How to Write a Philosophy Paper

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“No one who has something original or important to say will willingly run the risk of being misunderstood; people who write obscurely are either unskilled in writing or up to mischief.”

–Peter Medawar

“If you can’t say it clearly, then you don’t understand it yourself”

–John Searle
Outline

1. What You’re Supposed to be Doing

2. The Structure of a Philosophy Paper
   - The Introduction
   - The Exposition
   - Thesis Defense
   - Objections and Replies
   - The Summary
What You’re Supposed to be Doing

- This is not a research paper or a report. You won’t (only) be asked to explain to me what the author has said.
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- You must also *engage* with the author.
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- You must also *engage* with the author.
- You must tell me why you think that they are *wrong*. They’ve provided powerful arguments for their views. Where do those arguments go wrong?
Go back over the readings that we’ve had thus far. We’ve had people on both sides of every issue that we’ve looked at, so you should be able to find somebody you disagree with.
Constructing a Thesis Statement

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- Try to think about why you disagree with them. They provide reasons in favor of their views. What’s wrong with those reasons?
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- Formulate a rough and working thesis statement about where the author has gone wrong — which premise of their argument is false (and why), or why the argument is invalid.
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- Formulate a rough and working thesis statement about where the author has gone wrong — which premise of their argument is false (and why), or why the argument is invalid.

- You should feel free to change this thesis statement later on, but having one in mind will guide your progress writing the paper.
What Makes a Thesis Statement Good?

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  - Bad thesis:

    \[
    \text{Morality is relative to culture.}
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  - Bad thesis:
    
    *Morality is relative to culture.*
  
  - Good thesis:
    
    *In arguing against cultural relativism, Rachels claims that the cultural relativist is forced to say that female genital mutilation in the Sudan is not wrong. However, the cultural relativist is not forced to say this at all. I will demonstrate that a cultural relativist can consistently say that female genital mutilation in the Sudan is wrong.*
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    *If hard determinism is true, then we are not free.*
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  - Bad thesis:
    
    *If hard determinism is true, then we are not free.*
  
  - Good thesis:
    
    *Ted Sider says that if hard determinism is true, then nobody is morally responsible; and if nobody is morally responsible, then we can’t be justified in punishing them. However, I will argue that, even if hard determinism is true, and even if nobody is morally responsible for their actions, we could still be justified in punishing those who act immorally.*
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  - Give the reader a road-map for the rest of the paper. Let them know what kind of exposition you’ll be providing. Let them know what thesis you’ll be defending and how you’ll be defending it. Let them know which objections you’ll be considering and how you’ll be responding to those objections.
“J. L. Mackie has argued that the existence of an omnipotent and omni-benevolent god is incompatible with the existence of suffering. In this paper, I will review Mackie’s argument for this conclusion, focusing particularly on his contention that the existence of higher-order evils like sadism and envy prevents the theist from appealing to higher-order goods in their explanation of the existence of evil. I will then argue for my central thesis: that this aspect of Mackie’s defense fails. The theist needn’t maintain that there are no higher-order evils, merely that for every evil, there is some higher-order good which depends upon it. This does not lead to any vicious regress, as Mackie claims. After defending this thesis, I will consider the potential response that for any higher-order goods, there will be some higher-order envy corresponding to it, and show that this response has some implausible consequences. Thus, I will conclude that Mackie’s argument against theism fails.”
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“People have always wondered “why are things bad?” Since the beginning of time, cavemen noticed that their lives could have been better. But bad things don’t mean that god doesn’t exist, as some so-called ‘philosophers’ have claimed. Higher-order goods and evils are besides the point. Who cares, so long as some things are good? Mackie is wrong and therefore God exists.”
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A Bad Introduction

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- The thesis is not clearly articulated.
- The tone is not professional and respectful.
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- The paper presupposes a familiarity with the subject matter. You should suppose that your author has not heard about the debate you’ll be discussing.
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- Merely showing that Mackie’s argument is bad doesn’t show that his conclusion is false. You shouldn’t claim to have shown any more than you actually argue for.
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The Exposition

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You don’t want to set up a straw man to argue against. Your exposition should paint your dialectical opponent in their best light. The stronger the argument looks in the exposition, the more impressive you will look when you knock it down with your thesis defense in the next section.
The Exposition

A easy and all-too-common way to have a paper fall flat is to attribute a view or argument to an author that they don’t actually hold. For that reason, the exposition is one of the most important sections of the paper. Spend a good amount of time making absolutely sure that you’ve understood what the author you’re engaged with actually says.
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Don’t lean upon quotations from the author. Explain their position in your own words, using your own examples. I know that the author understands their argument. What I want to see is that you understand their argument.
“...Mackie considers the response that the world may be better off with some evil in it, since there are second-order goods — goods such as compassion, empathy, and heroism — which could not exist were it not for the existence of first-order evils such as suffering and danger. The evils are ‘first-order’ because they do not depend upon any other evils or goods in order to exist. They can exist even in the absence of any other evils or goods. The goods are ‘second-order’ because they depend upon first-order evils. In response to this potential objection, Mackie claims that, even if this trick works for evils down at the first level, there must surely be second-order evils — evils which depend for their existence on evils or goods down at the first level. For instance, consider evils like sadism — the taking of pleasure in another’s pain. This could not exist without the existence of first-order pain...”
“...Mackie says that second-order evils trump the first-order goods, even though there’s no reason to think that they do. But if second-order evils like suffering are bad, then why would God have allowed them to exist in the first place? Mackie says that omnipotence makes it possible for god to have everything be red at once, but if everything was red, then how could anything be red?...”
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- The exposition slips into criticism. You shouldn’t criticize the author in the exposition. Save that for the thesis defense.
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- The exposition slips into criticism. You shouldn’t criticize the author in the exposition. Save that for the thesis defense.
- Several aspects of Mackie’s argument are either unclear or inaccurate. What does it mean to say that “second-order evils trump first-order goods”? The exposition doesn’t make it very clear. Also, suffering is not a second-order evil, according to Mackie.
“...Mackie says that second-order evils trump the first-order goods, even though there’s no reason to think that they do. But if second-order evils like suffering are bad, then why would God have allowed them to exist in the first place? Mackie says that omnipotence makes it possible for god to have everything be red at once, but if everything was red, then how could anything be red?...”

- The exposition spends time talking about parts of Mackie’s article which are completely unrelated to the thesis being defended. Only focus on those aspects of the paper which are necessary for understanding your thesis, and spend a long time developing those aspects — making them as clear and explicit as possible.
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Thesis Defense

- Do:
  - Give plausible, non-contentious *reasons* for thinking that your thesis is correct.
Thesis Defense

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Don’t:
- Just assert your thesis as if it were obvious, or justify it using only reasons that your dialectical opponent is incredibly unlikely to accept.
Thesis Defense

- Do:
  - Treat the authors you are engaged with respectfully.
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Don’t:
- Insult the author or call them stupid. Besides being bad philosophy — such *ad hominem* attacks don’t give me any reason to think that the author’s argument is bad — it is just bad intellectual hygiene. You’re unlikely to ever learn very much if you treat everyone who disagrees with you as though they were idiots.
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- Do:
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Don’t:
- Focus on the *empirical questions*. Whether the author’s empirical claims are true is a matter to be decided in other departments. Here, we’re interested in whether or not their conclusion follows from the empirical claims they have made.
“We have seen that Mackie’s response to the higher-order good defense requires the assumption that, for any good, there will be some higher-order evil whose existence depends upon the existence of that good. It is this assumption that I wish to call into question here. It is entirely possible that for every $k$th-level evil, there is some $(k+1)$st-level good which depends upon that $k$th-level evil, yet still be the case that there is some $n$ such that for every $n$th-or-lower-level good, there is no higher level evil depending on it. Moreover, Mackie has given us no reason to think that this is not the case at the actual world; and many straightforward ways of arguing that this is not the case at the actual world fail. This thesis has two parts: first, that it is *possible* that a world be this way; and secondly, that there is no reason to think that the actual world is *not* this way. I will defend these two assertions in turn...”
Bad Thesis Defense

“Mackie’s wrong that higher-order evils make God not exist. If there are higher-order evils, then obviously God wanted them to be there, so they must have some reason for being there. Does Mackie think that he knows more than God? Obviously he doesn’t, so he probably needs to go back to school to learn how to think properly. Anyhow, it’s not like there are any evils in the world in the first place. If God put it there, then it’s not evil, cause God only causes good. So, Mackie’s wrong and God exists.
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- The defense does not treat Mackie with the respect that he deserves.
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- The defense assumes that, simply because Mackie’s argument fails, his conclusion is false. This does not follow. There are bad arguments for true conclusions. Do not overstate what you have shown.
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Objections and Replies

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And then, you want to tell the author why this response of theirs ultimately fails. [The ‘Reply’ part]
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  - At this point, Mackie might contest that I’m a poopy-head. However, I am not a poopy-head, and name-calling doesn’t help Mackie make his case.
- Your responses should *fully address* the concerns raised by the objections.
“...Mackie might want to respond at this point by saying that, for any good, somebody will envy that good. Therefore, there will be a higher-level evil of envy for every good. However, even if there is a higher-level envy for every material good or every pleasurable thing, it is implausible to suppose that certain higher-order goods — like, say, the ability to learn from other’s mistakes — will lead to envy. Or, at the least, it is implausible to suppose that they always lead to envy. Few people are disposed to envy a person for learning a moral lesson...”
“...Mackie would say that since there’s no God, none of this matters anyway, and we should just kill ourselves. Mackie simply fails to see that evils are there for greater good, and there’s probably nothing that will change his mind.”
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- The objections are not good.
- The objections are not dealt with. There is no reply.
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The Summary gives the reader a chance to step back from the nitty-gritty of your paper and reflect on its large-scale argumentative structure. It gives them a chance to see in the forest after having inspected the trees.