

Notes on Writing a Philosophy Paper

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A. Things that should be matters of course but aren't always:

1. You should start actually writing your paper at the earliest possible stage. (One way is to write a draft *before* you've done any reading at all.) Do not just say to yourself, day after day, "I really *must* start soon." Still less should you say, "I really know what I want to say, so it's just a matter of writing it." Until you start making squiggly marks on paper or on a screen, you've got nothing to work with. Get *something* down, no matter how silly, rough, or trivial it may be or seem to you. Do not pile up notes and quotes interminably. Start writing!!

Editing an already existent paper is far easier than producing one *de novo*. Incidentally, get straight into the heart of the matter. Don't waste time writing a flowery introductory paragraph, page, or section. If you decide you want one you can always put it in later, but often you will find that the paper can make its own way in the world perfectly well without an ornate introduction.

But what if you have "writer's block"? What if you have no inspiration? It was, I think, John Updike who, when asked whether he wrote to a schedule or only when inspiration seized him, replied, "Oh, I write only when inspiration seizes me. And it seizes me every morning from eight till one." Being human we are all of us, all too ready to seize an excuse not to work.

If you simply start writing, no matter how flat and uninspired the result seems to you, you will at least have something. What's more, in six months time, if you look back at what you have written you will not be able to distinguish the passages you wrote because you felt like writing, and the passages you wrote because you forced yourself to write.¹

¹ Of course it can be hard. Here is Simone de Beauvoir on the matter: "How hot it was in Italy! My arms stuck to the table, and the words got gummed up inside the cells of my

When you write remember that well-known philosophers are well-known. Writing "René Descartes, a French philosopher, ..." is like writing "Sydney Crosby, a Canadian hockey player, ...". I might begin a sentence about Crosby that way when talking to my friends in New Zealand or Australia or England, because they are bereft of culture, and need such basic information. You should not assume that your instructors are similarly culturally disadvantaged. Avoid, too, sentences such as

Through the ages many philosophers have written about x.

The problem of x has long puzzled humanity.

Since time began philosophers have wondered whether

Such sentences are usually untrue, and always unnecessary. Your task is to walk the not terribly fine line between not telling your philosophy instructors things you both know

brain. I couldn't get them down into my pen. (*Force of Circumstance*, [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968], 444)," and Thomas Hardy has his rural characters discussing the new minister make a similar point:

"... He's a poor gawk-hammer. Look at his sermon yesterday."

"His sermon was well enough, a very good guessable sermon, only he couldn't put it into words and speak it. That's all was the matter wi' the sermon. He hadn't been able to get it past his pen."

"Well—ay, the sermon might have been good; for, 'tis true, the sermon of Old Eccl'iastes himself lay in Eccl'iastes's ink bottle afore he got it out." Mr Penny, being in the act of drawing the last stitch tight, could afford to look up and throw in a word at this point. "He's no spouter—that must be said, 'a b'lieve."

"'Tis a terrible muddle with the man, as far as spout do go," said Spinks. (Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*), Part 2, Chapter 2.

and *you* can take for granted, and telling them things you both know, but which they want *you* to exhibit your knowledge of.

2. Write as clearly and as simply and as fairly as you can. Do not let Disraeli's satirizing censure of Gladstone, "A sophistical rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity, and gifted with an egotistical imagination that can at all times command an interminable and inconsistent series of arguments to malign an opponent and to glorify himself," be a fit comment on you as revealed in your paper. Remember the advice Samuel Johnson attributed to an "old tutor": "Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out."² That is perhaps extreme, but your aim should be clarity, not beauty. In a similar vein, H. W. Garrod once remarked of his friend Walter Raleigh that if he had a fault it was that "he was perhaps prone to suppose that he had concluded a syllogism when he had invented a metaphor."³

3. Two standard mishaps: rhetorical questions and suppressed quantifiers.

3.1 Rhetorical questions: There is a tendency, when argument fails us, to fall back on rhetorical questions.⁴ Avoid them! At best you will have omitted a necessary argument;

² Disraeli was speaking at a banquet on July 28, 1878. B. Disraeli, *Collected Works*, 20 vols. (New York: M. Walter Dunne, 1904), 20:83. Johnson was contrasting two historians: 'No man will read Robertson's cumbrous detail a second time; but Goldsmith's plain narrative will please again and again.' (Boswell's *Life*, Apr. 30, 1773.) Notice a corollary of this point: you should use a Thesaurus, if at all, with extreme care.

³ H. W. Garrod, "Walter Raleigh," in *The Profession of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 266-70, 268.

⁴ The next step down is simple abuse, but you are not allowed to make use of this device until you are a professional philosopher.

more likely, you will have alerted your reader to the existence of an important alternative to which you have failed to give sufficient weight. A classic case occurs in Descartes' *Meditation II* when he says:

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.

This is [he continues] a considerable list, if everything on it belongs to me. But does it?⁵

Now, at this stage we might reasonably expect an argument to show that these items are indeed inseparable. But what we get is a string of rhetorical questions followed by a string of assertions bolstered up by the claim that the connection "is so evident that I can see no way of making it any clearer."⁶ If Homer can nod, Descartes can slumber, but you should remain wide awake while writing your philosophy papers.

3.2 Quantifiers: Quantifiers are terms that alert us to the number of things being

⁵ Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* 11 vols. (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964-76, hereafter AT), 7:28, translated by John Cottingham in J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny, translators and editors., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols.(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985-1991, hereafter CSMK), 2:19.

⁶ "Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself?" etc. AT 7:28-29.

considered, for example, '*all* Greeks,' '*some* philosophers,' '*many* politicians,' '*a few* scientists,' '*most* administrators,' '*the one and only* present prime minister of Canada,' and so on. In a note in my son's elementary school Agenda (1998-9), the Canadian Association of Principals told us that "The students of today are the leaders of tomorrow." No doubt that is true, but if it is true, then it is also true that the students of today are tomorrow's depressed and downtrodden, they are the drifters, derelicts, and drug addicts of tomorrow. The point is that the appropriate quantifier here is *some* or, even more accurately, if less inspirationally, *a very, very few*. Omitting quantifiers is a standard device of politicians, propagandists, and advertisers—and, apparently, in the late 1990s at least, the Canadian Association of Principals. You should be more honest. If you find yourself tempted to write something like "Philosophers have often held that ...," ask yourself *how many?* and even *which ones?* You might even ask *when* did they hold this view, and for *how long?* If you put in no quantifiers the chances of your argument being either fallacious or fatuous or both increase greatly.

Now a number of general points, some of them more applicable to papers than to tests:

4. Printers and readability: In the bad old days when people used typewriters it was usual, in order to mimic print, to insert two spaces after the punctuation marks period or full stop (.), colon (:), exclamation mark (!), and question mark (?). With printers this is no longer necessary, and inserting two spaces is in fact distracting. Similarly, when using a typewriter, it was common to use two hyphens (--) to emulate the em or en dash of a typesetter. However printers can now deal with hyphens (-), en dashes (—), and em dashes (—). Use hyphens for compound words ('Anglo-Saxon'), and (typically, though publishers' usage varies) use em dashes without spaces, or en dashes with a space on either side, to set off an interpolated phrase: "Even Iris Guralnik helped. Not with the murder directly—she's a psychologist, not a detective—but in advising how I should get along with my son, the philosopher. Which is not so easy; if you're related to a philosopher, you'll know what I mean."⁷ Also, studies have shown that for the body of your text serif fonts are easier to read than sans serif fonts (this is a sans serif font,

⁷ Herbert Resnicow, *The Hot Place* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 7.

useful for headings, but harder to read in lengthier passages than the serif font of the rest of the paragraph), and that papers which are not justified on the right are easier to read than those which are right-justified. (Anything you can do to make life easier for your reader is to your advantage.)

5. Your paper should not contain an undue number of misspellings. Even if misspellings show nothing about your general intelligence, philosophical ability, or worth as a sterling human being, they are bound, if numerous, to exert a negative influence on your reader.

6. Your paper should not be ungrammatical. You should be particularly careful about this since some grammatical lapses can seriously distort the meaning you are trying to convey. Even minor details of punctuation can be important.

In *All's Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare has his character Lafew say, "They say miracles are past, and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless." Notice the difference in sense that the omission of the second comma would make.⁸ Or consider the difference in sense between

Whatever exists necessarily, exists.

and

Whatever exists, necessarily exists.

The first is a truism, the second clearly false.

7. Get your singulars and plurals right! *Phenomena*, for example, is a plural. The singular is *phenomenon*.

In a similar vein, don't use words if you don't know what they mean.

To take a currently common misuse, the word *kudos* means *glory* or *renown*. Although it

⁸ Act ii. scene 3. The comma was in fact omitted in the First Folio.

ends in "s" it is not a plural any more than, say, *molasses* is. There is not a singular thing called a kudo any more than there is a singular thing called a molasse. It does not mean a number of things each of which is called a *kudo*, though various writers writing on-line or in (and to) newspapers seem to think that they know what a *kudo* is. Nor is the error limited to the popular press. A University of Calgary document dated October 25, 1999 contains two references to something called *Co-chair Kudo's*, which manages not only to get *kudos* wrong but to add an extraneous apostrophe. It gets worse: the rot has spread from academics to athletes. Here is the skier Ken Read, quoted in the *Calgary Herald* (Nov. 30, 2003, p. B2):

A relieved Read spoke afterwards about Guay's maturity, leadership, internal drive—even his fluent bilingualism.

'A quintessential Canadian,' said Read ..., 'He deserves every single kudo. He's been the real engine of growth for that group. It's going to motivate all the rest of them.'

8. Do not use demeaning language, even if you do not think it demeaning. Even if such language does not offend you, it will almost certainly offend your reader(s). Remember, in particular, that 'girl' is not a correct description of an adult woman, that 'Man,' even if capitalized, does not immediately conjure up an image of all human beings, and that 'he' is not a gender-neutral pronoun.

9. Give your references clearly.

That typically means, in the case of a book, giving the author or editor, the title, the place of publication and the publisher, and the date of publication, followed by a page reference,⁹ and in the case of a periodical article, the author, the title of the article, the

⁹ The exception to this comes when you are quoting from a standard source available in a number of editions. Consult your readers' convenience and quote or refer to Locke's *Essay* by Book, Chapter, and Section, not some particular edition's page number, for example; similarly, a section number will be the most useful way to refer your reader to Berkeley's *Principles*. However, if there *is* a standard edition in use—Adam and

title of the journal, the volume number, the year, and the pages of the article, followed by the page reference.

The philosophy department does not have a required policy for references (nor do the various philosophy periodicals have a uniform policy), but clarity and consistency are, as always, desirable. Here is one standard way of giving a reference:

Books:

Author(s) or Editor(s), *Title*, (Place of publication: Publisher, Date of publication) Page reference.

example:

Annette Baier, *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 153.

Periodical articles:

Author(s), "Title of the article," *Journal title*, Volume number, Year, Page numbers of the article, Page reference.

example:

Annette Baier, "Secular Faith," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 10, 1980, 131-48, 135.

On-line references will be from a number of different kinds of sources. The *Chicago Manual of Style*, available through the University of Calgary Library, has a *Quick Guide* link with straightforward suggestions.

Tannery's Descartes, for example, or the Gerhardt Leibniz—senior students at least should get into the habit of giving that reference *as well as* a reference which will let readers find their way to the source in other editions, if necessary.

Remember that to give less than full information in a reference suggests that your readers will not be interested enough in the topic to want to follow up some of your leads themselves. But they may be. They might even be wondering if your quotation has been taken out of context, or if your paraphrase is really accurate, and want to check up on the matter for themselves. It is your duty as a writer to make that possible for them. (Especially when you realize that the 'them' may well include one or more of your future selves.)

10. Remember the central rules of composition:

Don't use no double negatives.

Make each pronoun agree with their antecedent.¹⁰

When dangling, watch your participles.

Don't use commas, which aren't necessary.

Verbs has to agree with their subjects.

About those sentence fragments.

Try to not ever split infinitives.

It is important to use apostrophe's correctly.

Always read what you have written to see you any words out.

Correct spelling is esential.

Use quotation marks "correctly."

11. Some currently common problems:

11.1 Apostrophes: the two main uses of apostrophes are to indicate contractions or possession. Contractions are common:

¹⁰ Notice that avoiding sexist language may lead you to break this particular commandment. Morality is more important than grammar, even when the grammatical rules are amusing.

"He'll get the books" for "He will get the books";

"She's a wonderful hockey player" for "She is a wonderful hockey player";

"Gaudreau's about to shoot" for "Gaudreau is about to shoot";

"They've bought a new car" for "They have bought a new car";

"I'd love to be able to play chess as well as Polgar, but I can't hope to reach her standard" for "I would love to be able to play chess as well as Polgar, but I cannot hope to reach her standard";

"Jack says I've got to help, but he's a scumbag, so I won't do it" for "Jack says I have got to help, but he is a scumbag, so I will not do it." Etc.

The apostrophe is also used to indicate possession: "Miri's book clarified a number of puzzles;" "The mayor's speech was absolutely enthralling;" "His parents' lies led to little Johnny's belief in Santa Claus," etc.

Contractions trump possessives. Typically pronouns have a special form for possession, leaving the form with the apostrophe as a contraction. The personal pronouns *I, you, she, he, it, we, you, they*, all have special possessives:

I, my;

you, your;

she, her;

he, his;

it, its;

we, our;

you, your,

they, their.

So we have *your* as a possessive, and *you're* as a contraction. ("You're going to your house, are you?") Similarly we have *who's* as a contraction ("Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?") and *whose* as a possessive ("Whose woods these are I think I know"). In particular, note that "it's" is a contraction, not a possessive. Do not write sentences such as "The dog scratched it's ear," unless you also and consistently write sentences such as "I

borrowed she's book and took it to I's car, and then drove to we's house."

11.2 Names ending in 's': St. James, Descartes, Euripides, etc. Here there is some flexibility. If the possessive is typically pronounced with an extra syllable ("The ladies of St. James's / Go swinging to the play"; "Charles's Wain"; "Pythagoras's theorem") it should have an apostrophe 's'; if the term used as a possessive typically does not have an extra syllable, the apostrophe 's' is typically omitted ("Euripides' plays"; "Socrates' pupils"; Descartes' daughter). What is, however, an egregious mistake is to insert an apostrophe *before* the word's own terminal *s*: Descarte's *Meditations*, or, as I once saw on a sign in Calgary, "St. Jame's School." (Either of these would be quite in order, of course, if someone named Descarte had written a work entitled *Meditations*, or if there was a St. Jame in whose honour the school was named.) For plural possessives, whether or not they end in 's,' the apostrophe comes after the word, with an apostrophe 's' if the word does not end in an 's,' simply with an apostrophe if it does: "Susan's brothers and their children had left the room in a mess. With a sigh Susan picked up her brothers' books and the children's toys."

Be careful not to confuse homonyms such as 'there,' 'they're,' and 'their': "They carried their books from here to there, and now they're about to carry them back!"

12. Quotation marks: there are three standard uses of quotation marks.

12.1 They are used to report speech or written work accurately: Berkeley said, "To be is to be perceived." Quine said, "To be is to be the value of a bound variable."

12.2 They are used to refer to an individual item. Thus, as noted above, we refer to a journal article by putting the title of the piece in quotation marks:

See further Gilbert Ryle's "Jane Austen and the Moralists," with an accompanying footnote to the source, of course.

An important specific referential use is to name *words*. We often want to refer to a word, and a standard way to name the word is to use quotation marks: The word "word" is

monosyllabic; but the word "monosyllabic" is polysyllabic.

12.3 We also use quotation marks (as "scare quotes") to show that the term is being used ironically or in some other way non-seriously. They were so "nice" when they fired me: they gave me a whole hour's severance pay.

13. *Begging the question* is a logical fallacy, which comes about when a conclusion is illicitly smuggled into the premises from which it is supposedly derived:

The Bible is trustworthy because it is the word of God, and the Bible tells me that God exists. Therefore God exists.

Currently "begs the question" is often used when "raises the question" is meant. Avoid this confusion. Notice, too, that something is *refuted* if it is shown to be false. Merely denying something is not refuting it, no matter what the newspapers say.

14. Programs such as Microsoft Word have spell and grammar checkers. Word's spell checker is a useful aid, but since it cannot catch mistakes such as "form" for "from" and conversely, it must be a part of your check, not the complete check, and Word's grammar checker is best left in peace.

15. Mass nouns and count nouns (or stuffs and things): Some things (chairs, galaxies, sentences) are countable. This feature is signalled syntactically by the words that refer to them having plurals and taking the indefinite article: chair, chairs, a chair. Mass nouns (butter, whisky, dough, helium) do not have plurals, nor do they take the indefinite article, unless we are elliptically referring to a *type* of butter, a *brand*, or a *glass*, or a *type*, of whisky, a *lump* of dough, a *sample* of helium, etc. This distinction is also signalled syntactically by *much* and *many*, and by *less* and *fewer*. You have *many more* books than I do, and I don't have as *much* whisky as you do (life is so unfair). If I don't have as much whisky as you do, I have *less* whisky (and presumably *fewer* bottles of whisky); if I don't have as many books as you do, I have *fewer* books. But, unless our books have been pulped I don't have *less* books than you do, no matter what the signs at the grocery store's express lines say. [A philosophical aside: notice that many terms that

are count nouns syntactically may not label precisely countable entities: 'ideas,' 'hopes,' 'fears,' 'beliefs,' 'waves,' 'facts,' 'sensations,' 'sense data,' etc.]

16. Back to the first point: just as you should *begin* your paper, no matter how rough the first draft may be, so too you should also *finish* that draft, whether or not your conclusion will stand up to the scrutiny to which you will subsequently subject it. If you have *some* ending or other, there is that much less chance that your paper will join the multitude of partly finished papers that exist in the special Limbo God created for started but uncompleted academic papers.¹¹ Don't trail off half-way, thinking, "I know how to go on from here," or "It will be straightforward from here on in." It won't be, if you leave it there, but it might be, if you don't. So: Finish your draft! Don't stop following point (i) too early: for a draft of a paper with an ending is far easier to finish than a draft of an *incomplete* paper. Write a final paragraph as part of your first draft: don't just tail off into nothingness.

B. The paradox at the heart of teaching:¹²

There is, it seems, a basic paradox at the heart of teaching, particularly the teaching of philosophy. To oversimplify slightly, we only teach two things: knacks and results. We want our students to be aware that the end products of intellectual investigation are important, and that we think they are. Moreover, in the areas we are particularly

¹¹ Like the angels, they "exist in exceeding great number, far beyond all material multitude." (St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1^a 50.3 c.) It follows from ST 1^a 7.4 that they are at most a denumerable infinity, however, and are in fact probably finite, though large, in number. The unstarted papers by contrast almost certainly have a higher cardinality, and are presumably non-denumerable.

¹² I have also discussed this point in the short article "Teaching Philosophy," in T. Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

concerned with we will typically have firm and (we believe, or at least hope) well-thought-out views. But we also want our students to acquire the knack of getting justified beliefs for themselves, even if the cost is their occasionally going astray. So we not only do not mind students disagreeing with our cherished beliefs, we often positively welcome it, as long as the disagreement is well supported. As all good teachers know, this feature of the pedagogical process makes certain students very jumpy. Actually, as all good students know, it also makes certain teachers very jumpy.

So we try to present material neutrally, while at the same time letting our students know that we find the issues important and in general have firm and definite views on what is the case in these matters. Students sometimes, and understandably, wonder: if we find these issues important, and believe that we have found out the, or a, truth of the matter, why on earth are we urging them to make up their own minds. Don't we *want* them to agree with us? Well, we do, but we also, even more, want them to come to their *own* conclusions on the basis of rational considerations.

This leads to a suggestion regarding the writing of philosophy papers: do not be afraid to disagree with what you take to be the opinion of your instructor. But do be sure that your position (whether agreeing or disagreeing) is supported by the strongest arguments you can muster. Remember too that your instructor's façade of omniscience is, inevitably, just that: she or he has not read everything connected with the subject in every recent journal or book (or even every non-recent journal or book), so a little judicious extra work on your part will pay off handsomely in novelty value. "As *author* has pointed out clearly in "*title*" [footnote: *journal*, vol. no, year, pages, page ref.]," you write, "Pascal's wager may be seen to lead to a result diametrically opposed to that intended by Pascal. Briefly, *author's* argument goes as follows. Etc." Your reader will be surprised, enlightened, and pleased, provided always, of course, that your presentation makes it clear that you *understand* the argument and are not simply parroting: that you are *using* it as part of *your* presentation.

C. The structure of the paper:

Here is one way of proceeding. It is not the only way, but it is a straightforward way:

- (i) Outline what you take to be the main issue(s) to be discussed.

- (ii) Sketch briefly the more important of the various positions that have been, or could reasonably be, adopted towards these issues. (Often two such will be sufficient.) These need not be, and indeed should not be, solely from other people: you should use the arguments of others, *when* you use them, as part of *your* statement of the matter.

- (iii) Then, taking the most important of the views you have isolated one by one:
 - (a) State the positive arguments in favour of the view.

 - (b) Show the difficulties that attend it
 - (α) by showing any weaknesses in the positive arguments just sketched, and

 - (β) by showing what independent (negative) arguments there are against the view.
 - (c) Put forward any defence to these criticisms that the holder of the view might reasonably offer.

- (iv) Sum up by drawing one of the following results to your readers' attention:
 - (a) One view now appears, given your paper, as conclusively the best view.

 - (b) Though one view is clearly better than its contenders it is not without difficulties.

 - (c) The views are too nearly balanced to allow us to claim any one view as clearly superior to its contenders.

Notice two things especially. One is that each one of these three results is intellectually acceptable. What is important is that you get the actual relationship between the various positions correct. It is not necessary to opt for one particular point of view and defend it come what may. Your aim is clarity and rigour, not debating tricks and rhetoric. Secondly, note that your conclusion may not, in such a case, agree with your own beliefs on the matter. You may believe that a certain result is correct (that abortion is morally

acceptable, or morally unacceptable; that God exists, or that God does not exist; that simplicity is an important feature of acceptable scientific theories, or that simplicity is irrelevant to the acceptability of scientific theories, etc.) but find that your argument fails to yield the result you favour or even (gasp!) tells in favour of an alternative and incompatible position. This does not mean that you have to give up your favoured position (though it does mean that you should think long and hard about it.) Greater philosophers than you have found themselves in this situation, and have had the honesty to admit it. If you *never* find a rebuttal you should certainly consider abandoning your initial position, but it is certainly allowable to be baffled *pro tem*.

(v) Because of lack of time, space, or knowledge, one or more of these steps may often have to be omitted or truncated, but they can at least be *sketched* or *outlined*. This will help you as well as your readers.

(vi) Don't be afraid to set out your main points in point form. *Say*: the points I shall argue for / discuss / consider are:

1. . . . ,
2. . . . ,
3. . . . , etc.

Do this even if it strikes you as being a way of introducing spurious clarity into your paper, for you may well discover, having done it, that it introduces real clarity.

D. A word of psychological, or Popperian, advice:

Karl Popper has suggested that it is more important to try to falsify our own views than to attempt to confirm them. Initially he drew our attention to the importance of attempting to falsify our position on logical and methodological grounds, but he soon began to emphasize its importance on psychological grounds. Popper wrote:

Philosophers are as free as others to use any method in searching for truth. *There is no method peculiar to philosophy. . . .*

And yet, I am quite ready to admit that there is a method which might be described as 'the one method of philosophy.' But it is not characteristic of philosophy alone; it is, rather, the one method of all *rational discussion*, and therefore of the natural sciences as well as of philosophy. The method I have in mind is that of stating one's problem clearly and of examining its various proposed solutions *critically*.

I have italicized the words '*rational discussion*' and '*critically*' in order to stress that I equate the rational attitude and the critical attitude. The point is that whenever we try to propose a solution to a problem, we ought to try as hard as we can to overthrow our solution, rather than defend it. Few of us, unfortunately, practise this precept; but other people, fortunately, will supply the criticism for us if we fail to supply it ourselves. Yet criticism will be fruitful only if we state our problem as clearly as we can and put our solution in a sufficiently definite form—a form in which it can be critically discussed.¹³

Popper's point is surely correct. We are, all of us, all too human, and that means, among other things, that we are likely to be far more easily convinced of something we ourselves already hold than we are of a contrary opinion. Realizing this, however, we should also realize that we should use most of our time and effort in the attempt to investigate the difficulties which may beset our own position. We should expend our energy in the attempt to find good arguments for *opposing* positions, and to find strong criticisms of the arguments by which we support our own. Always remind yourself that a *discussion*, by definition, involves the consideration of arguments *pro* and *con*.

Probably, as Popper suggests, this is the preferred method of rational discourse. Certainly it is effectively the method used by a number of good philosophers. Those of you who have studied some philosophy will undoubtedly think of a number of paradigm cases: St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, assiduously searching the literature for good arguments against his position, and often providing the best ones himself; William of Ockham, constrained by his love of truth, which pulled him one way, and his admiration for the church fathers (which led him in another) admitting that he found himself in an unsolvable dilemma with respect to future contingents; Freddie Ayer or Hilary Putnam in our own day (or at least *my* own day), ever willing to admit that—at any given moment—their position was at risk from the strength of this or that opposing argument, opposing

¹³ K. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 15-16.

arguments which were, often, provided by themselves. This suggests

E. A final point:

During the course of writing your paper, or while considering what you might write, do not hesitate to discuss the problem with others: philosophy is paradigmatically a dialectical activity, and discussing your views with others will on some occasions lead to their being modified, and on almost every occasion will help to clarify them for you. However, when all is said and done, we don't really know what we think, at least on philosophical matters, until we write it all down as clearly, as coherently, and as cogently as we can. So the last word of advice is also the first: start writing!