

Writing Philosophy



A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophy Essays

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DUPLICATE



How to Read Philosophy

To write philosophy, you must be able to read philosophy. To read philosophy—to *really* read it with understanding and appreciation—you must cast off the misconceptions that make philosophy seem barren or impenetrable or trifling. You must abandon the myths about philosophy that make it seem like a dark and distant island, way out of the normal shipping lanes and hardly worth an hour's sailing.

You must also be willing to give philosophy a chance, to try to see what countless people have seen in philosophy through the ages. Philosophical ideas have changed the world, altering the lives of innumerable people (not just those of philosophers), inspiring cultures, and driving history. You must try to understand what all the fuss is about.

Philosophers—those who know philosophy best—would tell you that the study of philosophy is well worth the trouble. But you should not take their word for it. You should try to explore the conceptual terrain for yourself. This chapter is designed to help you get started.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

Whatever else philosophy may be, it is a discipline, a field of inquiry. It is concerned with the examination of beliefs of the most fundamental kind—beliefs that structure our lives, shape our worldviews, and underpin all academic disciplines. A physiologist may want

to know how our brains work, but a philosopher asks a deeper question—whether the brain is the same thing as the mind. A lawyer may study how the death penalty is administered in Texas, but a philosopher asks if capital punishment is ever morally permissible. A medical scientist may want to know how a human fetus develops, but a philosopher asks what the moral status of the fetus is. An astrophysicist may study the Big Bang, the cataclysmic explosion thought to have brought the universe into being. But a philosopher asks whether the Big Bang shows that God caused the universe to exist. Someone may wonder if lying to protect a friend is right or wrong, but a philosopher asks *what makes* an action right or wrong. You may find yourself reflecting on the horrific evils of war and famine, but a philosopher asks if these evils can be squared with the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God.

These points give the lie to a common myth about philosophy—the notion that philosophy is a trivial endeavor, a pretentious exercise in small matters that have no bearing on issues in real life. Obviously, if philosophy is concerned with questions like those just listed, it is about very important issues indeed. Philosophy is frequently concerned with very difficult questions. But difficult questions are not the same thing as trifling questions, and seriously trying to answer the questions does not make you pretentious.

Notice that philosophy is not primarily concerned with what *causes* you to have the particular beliefs you do. It focuses on *whether a belief is worth believing*. Strong emotions, peer pressure, and cultural influences may cause you to adopt certain opinions. But the important question that philosophy would address is whether those opinions are worthy of belief. A belief is worth believing, or accepting, if there are *good reasons* to accept it (see Chapter 2). The better the reasons for acceptance, the more likely the belief is to be true. Philosophy is a critical and wide-ranging search for understanding, and as such it is perfectly suited for this kind of deeper assessment of beliefs.

Sometimes people use the word *philosophy* in a narrower sense, as in “I have a different philosophy of life.” Here, philosophy means *worldview*. A worldview is a set of fundamental ideas that help us make sense of a wide range of important issues in life. A worldview defines for us what exists, what should be, and what we can know.

An interesting fact about worldviews is that we all have one. We all have certain ideas about what exists and what doesn’t, what kinds of actions are right or wrong, and what type of claims we can know

or not know. Even the rejection of all worldviews is a worldview. A vital question, then, is not whether we have a worldview, but whether our worldview is worth having—whether the beliefs that constitute our worldview are true. Since our lives are guided by our philosophy, our worldview had better be good. Using philosophy in the broad sense is the best way we have of evaluating a philosophy in the narrower sense.

We are born into this world at a particular place and time, steeped in the ideas and values of a particular culture, handed ready-made beliefs that may or may not be true and that we may never think to question. Philosophy helps us rise above this predicament, to transcend the narrow and obstructed standpoint from which we may view everything. It helps us examine our unexamined beliefs in the light of reason, look beyond the prejudices that blind us, and see what’s real and true. By using the methods of philosophy, we may learn that some of our beliefs are on solid ground and some are not. In either case, through philosophy, our beliefs become truly and authentically ours, and we are more fully in control of the course we take in life.

As you can see, philosophy as a discipline is both broad and deep—but it is not static. More than anything else, philosophy is a *process*, a careful, systematic investigation of fundamental beliefs. When we get involved in the process, we are “doing philosophy.” We are doing what both great philosophers and ordinary people have done for thousands of years. To put it more precisely, doing philosophy consists mainly of the systematic use of critical reasoning to explore answers to basic questions, to clarify the meaning of concepts, and to formulate or evaluate logical arguments.

Clarifying the meaning of concepts is important because we cannot evaluate the worth of a belief or statement until we understand what it means. Very often we may think that we understand a concept—until we look more closely at it. Philosophy gives us the tools to take this closer look. The larger and more characteristic part of doing philosophy, however, is the assessment of arguments. As you will see in Chapter 2, in philosophy the term *argument* does not refer to heated disagreements or emotional squabbles. In philosophy, an argument is a statement, or claim, coupled with other statements that are meant to support that statement. The statement being supported is the conclusion, and the statements supporting the conclusion are the premises. The premises are meant to provide reasons for believing that the conclusion is true. A good argument gives us good reasons for accepting a conclusion; a bad argument fails to provide good reasons.

The Divisions of Philosophy

The field of philosophy is concerned with trying to answer some of the toughest and most fundamental questions that can be devised. In a broad sense, philosophy's sphere of interest is literally everything there is. Philosophy divides its subject matter into four main divisions, each of which is a branch of inquiry in its own right with many subcategories. Here's a brief rundown of these divisions and a sampling of the kinds of questions that each asks.

- *Metaphysics* is the study of reality, an inquiry into the fundamental nature of the universe and the things in it. Although it must take into account the findings of science, metaphysics generally focuses on fundamental questions that science cannot address. *Questions of interest:* Is mind the same thing as body? Do people have free will? Is there a God? What is the nature of causality? Is science objective?
- *Axiology* is the study of value, including both aesthetic value and moral value. The study of moral value is known as *ethics*. The study of ethics involves inquiries into the nature of moral judgments, virtues, obligations, and theories. *Questions of interest:* What makes an action right (or wrong)? What moral principles should guide our actions and choices? What things are intrinsically good? Is killing ever morally permissible? Are moral standards objective or subjective?
- *Epistemology* is the study of knowledge. *Questions of interest:* What is knowledge? Does knowledge require certainty? When are we justified in saying that we know something? Is experience a source of knowledge?
- *Logic* is the study of correct reasoning. *Questions of interest:* What are the rules for drawing correct inferences? What is the nature and structure of deductive arguments? How can propositional or predicate logic be used to evaluate arguments? Upon what logical principles does reasoning depend?

In philosophy—and in any other kind of rational inquiry—accepting a conclusion (statement) without good reasons is an elementary mistake in reasoning. Believing a statement without good reasons is a recipe for error; believing a statement for good reasons increases your chances of uncovering the truth. Arguments are therefore a driving force behind the advancement of knowledge in all fields.

When we do philosophy, then, we are likely at some point to be grappling with arguments—we are trying either (1) to devise an argument to support a statement or (2) to evaluate an argument to see if there really are good reasons for accepting its conclusion. Some of this process, of course, gets done in serious discussions with others or in the solitary thoughts of those trying to search for answers to tough philosophical questions. But a great deal of philosophy gets done on paper, where writers try to create or assess arguments in essays or articles or other kinds of text. The purpose of this book is to help you learn how to handle this task—and perhaps even to excel at it.

Trying to write good philosophy papers has consequences. First, writing philosophy can lead to some interesting discoveries, some unsettling and some splendid. Through the process of devising and evaluating arguments, you may come to see that a cherished belief is unsupportable, or that the arguments of others are faulty, or that arguments that you thought were dubious are actually solid. You may even achieve some remarkable insights into an issue that you always found puzzling. Probably for most people, writing philosophy is the best way to think about philosophy. Second, you may become a better thinker. Philosophical thinking is systematic, analytic, productive thinking—which is something you can use in many everyday situations and fields of study. Third, you may come to better understand and appreciate some of the important ideas of the great thinkers of the past. Grasping the significance of such powerful ideas can be deeply satisfying, even liberating. Great ideas have a way of lifting people up from their customary perspective on the world, from which vantage point they can see farther than they thought possible.

READING PHILOSOPHY

In some ways, reading philosophy is like reading the literature of many other fields. It requires a good deal of abstract thought, often involves difficult concepts or extraordinary propositions, and can be intimidating to those who approach the subject for the first time. But

in other ways, reading philosophy is fairly distinctive. When you read a philosophical essay, you are not simply trying to glean some facts from it as you might if you were reading a science text or technical report. Neither are you following a story line as if you were reading a mystery novel (although philosophy papers sometimes contain their share of mysteries). In most cases, you are tracing the steps in an argument, trying to see what conclusion the writer wants to prove and whether he or she succeeds in proving it. Along the way, you may encounter several premises with their accompanying analyses, clarifications, explanations, and examples. You may even run into a whole chain of arguments. In the end, if you have read well and the writer has written well, you are left not with a new set of data or a story ending, but with a realization—maybe even a revelation—that a conclusion is, or is not, worthy of belief.

The best way to learn how to read philosophy well is to read philosophy often. You will probably get plenty of chances to do that in your current philosophy course. Having a few rules to guide you in your reading, however, may help shorten the learning curve. As you read, keep the following in mind.

Rule 1-1 Approach the Text with an Open Mind

If you are studying philosophy for the first time, you are likely—at least at first—to find a good bit of the material difficult, strange, or exasperating, sometimes all three at once. That's normal. Philosophy is an exploration of the rugged frontiers of our knowledge of fundamental things, so much of this new territory is likely to seem daunting or unfamiliar. There's also an excellent chance that your first visits to this terrain will be vexing, perhaps even infuriating, because you may sometimes disagree with what you read.

There is no shame in experiencing any of these reactions. They come with the territory. But if you are to make any headway in philosophy and write good papers, you need to try your best to counteract these attitudes and feelings. Remember, philosophy at its best is a fair-minded, fearless search for truth. Anything that interferes with this noble quest must be overcome and cast aside. Here is some advice on how to do that:

- Avoid making a judgment about an essay's ideas or arguments until you fully understand them and have fairly considered them. Make sure you are not reading with the intent to prove

the conclusions false (or true). Be open to the possibility that the essay could give you good reasons to change your mind about something.

- Try to maintain a neutral attitude toward the writer, presuming that he or she is neither right nor wrong, neither sinner nor saint. Don't assume that everything a renowned philosopher says must be true, and don't presuppose that everything a philosopher you dislike says must be false. Give the writer the same attention and respect that you would give a friend who is discussing a serious issue with you.
- If you are reading the work of a famous philosopher and you find yourself thinking that his or her ideas are obviously silly or ridiculous, think again. The odds are good that you are misunderstanding what you read. It is wiser to assume that the text offers something of value (even if you disagree with it) and that you need to read more carefully.
- Once you do make a judgment about the value of a writer's ideas, ask yourself what reasons you have to support that judgment. If you cannot think of any reasons, your judgment is suspect. Reconsider your evaluation.

Rule 1-2 Read Actively and Critically

Philosophical reading is intense. It cannot be rushed. It cannot be crammed. It cannot be done while your mind is on automatic pilot. To repeat: When you read philosophy, you are usually trying to follow the twists and turns of an argument (or several arguments), from premises to conclusion, often through side trips to analyses, illustrations, explanations, digressions, and speculations. You want ultimately to arrive at an understanding and appreciation of the writer's work. You want to end up knowing what the writer is trying to prove and whether he or she has proved it. Going this route requires concentration and perseverance.

Philosophical reading is active reading. Instead of reading just to get through a piece of writing, you must take your time and ask yourself what key terms and passages mean, how the argument is structured, what the central thesis is, where the premises are, how certain key ideas are related, whether the main conclusion conflicts with propositions you know are true, even how the material compares with other philosophical writing on the same subject.

Philosophical reading is also critical reading. In critical reading, you ask not what something means but whether a statement is true and if the reasoning is solid. You ask if the conclusion really follows from the premises, whether the premises are true, if the analysis of a term really makes sense, if an argument has been overlooked, if an analogy is weak, whether there are counterexamples to key claims, and whether the claims agree with other things you have good reason to believe.

When you read fiction, you must often “suspend your disbelief” for the sake of the story. That is, to better enjoy the story, you must try to discard any doubts you might have about the realism of the narrative and pretend that the story could actually happen. But when you read philosophy, you must never suspend your disbelief in this way. The whole point of the exercise is to discover whether various claims are worthy of acceptance.

Reading philosophy actively and critically takes time—a lot of time. You simply cannot do it at a fast pace; you have to read slowly and deliberately (and probably do a lot of note-taking and highlighting). Speed-reading is out of the question. Skimming is pointless. Even if you read at a snail’s pace, you will probably need to reread the material, perhaps several times. You need to read and reread as many times as necessary to understand the text fully.

Rule 1-3 Identify the Conclusion First, Then the Premises

When you first begin reading philosophical texts, they may seem to you like dark thickets of propositions into which you may not enter without losing your way. But your situation is really not that bad. As we have seen, in argumentative writing (the kind you are most likely to encounter in philosophy), you can depend on there being, well, an argument, a conclusion backed by premises. There could, of course, be several arguments that support the main argument, and the arguments could be complex, but these sets of conclusion-plus-premises will all serve as recognizable guideposts. If you want to penetrate the thicket, then, you must first identify the argument (or arguments). And the key to doing that is to *find the conclusion first, then look for the premises*. (Chapter 2 details how to identify arguments of all kinds, even when they are ensconced among a great deal of nonargumentative prose.)

When you find the main conclusion, you thereby identify the main point of the essay, and you then have the most important clue to the function of all the rest of the text. Once you uncover the point that the writer is trying to prove, finding the supporting premises becomes

much easier. And when you isolate the premises, locating the text that explains and amplifies the premises gets easier too. Therefore, the first—and most important—question you can ask about a philosophical essay is, “What claim is the writer trying to prove?”

Rule 1-4 Outline, Paraphrase, or Summarize the Argument

Understanding an essay’s argument is so important that testing whether you really “get it” is crucial. You can test your grasp of the argument by outlining, paraphrasing, or summarizing it. If you can lay out an argument’s premises and conclusion in an outline, or if you can accurately paraphrase or summarize the argument, you probably have a pretty good understanding of it. Very often students who think they comprehend an argument are surprised to see that they cannot devise an adequate outline or summary of it. Such failures suggest that, although outlining, paraphrasing, or summarizing may seem to some to be unnecessary, it is not—at least not to those new to philosophy.

Outlining an argument means identifying the premises and the conclusion and arranging them in an outline pattern that reveals their relationships. Each of these components should be stated in a complete sentence. In such a pattern, each premise is listed in order on a single line followed by the last line, the conclusion. Like this:

Premise 1
Premise 2
Premise 3
Conclusion

If the premises themselves are supported by arguments (in which the premises are the conclusions), the outline may look like this:

Main premise 1
 supporting premise a
 supporting premise b
Main premise 2
 supporting premise a
 supporting premise b
 supporting premise c
Main premise 3
Conclusion

You may state each of these points in the same language used in the essay or in your own words. Remember, this kind of outline is not a sketch of the entire essay, just of the argument itself. (An outline of the whole essay may include other points besides the parts of the argument.) Very often, however, the outline of the argument will be virtually identical to an outline of the entire essay. In any case, other parts of the essay (for example, introductory background information or extended concluding remarks) will make sense to you only if you fully understand the argument.

To some students, writing a paraphrase or summary of the argument is more helpful than creating an outline. In a paraphrase, you create your own accurate facsimile of the argument, rephrasing it in your own words and expressions. In a summary, you paraphrase *and* condense, distilling the argument into fewer words than the original has. By successfully paraphrasing or summarizing, you demonstrate that you do indeed understand the argument. (See the next section, "Writing a Paraphrase or Summary," for more guidance in these skills.)

Five Common Mistakes in Reading Philosophy

1. Reading philosophy the same way you would read a technical report or a novel.
2. Prejudging the text's argument or author.
3. Failing to *evaluate* what you read.
4. Trying to speed-read or skim.
5. Not reading actively and critically.

Rule I-5 Evaluate the Argument and Formulate a Tentative Judgment

When you read philosophy, understanding it is just the first step. You also must do something that many beginners find both difficult and alien: You must make an informed judgment about what you read. Simply reiterating what the writer has said will not do. *Your* judgment is what matters here. Mainly, this judgment is your evaluation of the argument presented by the writer—an assessment of

(1) whether the conclusion follows from the premises and (2) whether the premises are true. Only when the answer is yes to both these questions can you say that the conclusion of the argument is worthy of acceptance. This kind of evaluation is precisely what your instructor expects when he or she asks you to critique an argumentative essay in philosophy.

A philosophical text, of course, contains more than just a bare-bones argument. Often a considerable amount of space is devoted to explaining the background or history of the topic being addressed, elaborating on each of the premises, discussing the implications of the argument's conclusion, and answering possible criticisms of the essay's main points. Certainly you must take these into account when you are reading and evaluating a philosophical text. But your primary task is to arrive at an honest and well-reasoned assessment of the text's central claim.

WRITING A PARAPHRASE OR SUMMARY

There are three reasons why you should try to master paraphrasing or summarizing an essay's argument. The first one you already know: Paraphrasing or summarizing increases your understanding. The second one is that you need these skills to do well on essay exams, which often ask you to paraphrase or summarize a philosopher's work. The third is that in just about every philosophy paper you write, you will have to restate or condense arguments. Paraphrasing and summarizing are required.

In good essays, writers often paraphrase or summarize an author because their own wording is clearer than that of the original source. They sometimes summarize a passage because the author's original is too long to quote verbatim yet all its main points are worth mentioning. Whether they add a paraphrase or summary, however, they are careful to cue the reader about it. Just as quotations should be introduced properly and explained in a paper, so must paraphrases and summaries. Readers should never have to guess whose ideas are being put forth, what a paraphrase or summary means, or how it relates to the rest of the paper.

The first step in paraphrasing or summarizing is understanding the text. Do not begin writing until you have read the essay and think that you understand it well. In other words, do not try to paraphrase

or summarize until you have followed Rule 1-2: Read actively and critically.

Paraphrasing is a matter of rewriting text—accurately representing the text's meaning but doing so in *your* words, not in a barely disguised rendition of the author's words. A paraphrase is not a condensation, so in most cases any paraphrase you produce should contain close to the same number of words as the author's original.

In paraphrasing, you try to capture the gist of passages—perhaps just the paragraph that contains the argument in a nutshell, or the section of the paper that discusses a major point, or even the entire essay, point by point. If you want in-depth understanding of what a philosopher is saying, there is no better way than to paraphrase the entire essay.

Consider this passage taken from the essay in the next section; read the paraphrase of it that follows.

PASSAGE

To make the point clearer, consider a different matter. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat. In other societies, such as our own, people believe that the earth is (roughly) spherical. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no "objective truth" in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion because we realize that, in their beliefs about the world, the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth everyone must know it. The fundamental mistake in the Cultural Differences Argument [which says that because societies disagree on morality there must be no objective morality] is that it attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.¹

PARAPHRASE 1

Rachels tries to show that disagreement among societies about moral values does not, in itself, show that there is no such thing as objective morality. In some societies, people believe that the earth is flat. In our own society, we believe that the earth is spherical. This case of clashing views, however, does not show that there are no objective truths about geography. It is possible that such disagreements happen because some people have false beliefs. Why should we think that if the world is round

¹Excerpted from chapter 2 of James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2003), 20–21.

everyone must realize it? Likewise, if there is such a thing as objective moral truths, we have no evidence to think that everyone would know these truths. We must conclude that the mistake in the cultural difference argument is thinking that we can draw a conclusion about something from the mere fact that people disagree about it.

This paraphrase is *not* acceptable. It is fairly accurate, but it mimics the words and phrases of the original too closely. It repeats, for example, some parts word for word: "people believe that the earth is flat," "believe that the earth is . . . spherical," "if the world is round, everyone must," and "from the mere fact that people disagree about it." Also, some sentences that are not verbatim are obviously and blatantly modeled after Rachels's. The close mimicry of this passage is a problem for two reasons. First, it diminishes the opportunities for better understanding of the text because it is mere repetition instead of thoughtful, thorough recasting. Second, the paraphrase constitutes plagiarism. It repeats many of Rachels's words verbatim without enclosing them in quotation marks, and it closely apes his ideas and sentence patterns without acknowledging Rachel as the source. (See Rules 6-2 and 6-3.)

Here is a better paraphrase:

PARAPHRASE 2

Rachels shows that the cultural differences argument is unfounded and is, in fact, based on a mistake. He argues that we cannot infer that objective morality does not exist from the fact that societies have conflicting views about moral judgments. To make his case, he uses an example from an unrelated field, geography. Some societies think the earth flat; some, spherical. What can we conclude from such a disagreement? It surely would be illogical to conclude that because people differ on geographical facts there must be no objective geological facts. After all, Rachels says, people in different societies "might simply be wrong." Likewise, moral disagreements may simply indicate that some people are mistaken and some are not. Therefore, there is no good reason to accept the cultural difference argument.⁴⁴

This paraphrase is accurate and does not improperly borrow Rachels's words or sentence patterns. It includes a citation and clear indications of which ideas have been derived from Rachels.

A summary must accurately capture a text's main ideas in just a few words. You should be able to summarize the main points of an entire essay (that is, the premises and conclusion) in less than 150 words. Those words, of course, must be your own.

Look at this longer excerpt from the same essay:

Cultural Relativism is a theory about the nature of morality. At first blush it seems quite plausible. However, like all such theories, it may be evaluated by subjecting it to rational analysis; and when we analyze Cultural Relativism, we find that it is not so plausible as it first appears to be.

The first thing we need to notice is that at the heart of Cultural Relativism there is a certain *form of argument*. The strategy used by cultural relativists is to argue from facts about the differences between cultural outlooks to a conclusion about the status of morality. Thus we are invited to accept this reasoning:

1. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.
2. Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion that varies from culture to culture.

A proper summary of this passage should accurately encapsulate its main points, like this:

Rachels says that the moral theory known as cultural relativism may appear credible initially, but it cannot withstand critical assessment. The main argument for the theory says that since moral outlooks vary from culture to culture, there is no objective moral standard by which everyone can be judged. There is only a world of moral beliefs that vary from one society to the next.⁴⁴

Again, Rachels is clearly credited, and the source is documented.

APPLYING THE RULES

Let's apply the preceding rules to Rachels's entire essay.² Read it and study the comments that follow.

Cultural Relativism

James Rachels

1. Cultural Relativism, as it has been called, challenges our ordinary belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth. It says, in effect,

²Excerpted from James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2003. Reproduced with permission of The McGraw-Hill Companies.

that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Moreover, our own code has no special status; it is merely one among many. . . .

2. Cultural Relativism is a theory about the nature of morality. At first blush it seems quite plausible. However, like all such theories, it may be evaluated by subjecting it to rational analysis; and when we analyze Cultural Relativism, we find that it is not so plausible as it first appears to be.

3. The first thing we need to notice is that at the heart of Cultural Relativism there is a certain *form of argument*. The strategy used by cultural relativists is to argue from facts about the differences between cultural outlooks to a conclusion about the status of morality. Thus we are invited to accept this reasoning:

4. (1) The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.
- (2) Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion that varies from culture to culture.

5. Or, alternatively:

6. (1) The Eskimos see nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.
- (2) Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

7. Clearly, these arguments are variations of one fundamental idea. They are both special cases of a more general argument, which says:

8. (1) Different cultures have different moral codes.
- (2) Therefore, there is no objective "truth" in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

9. We may call this the Cultural Differences Argument. To many people, it is persuasive. But from a logical point of view, is it sound?

10. It is not sound. The trouble is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion still might be false. The premise concerns what people *believe*—in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe differently. The conclusion, however, concerns what *really is the case*. The trouble is that this sort of conclusion does not follow logically from this sort of premise.

11. Consider again the example of the Greeks and Callatians. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead; the Callatians believed it was right. Does it follow, from the mere fact that they disagreed, that

there is no objective truth in the matter? No, it does not follow; for it could be that the practice was objectively right (or wrong) and that one or the other of them was simply mistaken.

12. To make the point clearer, consider a different matter. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat. In other societies, such as our own, people believe that the earth is (roughly) spherical. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no "objective truth" in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion because we realize that, in their beliefs about the world, the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth everyone must know it. The fundamental mistake in the Cultural Differences Argument is that it attempts to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree about it.

13. This is a simple point of logic, and it is important not to misunderstand it. We are not saying (not yet, anyway) that the conclusion of the argument is false. That is still an open question. The logical point is just that the conclusion does not *follow from* the premise. This is important, because in order to determine whether the conclusion is true, we need arguments in its support. Cultural Relativism proposes this argument, but unfortunately the argument turns out to be fallacious. So it proves nothing.

What might be the result of your conscientiously following the rules as you read this selection? Here is a brief demonstration:

Rule 1-1. This little essay is particularly well suited to testing students' ability to approach a piece of philosophical writing with an open mind. The essay's topic is the common argument for cultural relativism that the author calls the "cultural differences argument." Cultural relativism is the view that there is no such thing as objective morality but that morality is relative to one's culture. To put it another way, what makes an action right is that one's culture approves of it. The cultural differences argument is a popular argument in favor of cultural relativism—an argument that many (most?) college students assume to be perfectly sound. There is a good chance, therefore, that you would come to this essay strongly predisposed *toward* the argument and *against* any criticisms of it.

To follow Rule 1-1, however, you would need to restrain any tendency to reject the author's argument out of hand. You would try *not* to prejudge the quality of the argument before you have read and

understood it. This means being open to the possibility that the cultural differences argument is indeed faulty.

Conversely, you would not want to assume automatically that the author is right. James Rachels is a famous name in philosophy and a well respected one too. This fact should not predetermine the outcome of your evaluation of his argument.

Rules 1-2 and 1-3. Reading the essay actively and critically (and repeatedly) would help you see, among other things, that (1) the thesis statement (the conclusion of the author's argument) is in paragraph 10: "[The cultural differences argument] is not sound"; (2) the first nine paragraphs are not part of the essay's argument but simply introduce the topic and explain the argument to be critiqued; (3) the essay's argument has one explicit premise ("The trouble is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion still might be false"), which first appears in paragraph 10 and is elaborated on in paragraphs 11–13; and (4) the author's description of the cultural differences argument seems to be fair and accurate.

Rule 1-4. An outline of the essay's argument would look like this:

PREMISE: The conclusion of the cultural differences argument does not follow from its premise.

CONCLUSION: The cultural differences argument is not sound.

Rule 1-5. As you can see, the essay puts forth a simple argument. Evaluating the argument should be straightforward, especially if you understand the basics of arguments explained in Chapter 2. In your assessment, your main priority would be to determine whether the essay's conclusion follows from the premise and whether the premise is true. The essay's conclusion does indeed follow: From a premise stating that the conclusion of the cultural differences argument does not follow from its premise, we can readily conclude that the cultural differences argument is not sound. Premise 1 is true; from the fact that different cultures have different moral codes, we cannot conclude that there is no such thing as objective truth in morality.

QUICK REVIEW: Reading Philosophy

- Philosophy is not primarily concerned with what causes you to have particular beliefs; it focuses on whether those beliefs are worth having.
- Philosophy helps you evaluate your worldview.
- Through philosophy, your beliefs can become truly and authentically yours, and you can be more fully in control of your life.
- In philosophy, an argument is a statement, or claim, coupled with other statements that are meant to support that statement.
- The productive reading of philosophy requires an open mind, an active and critical approach, and the identification of the conclusion and premises.
- Outlining, paraphrasing, or summarizing can enhance your understanding of a philosophical essay.

2

How to Read an Argument

To a large extent, to read and write philosophy is to read and write arguments, for logical argument is at the heart of philosophy. When we do philosophy, we are usually either evaluating or constructing arguments. The philosophy that we read will most likely contain arguments, and our understanding of the text will hang on our ability to identify and understand those arguments. Most often the quality of the philosophical essays we write will depend heavily on the quality of the arguments we craft. Learning the fundamentals of logical argument, then, is a prerequisite for making sense out of philosophy and writing good philosophy papers. This chapter will get you going in the right direction by showing you how to pick out arguments from passages of nonargumentative prose, assess the quality of different kinds of arguments, devise good arguments, and recognize defective arguments when you see them.

PREMISES AND CONCLUSIONS

A *statement*, or claim, is an assertion that something is or is not the case. It is the kind of utterance that is *either true or false*. These are statements:

A tree is growing in the quad.

I am shocked and dismayed.

$2 + 2 = 4$