a view that they believe is true.

Organizing Your Essay

Putting together a coherent, well-organized philosophy essay is not a sim-›le and clear-cut task. This section will discuss five organizational strategies that ıay help you organize your essay. The strategies are these: (1) formulating the prob-ɛm; (2) deciding on a format; (3) incorporating other philosophers' views; (4) pre-enting a good introduction; and (5) achieving coherence.

Formulating the Problem Critical philosophy essays involve responses to hilosophical problems. If it has not been done already, your first task should be to ɛanslate the general problem or topic about which you are writing into a specific *uestion* or *statement*. Suppose, for example, that you are asked to write a critical ssay on the problem of evil. You should first ask yourself exactly what questions ıis problem involves. In the case of the problem of evil, a relevant question would e, "How can God's perfect nature, particularly His moral character, be reconciled ›ith the existence of evil in the world?" Then again, you may wish to focus critical ttention on a certain controversial response to that question. If so, this response ıust be translated into a specific statement—for example, "Human beings, not God, re responsible for evil through the depraved exercise of their free will"—which may ıen be either attacked or defended. Performing such preliminary "translations" will ive you a focal point around which to organize your essay and will help prevent our drifting from the issue during the course of your analysis.

Once you have formulated the specific question or statement with which you will be dealing, you should then clarify the key terms. A lack of clarity in the initial formulation of the problem can affect the organization and direction of your essay. To continue with our original example, consider the term 'evil'. So long as we restrict ourselves to a certain kind of evil, namely, moral evil, such as lying and murder, it is easier to suppose that human beings are responsible for introducing evil in what was originally a perfect world. But even if we accept this response at face value and we do not question the assumption of free will, the restriction to moral evil only partially resolves the problem. Why? Because it does not account for natural evil such as disease. Surely human beings are not responsible for disease. Wouldn't God remain responsible for natural evil? Answers to questions involving one kind of evil do not automatically transfer to questions involving another kind. Distinguishing between the kinds of evil at the beginning of your analysis would probably require you to limit your investigation to one variety or else to adopt a different strategy that will enable you to reconcile both types of evil with God's moral perfection. Initial clarity greatly improves organizational strategy. Clarity is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Having clarified the key terms, you should next think through the assumptions of the question you are attempting to answer. How do they influence the kinds of answers that might be given? For example, the question "Why did God create the world with so much evil?" tends to lock one into a fairly narrow range of answers, all involving God's motives. A natural response that uncritically takes the question at face value is, "Because God wanted a testing ground for distinguishing between the worthy and the not so worthy." A critical look at the assumptions of the question, however, might easily have led you either to reformulate it or to raise a different issue altogether. The question "Why did God create the world with so much evil?" already presupposes affirmative answers to the questions "Does God exist?" "Did God create the world?" "Is God responsible for evil?" and even "Does evil exist?" If good reasons can be found for answering any of these questions in the negative—for example, reasons for concluding that God is not responsible for evil—then the original question about why He created a world with evil collapses. You will find it helpful, then, to consider the assumptions implied in your initial formulation of the problem before writing your essay. And you may or may not find it necessary to reformulate the problem.

Deciding on a Format Closely related to formulating the problem is deciding on an appropriate format for developing your ideas. Probably the most commonly adopted formats are these: (1) comparing and contrasting two or more theories—for example, two attempted resolutions of the problem of evil—in order to determine the most adequate among them; (2) criticizing a single theory or argument; (3) defending another philosopher's view against mistaken criticism; and (4) supporting and defending an original theory of your own.

You must decide which of these (or other) formats best suits your interests and abilities. Remember, however, that philosophy is a cumulative activity wherein one comes closer to the truth by avoiding the mistakes of other philosophers. So if

you do not know where to begin, the most fruitful strategy for your first essay will probably be to criticize views that seem to you mistaken. Why? Because you already have at your disposal those critical techniques discussed earlier. By asking yourself, "Does this argument appear sound?" and "Are the consequences of this view plausible?" you may take an important first step in thinking for yourself.[1] Also, if you avoid the criticism applicable to implausible views, the lines along which your own thesis must be developed will emerge naturally.

Incorporating Other Philosophers' Views In organizing your paper, you may find yourself asking: "How am I supposed to improve on the theories of philosophers who have spent their lives thinking about these issues? Even where I think one philosopher is wrong, it seems that all I can do is quote another philosopher to support my contention. I have thought about the issue and in my opinion philosopher X's arguments are correct, so here they are." Beginning students in philosophy are not expected to revolutionize philosophy. Your instructor is interested primarily in getting you to begin thinking for yourself. But provided that you do not repeat others' views unquestioningly, and provided that you give credit where it is due—especially when paraphrasing or using direct quotations—it is natural that you will use the arguments of other philosophers. No writer on philosophical problems works in a vacuum.

Most importantly, the objection to incorporating other philosophers' views involves a false assumption. Exercising one's own problem-solving abilities is not incompatible with bringing in other philosophers' theories and arguments. Incorporating other views is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Often, your paper will blend or synthesize your thinking with the views about which you have read. For example, you may defend another person's theory against unsound criticism with your own arguments. Other possible blends are (1) restating a philosopher's arguments or theory in a clearer, more incisive, way; (2) applying that argument or theory to areas not discussed by its original proponent; (3) admitting the view is mistaken in places but attempting to remedy those deficiencies and thus produce a modified view.

Presenting a Good Introduction Once you have thought through the problem, determined the general conclusions you wish to argue for, and decided on a format for developing your ideas, you should be ready to express the results of your preliminary investigation in a good introduction. A good introduction has several virtues. First, it helps keep your essay on the right track. That is, if you commit yourself to showing that a certain thesis is false, then that is what you must do. The chances are much greater that your essay will lack coherence and direction if you do not spell out your commitments in advance. Second, it gives the reader some assurance that you know what you are about to undertake.

[1] You will probably want to consider other critical questions, too. For example: "Do the arguments show something other than what they are intended to show?" "Has the writer properly interpreted the problem?" "Are central claims mutually consistent?" "Has the writer subtly changed the meaning of key terms?" "Is the theory sufficiently developed and exemplified?"

There is no exact format for good introductions. They should, however, clearly set out the following: (1) the problem to which you will address yourself; (2) what you intend to show, for example, that a theory should be modified or that one theory is preferable to another; and (3) how you propose to do this, for example, by showing that one theory rests on highly questionable assumptions. Each of the three points is made clear in the sample introduction that follows:

> *In his novel about a behaviorally engineered utopia,* Walden II, *B. F. Skinner claims through one of its central characters that if man is free then a science of human behavior is impossible. Since Skinner believes that a science of psychology is possible, he draws the inference that man is not free. While his thesis may be supportable on other grounds, I propose to demonstrate in this paper that Skinner's reasons for denying human freedom are not persuasive. After presenting his view in more detail, I shall argue that his case rests on faulty assumptions concerning the nature of freedom and the purpose of science. A science of psychology, we shall see, is quite compatible with human freedom.*

Achieving Coherence Many undergraduate papers in philosophy suffer from a lack of coherence and incisiveness—what we may call a "drifting" phenomenon. Your reader becomes puzzled over where you are and what you are doing. Undefined terms appear from nowhere. Arguments appear out of nowhere, with little or no indication of what they are supposed to show. The same point is rehashed five different ways. Examples are inserted randomly. Too much territory is covered in a single sentence or paragraph. Too much writing is devoted to inessential points or perhaps to saying nothing. These are just some of the manifestations of drifting.

Of course, this phenomenon is by no means unique to philosophy papers. It tends to occur more frequently in students' philosophy papers, however, because of the relative novelty of the subject matter and the intellectual discipline required to produce a good philosophy essay. After you have written your first draft, therefore, go through it again, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and ask yourself the following questions. What is the relevance of this passage, and does it clearly fit here? Is the passage an essential link in my argument? Is it used to clarify? Does it tell the reader where I am and where I'm going? If it is an argument, is its relevance to what I'm trying to show clear? Does this sentence add anything to the substance of my essay? Does my introduction get the point? Your responses to these questions will probably mean rewriting or deleting some passages. Doing so, however, will help greatly to tighten the organization of your paper.

Achieving Clarity

In the preceding section we considered ways to organize an essay. Sound organization is essential for communicating your ideas effectively in a philosophy essay and in itself contributes greatly to the overall clarity (and persuasiveness) of

your essay. Our concern in this section, however, is primarily with the clarity of individual words and sentences. We shall consider the following areas: (1) ensuring that key terms clearly express the ideas they are supposed to convey, (2) using examples properly, and (3) improving your style of writing.

Clearly Expressing Your Ideas Clear writing presupposes clear understanding; if you do not understand the point you attempt to get across, you can hardly expect your reader to be enlightened, no matter how pleasing your style of expression may be. There is no foolproof procedure for gaining this prerequisite understanding. But rereading your sources, participating in "think sessions" with your friends, conferring with your instructor, and applying some of the critical questions discussed in Chapters IV and V—all these strategies should help. "Think sessions," whether personal or collective, are especially important, for in philosophy it is easy to believe that you clearly understand key ideas because you have memorized words—when in fact you do not. This is why "cramming" for philosophy exams is often ineffective.

Once you know what you wish to say, you will want to consider how you can communicate your ideas most effectively. If you do not express yourself clearly, your reader will usually assume that you do not fully understand your topic. Clarity of expression at the beginning is always preferable to later debates over whether one really understood what one was writing about. Most instructors are unmoved by such pleas from students as "Come on, now, you know what I meant!" The most likely response is, "Well, why didn't you write what you meant?" Following are a few rules of thumb that will help you present a clear statement of your ideas.

Firstly, avoid vagueness, particularly of key terms and sentences. A vague expression is one whose meaning is not clear because it fails to specify exactly to what objects or circumstances it should be applied. Vague ideas are "rough" ideas. For example, a vague idea of 'democracy' is "a political system in which the people have something to say about how they are governed." Although this conception of democracy is not incorrect, it needs considerable refinement. Who, for instance, are "the people"—those educated enough to vote intelligently, or sufficiently well-off to pay taxes without going hungry? Are we talking about a majority of people? If so, may they exterminate the minority? How much voice may they have in being governed? Did Hitler's Germany qualify as a democracy because "the people" freely chose Hitler as their leader? Vagueness can be reduced by providing adequate definitions, using examples, restating your point in a different way—in short, by spelling out in detail what you mean.

Secondly, avoid ambiguity. Ambiguity occurs when the reader is unsure which among several possible meanings of an expression is intended, although each meaning may be relatively clear by itself. A common fallacy of ambiguity is to begin an essay using a term to mean one thing and then to switch implicitly to another meaning without informing your reader. For example, a student recently wrote an essay in which he sometimes used the term "mind" in a collective sense to mean "the sum total of one's particular experiences, dispositions, and thoughts" and at other

times used it in a substantial sense connoting a thing, "a container or repository of particular thoughts and experiences." Such ambiguous expression greatly reduces clarity.

Thirdly, minimize your use of technical or profound-sounding expressions. When you must use them, clarify them immediately. A few examples of such expressions are 'reality', 'absolute', 'subjective', 'essence', 'inner self', 'cosmic', 'power structure', and 'establishment mentality'. Covering as much territory as they do, they are often unsuitable for precisely formulating and analyzing a problem. Unless you clearly fix their meaning, their elasticity is such that they are open to a variety of connotations, which will both confuse your readers and allow them to read too much into your view. Such expressions lend themselves to vagueness and ambiguity. For these reasons, avoid also such clichés as "Seeing is believing" or "It all depends on your point of view." These reveal your unwillingness to think through what you are writing.

Fourthly, do not rely heavily on metaphors and analogies. For example, time has been metaphorically depicted as a river that passes from out of the future into the past. And the world has been compared to a giant, complex machine. Although metaphors and analogies are often helpful in presenting philosophical ideas, their capacity to enlighten is equaled by their capacity to mislead. The world is not just like a machine. Some have argued that without human interference, nature's balance exhibits an efficient order and continuity unmatched by any machine. Depending on the point you wish to make, you may decide to drop the analogy altogether, considering all the ways in which the world is and is not like a machine. Metaphors and analogies should be used in addition to, never in place of, straightforward argumentation.

Finally, make what you mean and what your words mean harmonize. Choose your words carefully and write exactly what you mean. For example, you may wish to describe a kleptomaniac as one who does not act freely. You may express this by saying that the kleptomaniac steals "automatically." But this expression does not say what you want to say, because there is no incompatibility between acting freely and acting automatically. What you probably mean is that the kleptomaniac acts compulsively, though what your words mean is that the person acts without deliberation, spontaneously. So it is important to keep in mind that the words you use may mean something that you do not intend to convey. To help avoid this situation, ask yourself, "What do I want to say?" and "How can I say it most effectively?"

Precision is most important in philosophy. Avoid careless expression by rereading your written work. To take another example, a student recently wrote: "The materialist believes that the body is a physical entity. There is no separation from the body of the soul at death." Here the instructor would know what the student wants to say (or at least ought to be saying), but the statement is poorly suited to its purpose. For instance, the dualist also believes that the body is a physical entity, but holds that there is in addition a nonphysical aspect, a mind or soul. What the student meant to say was, "The materialist believes that persons are physical entities, nothing more." Furthermore, from the second sentence in the student's passage it seems as though there is a soul that just doesn't happen to leave the body at the time of death. The student should have said more straightforwardly, "There is no soul or mind that survives the death of the body." So once again, express yourself carefully.

Using Examples In Chapter IV we noted how examples help to clarify meaning. Using examples is particularly important in writing your philosophy essay. Appropriate examples will reduce vagueness and help to keep both you and your reader from getting lost in generalities and abstractions. The following are three points to bear in mind when you use examples.

First, remember that examples are not arguments, but illustrative devices. They do not demonstrate the truth of your case; they help to clarify meaning. For instance, citing Jesus, Socrates, and Gandhi may help to illustrate what you mean by the expression "social revolutionary." But doing so does not prove that these three men were, in fact, social revolutionaries. To prove that, argumentation is required.

Second, it is often helpful to think through the relation between the example you cite and what it is supposed to exemplify. This helps to avoid confusion and increase precision. For instance, your essay may revolve around the concept of a supreme being. As particular examples, you cite God, Allah, and Brahman. But these are examples of very different types of supreme beings. In fact, the impersonal Brahman differs so radically from the colorful creator Allah that Brahman probably should not be classified as a supreme being at all. So if your discussion refers only to the concept of a creator-God to which we ascribe certain humanlike qualities, citing Brahman would probably confuse your reader, not clarify your case.

Finally, it is important that your examples be specific enough to carry the weight of illustration. For instance, if you attempt to show what it would be like to act always according to the golden rule, you must give enough detail to tell your reader what acting according to such a rule would actually come to. To be more specific, would judges have to release criminals on the grounds that they, the judges, would not want to be sent to prison themselves? Or is this a misapplication of the golden rule? Tying your case down to particular examples will increase clarity.

Writing Well In closing, it may be helpful to mention a few matters regarding your style of writing. Entire books have been devoted to the topics of writing style and grammar.[2] The following are a few practical suggestions on clear writing.

Firstly, unless you are a relatively polished writer, keep your sentences short. Doing so will help you to express one idea at a time and thereby increase precision. Similarly, avoid wordiness. For example, consider the poorly executed sentence "What we see out there in the external world is really there"; written simply as "We see the world as it is," it still expresses the same point.

Secondly, use transitional devices, such as "Let us now turn to our first argument" and "Following my presentation of theory X, I shall offer two criticisms of it." Using devices that tell your reader where you've been and where you expect to go will help keep both of you on track as you guide the reader naturally through the

[2] A helpful, concise text devoted to elementary rules of style and grammar is William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979). A widely used text about the mechanics of constructing term papers is Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). A delightful work with many helpful tips is Brand Blanshard, *On Philosophical Style* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1967).

sections of your paper to the conclusion. Also, in longer essays it can be helpful to stop occasionally to summarize in a brief paragraph or two the substance of your argument up to that point.

Thirdly, do not pad your essay with useless additions, such as too many examples for a single point, apologies for not having shown more than you did, restatements of the obvious, and extended quotations. Quotations should be included only when there is a reason for giving someone's exact words—for example, when a question of interpretation is at issue. Padding diverts your reader's interest from the important points you wish to make.

Fourthly, write in the active voice rather than in the passive voice. Although writing in the passive voice is not necessarily less clear, too much passive voice fatigues your reader and is less likely to make a forceful impression. For example, instead of writing, "Theory X was earlier shown by me to be false," write, "I have demonstrated that theory X is false."

Fifthly, don't overwork indefinite terms such as "this," "that," "which," "thing," and "idea"; be specific. Of course, such terms are sound aids to normal exposition. When overused, however, they frequently generate vagueness and confusion, requiring the reader to puzzle out what they refer to. Suppose in examining a theory, you cite two philosophical claims and then state, "I shall now argue that this is false." Here, the antecedent is ambiguous, for it is not clear whether "this" refers to both claims or to one of them or, if it refers to one of them, which one it refers to. As an alternative, you might say, "I shall now argue that the second claim, 'The end always justifies the means', is false."

Finally, consider visiting your school's writing center. This will help with matters of grammar, style, and possibly overall argumentative strategy. It will also allow your instructor to focus more on the substance of your philosophical points.

In conclusion, we have surveyed a few of the points that will help you develop your philosophy essay. You have not been offered a foolproof method or mechanical procedure for writing philosophy clearly and coherently, for no such method exists. Philosophical ability, as manifested in clear and cogent thinking and writing, is one of the arts of life—to be cultivated by anyone who has the willingness to think and the spirit to endeavor.

A Sample Essay

The following is a very brief hypothetical essay. For purposes of illustration, it contains far more mistakes and deficiencies than would normally appear in a single paper. The important point is to understand and avoid the mistakes included. These are enumerated at the end of the draft. Corresponding to each number in the draft is a statement of the relevant mistake. Some of the shortcomings, including those of a stylistic nature, are noted for the first time. A rewritten draft is then presented. Although it is not intended as a piece of professional philosophy and is open to criticism, the new draft is a substantial improvement in both style and content. Some potentially good points made in the first draft are retained, the more questionable ones abandoned. The revised draft represents a reasonable ideal to strive for in your own expression.

Preliminary Draft

Through the ages people have asked what is right and what is wrong (1). Abortion is one of those questions (2). Now it seems to me (3) that abortion is morally right (4), especially since the recent Supreme Court ruling outlawed antiabortion laws in various states (5). There is lots of evidence to show that this is so. Once some of this evidence is presented, any thinking person (6) should favor abortion. Of course, since this is a philosophical problem and we are all entitled to our own opinions on such matters (7), about all I can do is present my views and hope that the reader will be convinced (8).

I'll begin by noting the influence of religious beliefs upon the question of abortion (9). For example, concern over the soul of an aborted fetus has led (10) to an attitude completely insensitive to the problems of the here and the now. For example, what happens to unwanted children (11)? Does anybody in his right mind think this is good (12)? Besides, I don't think religion should take precedence over a mother's right to control her own body (13).

To prove my point, let's consider the following example in detail (14). Mary Jones decided she did not want any children. Yet unfortunately she got pregnant. When she thought about getting an abortion, however, she felt guilty because society, which is filled with religious beliefs such as fear of God, made her feel guilty (15). So she had the child. But since it was not wanted and was retarded, she took very poor care of it and placed the responsibilities of motherhood on schoolteachers, babysitters, and the like. Eventually he became a burden to society. The fact that she was in part responsible for this outcome in turn made Mary's life miserable all because the original decision was through social pressure taken out of her hands (16).

They say that attitudes about abortion are more liberal these days (17). Certainly, the fact that more and more women are getting abortions these days shows that it's becoming more and more moral (18). But those who are against abortion still do not seem to perceive that their position rests on a contradiction (19). We grant women rights to choose their spouses, careers, and lifestyles, to take care of or mistreat their bodies, and raise children as they see fit. Why should we force on them the potential pain, suffering, and psychological stress of pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood if they become pregnant and do not want a child (20)? Besides, once we start prohibiting women from having abortions, we will wind up telling them who they can marry and dictating the rest of their lives for them (21).

The antiabortionists have an answer for this last question. They say that the real issue centers on the fact that we are dealing with a human life. Now if fetuses really were human, I would agree that abortion would be murder, and I would not go so far as to say that murder should take priority over the wishes of the mother. The proof that this is not so, though, consists in the fact that they can't tell us when human life really begins (22). Some say at the time of conception. Others say at three months, and still others at birth. Thus we see the choice is arbitrary (23). Personally, I think life begins when the child could begin breathing and be independent of the mother (24). At any rate, the antiabortionists have no better reasons for thinking abortion is murder than I do for thinking it is not. So abortion is morally right (25).

Comments

1. This and similar types of opening sentences ought to be avoided. They are not necessary, have a hollow ring to them, and often appear as attempts to convince the reader of the importance of the problem being dealt with.

2. Abortion itself is not *a* question much less *the* question "What is right?" or "What is wrong?" Rather, it is an action. Moreover, even if abortions were performed five thousand years ago, there is some doubt about whether they posed any particular moral issue.

3. Autobiographical references should be avoided unless they provide useful information relevant to one's case. Any reader will assume that the case being argued "seems" to the writer to be true.

4. This claim should have been immediately clarified, so that the reader would know exactly what is being asserted and be able to assess the soundness of its supporting arguments. As stated, it might mean anything from "Abortion is always justified for any reason whatsoever, even as an alternative to birth control" to "Abortion is justified only when the life of the mother is at stake." The problem is not clearly translated into a statement of a specific issue.

5. This is a good example of the fallacy of irrelevant reasons (non sequitur), since it presents a Supreme Court decision as evidence for the morality of a practice. But when the Supreme Court pronounces on the constitutionality of an issue, it is still open to question whether it is moral. Legal justification and moral justification are not the same thing.

6. Question-begging definitions should always be avoided. Here "thinking person" has been redefined so as to include only those people who agree with the author on this issue.

7. No one denies that we are entitled to our own philosophical opinions in the sense of exercising a right to have an opinion. Hence, this clause is not worth including.

8. This statement is superfluous, since the purpose of any philosophy essay is to convince others with arguments. Also, this qualification may just imply that the writer wants to be excused from arguing a case on the mistaken assumption that philosophical commitment is arbitrary. The entire introductory paragraph leaves much to be desired. We are presented with only vague ideas of the problem and of what the author intends to show, with no indication of how the author intends to proceed. In general, then, the paragraph fails to conform adequately to the principles of good introduction set forth earlier in this chapter.

9. This sentence appears from out of nowhere, with no forewarning or transitional elements to help the reader place in perspective the relevance of religion for the issue of abortion. Use of the term "influence" suggests the writer is concerned with the psychological or sociological effect of certain religious ideas. In fact, it is the logical or conceptual relevance of these ideas that is at stake. For example, the basic claim of this paragraph is that the antiabortion position is based upon certain false religious assumptions. Yet the distinction between assumptions that serve as necessary conditions and those that serve as sufficient conditions is

particularly important here. The assumption the writer cites, belief in souls, is certainly not a necessary condition of the belief in the immorality of abortion. Yet in apparently rejecting that assumption, the writer implies that the antiabortion view must also collapse. This would be an effective strategy only if the assumption were a necessary condition.

10. It is unlikely that the writer intends to say that a preoccupation with the soul leads to (causes) an otherworldly orientation, since this preoccupation is but one of many manifestations of an already established otherworldly orientation. The author's meaning and the meaning of the word "lead" do not harmonize. Moreover, this is but one of several rather lengthy and poorly executed sentences in the draft. The sentence might better be broken down and presented as follows: "The orientation of religion tends to generate an insensitive attitude towards pressing contemporary moral issues, such as abortion. Those persons more concerned with the soul are less likely to take seriously the problems of unwanted children." (Of course, whether this is true is another issue.)

11. It is usually prudent to avoid rhetorical questions in philosophy essays and say what is on one's mind. This question might better be reformulated as follows: "Consider, for example, the fact of thousands of unwanted children growing up undernourished, poorly educated, or at best unloved and uncared for."

12. Leading questions should always be avoided, and nothing would be lost by deleting this sentence. Clearly, what often happens to unwanted children is not good.

13. Again, there is no transition or forewarning. The writer should take one argument at a time and not introduce new issues until ready to deal with them. A "drifting" phenomenon is evident. Moreover, this way of stating the matter suggests that the writer assumes without question that the fetus is nothing more than a (disposable?) "part" of the mother's body on a par with, say, a finger.

14. Which point is at issue here? Several are mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Moreover, we recall that examples exemplify. They do not prove claims. "Prove" should be changed to "illustrate."

15. This poorly expressed sentence contains several questionable claims and assumptions that do not receive adequate critical attention. Which society are we talking about? Is, say, American culture "filled" with religious beliefs and attitudes? Is fear of God representative of them? Who is being blamed—society, religion, or both? Or should we also blame Mary to some extent for being so influenced by what others think? Moreover, the writer assumes without argument that the religious beliefs in question are false. It is also assumed that Mary ought not to feel guilty about possibly having an abortion. If so, why? The feeling alone doesn't prove anything one way or the other.

16. Several additional comments about this paragraph are in order. To begin, unless this illustration is supposed to be a unique case, it is drawn out in unnecessary detail. The general problem of unwanted children can be illustrated specifically by citing a broader range of reasons for not wanting children; discussion might include, for example, abortion of fetuses with probable physical or mental defects. Secondly, the writer does not come to grips with the new issue, namely, under what

circumstances, if any, not wanting a child is sufficient to justify its early extinction. In the present paragraph the writer merely tells us a story and assumes the case is established. A "drifting" phenomenon is again evident. Finally, the point concerning the child's retardation is a red herring. Wanted as well as unwanted children can be retarded, and so the pity that is evoked by citing the retardation is a diversion from the issue of abortion. It should be eliminated.

17. Since it introduces both a new paragraph and a new "argument," this sentence should be replaced by a more relevant alternative, such as, "Let me now attempt to show how the rights of the mother are overlooked by those who favor strong restrictions on abortion."

18. This is certainly a non sequitur, with a flavor of bandwagon as well. That any number of people engage in a practice provides no evidence that it's moral (or immoral). The most that could be claimed is that more people regard abortion as moral.

19. The word "contradiction" is often overworked in philosophy papers. It should be applied only when something is asserted both to be the case and not to be the case—which is not true in the present context. That people have some rights does not automatically entail that they should have others.

20. The lack of clarity in the introduction about exactly what the writer proposed to argue for (or against) reappears here. This sentence suggests there are good reasons for obtaining an abortion, such as the psychological instability of the mother. If so, these reasons are not spelled out in any detail. For example, how much instability is sufficient to justify abortions? But then again, the sentence might be interpreted as holding that abortions ought to be granted on demand for any reason whatsoever. Vagueness, imprecision, and ambiguity are evident.

21. This sentence provides a good illustration of the slippery slope fallacy. It should be omitted, since no evidence is given that banning abortions will lead to the repressive legislation mentioned here.

22. Use of the word "this" in this sentence has an ambiguous referent. Moreover, what is presented in this sentence is an alleged fact, not a "proof." Proofs consist of conclusions validly drawn from true premises. If an argument is intended here, as it should be, then it should be spelled out. For example:

1. If fetuses are human, then abortion is murder.
2. If life begins at conception, then fetuses are human.
3. Nobody knows when life begins.

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4. Therefore, abortion is not murder.

Of course, this is not a valid argument. The third premise does not express the denial of the antecedent (the "if" clause) of the second premise, and even if it did, the form would still be invalid.

23. The term "thus" suggests that an argument is being advanced here. If so, it is invalid. From people's disagreement over when human life begins, it does not follow that a given choice in the matter is arbitrary. "Arbitrary" means "whimsical," "capricious," or "based upon one's unsupported preference." And surely there are

better reasons than personal preference for holding that human life begins at, say, the time of conception rather than the 138th day of pregnancy (or 141st or 123rd or 130th). The passage is further complicated both by the apparent assumption that people who agree have arrived at the truth and by the possibility that the writer may have intended to say "unproven" rather than "arbitrary"—if the writer thought about it. Also, the claims and quasi arguments here and elsewhere in the essay are not, of course, original. Instead of simply multiplying familiar points, the writer ought to have developed fewer points in greater detail, thereby strengthening the case and exercising individual thought. The writer might have attempted, for example, to meet more objections to the essay's claims.

24. This is a good example of the writer's failure to think through the consequences of a position. For most children born at nine months could have been born at seven (six?) months, begun breathing, and become independent of the mother. Yet in the writer's view the aborting at six or seven months of a fetus that would normally be born at nine months would be fully justified. The only way this consequence can be avoided is to retract the claim that decisions of when human life begins are arbitrary. In other words, it seems inconsistent for the writer to argue in one breath that life begins at any arbitrary point and in another deny that an eight-month pregnancy should be terminated, on the grounds that at that point the fetus is a human being.

25. This conclusion is much too strong for the arguments presented. When one concludes that a certain thesis is preferable to another, one should do so because the weight of evidence favors that thesis. Yet in the preceding sentence it is asserted that the evidence doesn't favor either position. This ending exemplifies an inconsistency running throughout the essay. The writer states in some places that the whole issue boils down to a matter of arbitrarily choosing one's position yet offers "proofs" of a position in other places. In varying degrees, the author has violated all five primary rules for writing a critical philosophy essay.

Revised Draft

Although it established within broad limits the legality of obtaining an abortion, the recent Supreme Court ruling leaves unresolved the moral issue. Under what conditions is terminating the development of a human fetus morally justified? Although an expectant mother is now *legally* free up to a point to obtain an abortion, she may still be faced with the question of whether she *ought* to do so. In this essay I shall not attempt to determine all of the conditions under which abortion is justifiable. Rather, my purpose is essentially to criticize the thesis that abortion is never morally justified except perhaps when the life of the mother is at stake. Briefly, I shall attempt to undermine the logical relevance of certain religious beliefs for the antiabortion position. I shall also present reasons for doubting that human life begins at conception.

Let's first examine the relevance of certain religious beliefs for the issue of abortion. It is often argued that abortion is wrong because human life is sacred, and that human life is sacred because it is a "gift of God." Or it is urged that the ultimate value of human life stems from our having immaterial souls whose prime mission is to attain salvation.

My first objection to this theological basis of the antiabortion view is as follows. The beliefs that God exists, that He created us, and that we are immortal souls are most problematic. Serious doubts about their truth have been raised. We do not know whether God exists or not. Yet we do know that every year, despite their mothers' efforts to the contrary, thousands of children are conceived only to face a life of hunger, illiteracy, and poverty. When a religious belief conflicts with established facts, surely we should base our actions upon the latter. Speculation about the soul should not take precedence over the elimination of undoubtedly many future lives of misery.

My second objection is that the existence of God, the soul, and immortality is actually irrelevant to the "sacredness" of human life. If we are to locate some factor that makes life intrinsically good and the human species worth preserving, we must look to human actions, ideals, intelligence, and creative achievement. For example, if I devote my life to eradicating hunger, it may be said that I was a good person. If so, however, my goodness resides in my actions, irrespective of whether I am a soul in a body or just a physical body. To put my point differently, a soul that never did anything would be a useless lump of stuff, worth neither creating, preserving, nor destroying. Being a soul, then, is irrelevant to the value of human life.

Of course, showing the irrelevance of certain religious beliefs to the value of human life does not automatically demonstrate that abortion is morally justified. For example, an atheist may reject abortion for reasons completely independent of religion. Let us, then, consider one of those reasons, namely, the claim that human life begins with conception; we shall consider this claim in the light of its relevance to two proabortion arguments.

To begin, it is often claimed that because women have a right to control their own bodies, they should also have the right to obtain an abortion. But if human life begins with conception, then presumably fetuses have rights, too—among them the right to life. Thus the issue is not over a woman's right to control her body, but rather, over a conflict of rights. Whose rights should take precedence? Similarly, if fetuses are humans, then aborting them on the grounds that they would in all likelihood lead miserable and poverty-stricken lives would in principle be no different from killing a newborn infant for the same reasons. In both cases the crucial issue is whether fetuses are human beings.

Some fetuses must be humans, namely, those from, say, six to nine months, because many six-month fetuses are viable—they could survive independently of the mother if born prematurely. But are fetuses humans from conception onward? If not, then where shall we draw the line between human and nonhuman? I shall not attempt to draw such a line in this essay. I wish only to show that there are reasons for doubting that human life extends all the way to conception. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that there is *some* period between conception and birth in which we may be justified in saying that fetuses are not human. I shall present two arguments.

First, the organism at four weeks from conception has neither the form nor the function of a human being. Indeed, at this stage it is indistinguishable from the

fetus of a monkey. More specifically, brain-wave activity does not begin until quite some time after conception; exactly when is a matter for biologists to determine. And since a lack of such activity is the criterion of death, then its beginning in the human fetus should be the criterion of life's having begun.

Second, in the case of twins the twinning process does not take place until about six weeks after conception. Thus, even if we suppose that human life begins in general at six weeks, it cannot be claimed coherently that I as a twin, for example, existed prior to that time. To be sure, one of the causes of my coming into being existed prior to that time, but not *I*. There appear to be reasons, therefore, for doubting that conception is the beginning of human life. We may conclude that, contrary to the extreme antiabortion position, there are some circumstances in which abortion might be morally justified. Exactly what those circumstances are and where we should draw the line are topics for another essay.

Postscript: A Note on Research Materials

This chapter has focused on critical writing. Much of your writing will of course be based on research, and a few tips on research materials may therefore be helpful. For your convenience, each key item is numbered.

1. Your most valuable bibliographical resource is often your instructor. Many years of work in philosophy make him or her a gold mine of important information, especially at the introductory level. Use your instructor, and get specific recommendations. The same goes for your college or university librarian, who is specially trained to help get you started with your research. Your instructor and librarian want to assist you. Don't overlook them!

2. Take a few hours just to see what your library has to offer in the way of philosophy texts. Pull the interesting titles off the shelf and browse through the tables of contents. If you don't know what you are going to write about, this process can be very useful. If you do know what you wish to write about, you will often come across helpful information.

3. Also helpful are anthologies of original works and commentaries on various philosophical problems. The chances are very good that you will find plenty of material to help get you started on your research, as well as specific bibliographies dealing with the problem you are examining. As a rule, you should use these texts as preliminary guides, not as a basis for your entire paper.

4. For historical perspective and background of the main Western philosophers and philosophical ideas, F. C. Copleston's eight-volume *History of Philosophy* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1966) is both authoritative and comprehensive. W. T. Jones's *History of Western Philosophy* (2nd ed. [New York: Harper & Row, 1976]) is less authoritative and comprehensive, but readable and helpful in certain areas. Both texts are found in most libraries. *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, edited by D. J. O'Connor (New York: Free Press, 1964), contains articles on key philosophers and movements, usually as viewed from an "analytic" philosophical perspective. The articles are concise and blend historical research with individual critical analysis. *A History of Philosophical Systems*, edited by Vergilius Ferm (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), contains useful surveys and bibliographies of both Eastern and Western philosophical systems, periods, and orientations. Robert Arrington's *A Companion to the Philosophers* (London: Blackwell, 1999).

5. If you are starting out cold, perhaps the first source to consult is the eight-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967). This handy reference work contains authoritative articles on a very wide range of philosophers and philosophical issues, schools, and positions. Extensive bibliographies are often included. If you happen to be writing on one of the 102 "Great Ideas" (freedom, love, war), the *Syntopicon* that accompanies each set of *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), contains comprehensive and well-organized essays on each of those ideas. The essays are extensively referenced to guide you to the exact sources of philosophical opinion on the ideas. For brief explanations of many philosophical terms, a handy resource is the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, edited by Dagobert D. Runes (15th ed. [Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield Adams, 1964]).

6. Two other research guides are Richard T. De George's *A Guide to Philosophical Bibliography and Research* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), which explains many kinds of reference materials available to you, and the *Philosopher's Index* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center), which groups by subject matter and date the articles from many different professional philosophical journals. Journal articles are often too advanced for beginning students. But there are many exceptions to this rule, particularly in the journal *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, which examines important contemporary moral, social, and political issues. Other possibilities are *Philosophy Today*, *The Philosophical Forum*, and *Continental Philosophy Review*.

7. One final word of caution. Always document your sources with appropriate footnotes and bibliographical references when the ideas that you are using are not your own. Merely footnoting direct quotations is usually not enough. For example, if you discover certain criticisms of a view and go on to use them, you should give credit where it is due. As a rule you do not need to document commonly understood or frequently cited philosophical positions or criticisms that have become "public property"—for example, that Descartes was a mind-body dualist who failed to explain adequately the interaction between mind and body. Keep in mind that you should not "overload" your paper with quotations and paraphrases. It is supposed to reflect primarily your thinking and writing.