WRITING CENTER BRIEF GUIDE SERIES

# A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper

## The Challenges of Philosophical Writing

The aim of the assignments in your philosophy classes is to get you doing philosophy. But what is philosophy, and how is it to be done? The answer is complicated. Philosophers are often motivated by one or more of what we might call the "Big Questions," such as: How should we live? Is there free will? How do we know anything? or, What is truth? While philosophers do not agree among themselves on either the range of proper philosophical questions or the proper methods of answering them, they do agree that merely expressing one's personal opinions on controversial topics like these is not doing philosophy. Rather, philosophers insist on the method of first attaining clarity about the exact question being asked, and then providing answers supported by clear, logically structured arguments.

An ideal philosophical argument should lead the reader in undeniable logical steps from obviously true premises to an unobvious conclusion. A *negative* argument is an *objection* that tries to show that a claim, theory, or argument is mistaken; if it does so successfully, we say that it *refutes* it. A *positive* argument tries to support a claim or theory, for example, the view that there is genuine free will, or the view that we should never eat animals. Positive philosophical arguments about the Big Questions that are ideal are extremely hard to construct, and philosophers interested in formulating or criticizing such arguments usually end up discussing other questions that may at first seem pedantic or contrived. These questions motivate philosophers because they seem, after investigation, to be logically related to the Big Questions and to shed light on them. So, for example, while trying to answer Big Questions like those above, philosophers might find themselves discussing questions like (respectively): When would it be morally permissible to push someone into the path of a speeding trolley? What is a cause? Do I know that I have hands? Is there an external world? While arguing about these questions may appear silly or pointless, the satisfactions of philosophy are often derived from, first, discovering and explicating how they are logically connected to the Big Questions, and second, constructing and defending philosophical arguments to answer them in turn. Good philosophy proceeds with modest, careful and clear steps.

## Structuring a Philosophy Paper

Philosophy assignments generally ask you to consider some thesis or argument, often a thesis or argument that has been presented by another philosopher (a *thesis* is a claim that may be true or false). Given this thesis or argument, you may be asked to do one or more of the following: explain it, offer an argument in support of it, offer an objection to it, defend against an objection to it, evaluate the arguments for and against it, discuss what consequences it might have, determine whether some other thesis or argument commits one to it (i.e., if I accepted the other thesis or argument, would I be rationally required to accept this one *because* I accept the other one?), or determine whether some other view can be held consistently with it. No matter which of these tasks you are asked to complete, your paper should normally meet the following structural requirements: