

Lecture Notes



Essay-Writing β : Arguing

Developing an argument

Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

Remember your main job when writing a philosophy essay: to provide a well-argued and well-researched response to the essay question.

To do so, you'll need to:

1. Choose which ideas you'll need to develop your argument; to gather *relevant* material.
2. Demonstrate critical thought when covering these ideas.
3. Achieve some critical distance from the material that you draw upon.
4. *Engage critically* with challenges to your argument; don't swiftly dismiss them!

1. Gather Relevant Material

Your resources

You'll have a wide range of material to help get you started:

- Lecture slides and/or lecture notes.
- Any notes you've taken during tutorials or lectures.
- Any notes you've made on the required readings.
- Recommended further readings (e.g. on the Reading List or in the Module Handbook).

You'll need to work through this material to:

- Consolidate understanding
 - Further understanding tends to accompany further reading; don't just count on your module materials to help you understand an idea or argument. It may often be that you won't *fully* comprehend an idea or argument until you've seen it explained *in many different ways*.
- Decide what you think about the issue
 - What is your considered view about the issue that your essay question is asking you to address?
- Decide what you're going to cover—let's talk about this...

Choose your challenges

Be *selective* about which material you cover in the essay; less really is more here!

Don't just throw a bunch of mud at a wall and hope that some of it will stick—presenting a wide range of objections to a view in quick succession is generally ill-advised.

To put it in a slogan, 'depth is more important than breadth'.

It's better to focus upon *fewer points*, and to spell them out carefully, and critically engage with them at length, than to cover *many different points* superficially.

Use your resources effectively

One reason why students sometimes cover too much material in their essays: their essays are mostly just summaries of the lecture notes or the lecture slides.

Do not just summarise the lecture notes or the lecture slides!

- It shows inadequate scholarship.
 - (It suggests that rather than conducting independent research, you've simply used the lecture notes to construct your essay.)
- If you're just using your instructor's work to present ideas, then you only demonstrate that *your instructor* understands the topic; you need to demonstrate that *you* understand it as well.
- It means that you end up providing an overview of a topic rather than a pointed argument.
 - Lectures usually provide a general overview of a topic; if your essay just recapitulates the lecture content, then it will also just represent such an overview.
 - (Unless otherwise indicated) providing an overview of a topic isn't your job when writing a philosophy essay; your job is to provide a well-argued & well-researched answer to the question.

Here's how it's best to use lecture notes/slides: *as learning aids*.

- Use them *as a supplement to* rather than *as a substitute for* further reading and research.
- Module materials help you to understand what you read when doing further research—but you still need *to do that research*.

How not to use lecture notes/slides: as a crutch for essay-writing.

- Don't use your module materials as your main or only resource when writing an essay; don't lean too heavily on them when completing this piece of work.
- Citing lectures (rather than e.g., journal articles) can suggest a lack of independent research.
- Presenting an idea or argument *exactly* as it was presented in a lecture can also suggest an inability to put things in your own words, and thus, a lack of understanding.

2. Demonstrate Critical Thought

Don't present objections uncritically

Here is something that you don't want to do:

- Philosopher A said X.
- Philosopher B said Y was a problem for X.
- So, Philosopher A is wrong.

Why this is bad: it *uncritically* presents B's objection.

To build your case, you must *provide reasons* for thinking that the objection succeeds (or fails).

It may be helpful to provide some examples here...

Here is an example of a good demonstration of critical thought:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

As I noted, I will in this essay be defending the position that certain non-human animals have equal moral status to human beings. To build my case, I will begin by providing reasons to reject the idea that non-human animals lack moral status. On this view, animals do not matter morally in and of themselves. Many object to this view on the grounds that it seems to conflict with our core moral intuitions. Our familiar reactions to animal suffering suggests that we do take non-human animals to be appropriate subjects of direct moral concern. It seems difficult to believe, for example, that there is nothing morally wrong about torturing a cat for fun. We condemn those who harm animals for no good reason, and many support laws imprisoning people for animal abuse. In order to account for these intuitions, those who believe that non-human animals lack

moral status usually argue that we often have indirect moral reasons not to harm animals. Torturing another person's cat, for example would involve wrongfully damaging their property. Alternatively, it may lead to corruption; we may risk breeding insensitivity to human beings if we are cruel to animals (Kant 1997, p.212). However, I find this line of response unconvincing. Even if we shouldn't disrespect others' property or corrupt ourselves, there seems to be a further reason not to harm the cat—a reason that has to do with the cat itself rather than the effects of one's actions upon oneself or others. As O'Hagan (2009, p.541) notes, "...the suffering of animals seems morally relevant and seems to be what is most glaringly absent from the indirect duties view." I think that this perspective is a plausible one to take. This becomes especially apparent if we imagine that the cat is a stray (nobody's property) and that the torturer will receive a memory wipe straight afterwards (preventing corruption). Even if this were so, we would surely still condemn the person for torturing the cat. Moreover, we would plausibly appeal to the cat's suffering when doing so, which suggests that this is of greater moral importance than the owner's property rights or the corruption of the torturer. It therefore seems that the view which denies moral status to non-human animals cannot adequately account for our moral intuitions, despite its attempts to do so.

What makes this good:

- It introduces a view (that non-human animals lack moral status).
- It states (and explains) an objection to the view (that it conflicts with our core moral intuitions).
- It considers a response that could be offered to this objection (an advocate of the view could appeal to the indirect reasons we have not to harm animals to accommodate the relevant moral intuitions).
- The student gives *their own reasons for thinking that the response fails* (that even with the relevant qualifications made, the view still conflicts with what seem to be our considered moral verdicts).
- Notice that the student doesn't get these reasons from nowhere—their response builds upon someone else's (O'Hagan's) work—but they also go *beyond* what O'Hagan says, they add their own critical take on the matter, they make it clear *why* they are persuaded what O'Hagan says.

Here is an example of a not-so-good attempt to demonstrate critical thought:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

"A number of philosophers have defended the view that non-human animals lack moral status" (Lecture 9). But this view seems wrong, since we treat animals like they possess moral standing. However, philosophers have a response to this apparent appearance. This response argues that the reason we treat animals like they possess moral standing is because of other reasons, such as property rights or corrupting our natures. As Kant argues, "If a man shoots his dog because the animal is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind. If he is not to stifle his human feelings, he must practice kindness towards animals, for he who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men" (1997: 212). But as O'Hagan (2009) points out, "the suffering of animals seems morally relevant and seems to be what is most glaringly absent from the indirect duties view". Thus, this response fails, and view that non-human animals lack moral status is wrong.

What makes this not-so-good:

- The view is introduced using a quote, rather than in the student's own words.
- The objection to the view is under-explained (it's set out in just a single sentence).
- The response to the objection that's considered isn't presented in the student's own words.
- It's not fully clear from what's said (briefly by the student, & then using quotes) what the response *is*.
- The response is claimed to fail, but no justification is given for this verdict; the student simply repeats why *others* (namely O'Hagan) think that the response to the objection fails, without giving any *reasons of their own* for thinking that what O'Hagan says is plausible.

3. Achieve critical distance from the material

Don't present material uncritically

Here is something that you don't want to do:

- Philosopher A says P is true for reason Q.
- This is correct: P is true for reason Q.

(This is another instance of failing to demonstrate critical thought.)

Here is what you do want to do (depending on the context):

- Provide further reasons for thinking that P because Q.
- Provide other reasons for thinking that P is true.

Again, it is helpful to provide some examples here...

Here is a good instance of presenting material in a way that achieves critical distance from it:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

At this stage, I have introduced two competing views: (1) the view that humans have higher moral status than non-human animals, owing to their greater cognitive sophistication, and (2) the view that all animals have equal moral status. Singer offers what I take to be a compelling reason to prefer (2) to (1). As Singer (1974) observes, a fundamental commitment that underlies our moral outlook is that *all human beings are moral equals*; that no one matters more than anyone else from the moral point of view. Yet view (1) cannot accommodate this commitment. This is because it is not merely non-human animals that lack higher-order cognitive abilities (such as capacities for rationality or planning); many human beings lack these abilities as well, such as infants and the cognitively disabled. View (1) therefore implies that these human beings have *lower* moral status than cognitively sophisticated human beings, which undermines the commitment to human equality. I agree with Singer that this implication is unacceptable. Following Singer, the commitment to human equality does seem to be fundamental to our moral lives. This is evident in the ways in which we judge people who show prejudice against the disabled, or people who fail to take adequate care of young children. We don't tend to judge these actions as more morally acceptable than the mistreatment of adults or the cognitively-abled—as one would expect we would if children and the cognitively disabled did indeed have lesser moral status. Indeed, many societies provide legal protections for children and the disabled, to safeguard them against exploitation and ill treatment. These familiar judgments about how we ought to treat human beings with less cognitive sophistication suggests that we do indeed take them to be our moral equals, and that any view which fails to accommodate this will go against a rather fundamental element of our moral outlook.

What makes this good:

- It clearly explains Singer's claim (that view 1 is not plausible because it conflicts with equality).
- The student gives *their own reasons* for thinking that Singer is right; they don't just rely on the fact that Singer used a particular consideration in support of his claims—they also provide insight into *why* they agree that these ideas support these claims, or *why* they find these claims plausible.

Here is an example of a not-so-good attempt to achieve critical distance from the material:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

Singer (1974) gives an argument against the view that human beings are larger in moral status than other animals because of their superior intellect. This is the commitment to the moral equality of persons that the view cannot affirm. This view takes human beings with superior intellect to be morally better than human beings who are lesser in intellect. Singer argues that this is not an acceptable thing to conclude, since it goes against the commitment to equality, which is fundamental to moral thought: "There is no logically compelling reason for assuming that a factual difference in ability between two people justifies any difference in the amount of consideration we give to satisfying their needs and interests. The principle of the equality of human

beings is not a description of an alleged actual equality among humans: it is a prescription of how we should treat humans” (1974). Hence, the view that human beings have better moral status cannot possibly be maintained, since it gives rise to the unacceptable proposition that not all human beings are equal.

What makes this not-so-good:

- It outlines Singer’s claim (that the view being considered is not plausible because it conflicts with equality), but in a rather vague way—it’s not completely clear what exactly is being said.
- The student gives *no independent reason* for thinking that what Singer says is true or plausible; they simply *repeat what he says*, without providing any insight into *why they* agree with him, or why the reader should be persuaded by his argument.

4. Engage critically with the material

Respond to challenges effectively

Here is something that you don’t want to do:

- Here is a view that I want to defend: P.
- A possible objection to P is: not-P because Q.
- But: P!

This fails to engage critically with the challenge to P.

You need to be moving the discussion *forward*, providing reasons for thinking that the criticism(s) that you consider is (are) unsuccessful.

Here is a good instance of responding effectively to a challenge:

SAMPLE (GOOD)

Building on Singer’s work, I have argued that the proposal that some human beings (more intelligent or cognitively sophisticated ones) have higher moral status than others is morally unacceptable; for it conflicts with our fundamental commitment to human equality. However, someone persuaded by this proposal might argue that the implications of their view are not quite as morally unacceptable as I have suggested. They may be committed to the claim that it is morally worse to mistreat a human adult than a human infant, or to mistreat a cognitively abled human being than a cognitively disabled human being. But they are not thereby committed to the claim that it is *morally acceptable* to mistreat human infants or the cognitively impaired. Indeed, they might argue that such actions are still *seriously wrong*, even if are *less wrong* than parallel actions directed towards adults or the cognitively able. However, I do not find this response entirely convincing. Consider that our moral judgments often find their way into our legal systems, informing the laws that shape our society. The proposal that some human beings have higher moral status than others could be used to inform legislation—who ought to get priority on an organ donation list, say. Even if the advocate of the differential moral status proposal thinks that it’s morally wrong to mistreat human beings with deficient cognitive abilities, their theory would nonetheless seem to support an objectionably hierarchical society, where the more cognitively sophisticated were given more rights and opportunities. Many of us would object to such a society, but the proponent of such a view would be unable to raise a moral complaint against it.

What makes this good:

- The student clearly states their view (they are rejecting the proposal that some human beings have higher moral status than other human beings).
- They consider an objection to their perspective (perhaps someone who thinks that some human beings have higher moral status than other human beings could nonetheless insist that it is nonetheless seriously wrong to mistreat *any* human being).
- They respond by *providing reasons* to think that this objection does not succeed; they don’t swiftly dismiss it, or try to dismiss it just by repeating their view.

Here is an example of a not-so-good attempt to respond effectively to a challenge:

SAMPLE (NOT GOOD)

It is therefore neither fair nor just to have some human beings with the privilege of having higher moral status than other humans because they have higher cognitive faculties, since this idea conflicts with the commitment to human equality, which says that all human beings must have equal moral status, and which is central to our moral ideals. An objection to this claim may be that this view I am objecting to is still consistent with the idea that all human beings have moral status and it's wrong to treat them all badly. However, even if it's wrong to treat all human beings badly on this view, this view must still say that not all human beings are equal, and thus, it must still conflict with the equality of persons, which is central to moral life.

What makes this not-so-good:

- The student states their view (that it would be unfair to assign higher moral status to some human beings than others).
- They consider an objection to their view (someone who thinks some human beings have higher moral status than other human beings might say that it's still wrong to mistreat *any* human being).
- They respond to this objection *by simply repeating their view* (by simply re-iterating their judgment that human beings are equal and it's unfair to claim otherwise); this doesn't move the discussion forward—it doesn't give the reader any reason to think that the objection has or can be overcome.

Use these tips to evaluate your essay!

Read what you've written and ask yourself, Are you:

1. Moving through many ideas and objections very quickly, rather than focusing in depth upon a select few when building your argument?
2. Mostly just recapitulating lecture slides/lecture notes/a paper or chapter?
3. Using someone else's objection to a view to advance your argument, *without* giving your reader any further reasons to think that it is a successful objection?
4. Using someone else's view/argument/claim to advance your argument, *without* giving your reader any further reasons to think that what they say is plausible?
5. Responding to an objection to a view by simply repeating the view, in a way that doesn't move the discussion forward?

If yes, then you need to make some changes!