

Philosophy 1100: Introduction to Ethics

WRITING A GOOD ETHICS ESSAY

The writing of essays in which you argue in support of a position on some moral issue is not something that is intrinsically difficult. However such essays may be rather different from those that you have written before. What I want to do in this handout, accordingly, is to describe some of the more important characteristics of such essays, and to offer some suggestions, which you may find helpful.

1. A Clear, Concise, Informative Introduction

A good introduction is short and to the point. You should indicate exactly what your topic is, and the view that you intend to defend. You should also tell the reader how your discussion will be structured, so that he or she knows from the very beginning the general lines along which you will be arguing in support of your conclusion. You should also indicate, very briefly, your main line of argument. Finally, you should do these things as concisely as possible, so that you can get on with the business of defending the view that you are setting out on the moral issue in question.

Illustration

Suppose that you are writing about the morality of abortion. You might begin your paper as follows:

"My topic is the morality of abortion. I shall defend an extreme anti-abortion position by arguing, first, that no satisfactory rationale can be offered for any moderate position on abortion, and secondly, that an extreme pro-abortion position cannot be accepted without also accepting infanticide."

A person who reads this introductory paragraph knows exactly what view you will be defending, the general lines along which you will be arguing in defense of that view, and the overall structure of your essay.

Introduction Checklist: Key Questions

1. Is my introduction concise?
2. Does it contain a clear statement of my main thesis?
3. Does it indicate very briefly my main line of argument?
4. Does it explain the overall structure of my essay?

2. The Offering of Reasons for your View

After setting out your thesis, and outlining your overall approach in the introductory paragraph, you need to have a section in which you offer reasons for

accepting the view that you are advancing. Each reason should be set out in the form of an explicit, step by step argument, so that the reader can see right off both what your assumptions are, and how they are supposed to support your conclusion. Moreover, if you are offering more than one consideration in support of your thesis, it is important that different considerations not be mixed together in a single paragraph. Different arguments require at least separate paragraphs - and preferably, separate subsections, each clearly labeled with an appropriate heading. For the latter will not only help the reader to follow your argument: it will help you to think more clearly about the arguments you're offering.

How many reasons should you offer in support of your thesis? It is best to confine yourself to either one, or at most two, supporting arguments. If you offer more arguments, there is a serious danger both that you will not set out any of the arguments in a sufficiently detailed way, and that you will not discriminate between interesting arguments in support of your thesis, and arguments that are at best marginal. In short, choose your best one or two arguments, and develop that argument (or arguments) in a detailed and circumspect way.

Checklist for the Offering of Reasons:

1. Have I set out an argument (or at most two arguments) to provide reasons for thinking that my thesis is true?
2. Have I made all of my premises clear and explicit?
3. Have I developed my argument in a full and detailed way, so that all of my reasoning is clear to the reader?

3. Consideration of Objections to your Arguments

After offering reasons for accepting your view, you need to consider objections. The crucial point to note here is that objections come in two forms. First, there are objections that are directed against the reasons that you have offered in support of your thesis, and which claim, therefore, either that some of your assumptions are implausible, or that some of your reasoning is unsatisfactory. Secondly, there are objections that are directed against your conclusion, and which attempt to provide reasons for thinking that the view which you are advancing is false.

Objections of the first sort are especially crucial, and your main obligation is to address such objections. The reason is that if all that you do is to rebut objections to your thesis, and you fail to consider objections to your argument, then you haven't shown that you have made out a satisfactory positive case in support of your thesis.

How do you arrive at interesting objections to your own arguments? The crucial thing is to look carefully at the assumptions that you have made, and to ask yourself which of those are controversial, in the sense that an intelligent, thoughtful, and well-informed person might well question them. Having located

a controversial assumption, you need to consider why a thoughtful person might disagree with it, and then try to respond to that objection.

Checklist for Objections to your Arguments:

1. Have I carefully set out the most important objection to each of my arguments?
2. Have I then responded, in a careful way, to that objection (or objections)?

4. Consideration of Objections to your Thesis

After you have carefully considered objections to your argument (or arguments), the next important task is to consider objections that, rather than being directed against the reasons that you have offered in support of your view, are directed instead against your view itself, and which attempt to show that your view is incorrect. Here you need to set out any such objection (or objections) in a clear, careful, and dispassionate fashion, and then indicate why you think the objection in question is unsound.

How many objections to your thesis should you attempt to consider? Here, as elsewhere, trying to cover too much ground can result in a weak and superficial discussion. Try to find the strongest objection, and address it in a detailed way.

Checklist for Objections to your Thesis:

1. Have I considered the most important objection against the thesis that I am defending?
2. Have I responded carefully to that objection?

5. Exposition of Arguments

At the heart of a paper that examines some moral issue in a critical fashion is the setting out of arguments - both arguments in support of your positions, and arguments directed either against some of your assumptions, or against your position itself. Whenever one is setting out an argument, one needs to do so in a careful step-by-step fashion, so that it is clear to the reader both what assumptions the argument involves, and what the reasoning is - that is, how one is supposed to get from the assumptions to the conclusion.

One thing that it is very important to avoid is the setting out of more than one argument in a single paragraph. For this usually results in too brief an exposition of the arguments in question, and often in a muddling together of the two arguments, thereby obscuring the structure of the reasoning.

Checklist for your Exposition of Arguments:

1. Are my arguments carefully and explicitly set out so that both all of my assumptions, and my reasoning, are clear?
2. Have I, at any point, set out more than one argument in a single paragraph?

3. Are objections and responses set out in separate paragraphs?

6. A Logical and Perspicuous Structure

A crucial factor that makes for a good essay is the presence of a logical and perspicuous structure. So it's important to ask how one can both organize one's discussion in a logical fashion, and make that organization perspicuous to the reader.

The structure will be clear to the reader if you begin with an introductory paragraph of the sort described above, and then go on, first, to divide your essay up into sections (and possibly also subsections), and secondly, to use informative headings to mark out those sections (and subsections). The reader will then be able to see at a glance how you have structured your discussion.

What makes for logical organization? If you do the things mentioned above, in sections I through IV, in the order discussed, the result will be an essay whose overall logical organization is very strong. That is to say, start by setting out your thesis, and outlining your overall approach in the introductory paragraph. Follow this with a section in which you offer reasons for accepting the view that you are advancing. Then go on to devote two sections to a consideration of objections. In the first, set out, and respond to, objections that are directed against any controversial assumptions that you have made in arguing in support of your own view. Then, in the second, consider objections that might be directed against your thesis itself.

Individual sections also need to be organized in a logical fashion. This is primarily a matter of setting out arguments in a step-by-step fashion, and of discussing different arguments in different subsections, as discussed above in section 5.

Checklist for a Logical and Perspicuous Structure:

1. Is my essay organized into sections in a logical fashion?
2. Are the sections divided into appropriate subsections?
3. Have I made the overall structure of my essay clear by using informative headings for sections and subsections?

7. Dispassionate and Unemotional Discussion

Another very important feature of a good essay is that the discussion be dispassionate, and that one avoid formulating either the issue, or relevant arguments, in a biased and/or emotionally charged way.

Suppose, for example, that Mary is considering whether there should be a law against the sale of pornography. There are various ways in which she can formulate this question, some of which will strongly suggest one answer rather than another. She might, for example, ask herself whether people should be

allowed to amass fortunes as purveyors of filthy and degrading material that will corrupt people, and destroy the moral fiber of society. If this is the way she puts the issue, it will not be too surprising if she arrives at the conclusion that one certainly needs a law against pornography. Suppose, on the other hand, that what she asks is whether people should be prevented from having access to important information about something which is not only natural and very beautiful, but also a means of expressing feelings of tenderness and love. When the question is phrased this way, it seems likely that she will arrive at a rather different conclusion.

Why are emotionally charged formulations bad? There are two reasons. First, they tend to alienate the reader or listener, thereby making it less likely that others will devote much time to a serious consideration of your arguments. But secondly, such formulations are even more dangerous with respect to one's own thinking, since what they typically do is to make it seem that the right answer is obvious, and this in turn usually prevents one from grappling with the issue in a serious way, and from subjecting one's own view to critical examination.

Checklist for Dispassionate and Unemotional Discussion:

1. Have I made use of emotively charged language?
2. Is my discussion dispassionate and fair throughout?

8. Overall Clarity and Conciseness

Many people, confronted with an essay that is difficult to understand, but which is written in a style which sounds profound, tend to conclude that the topic must be a difficult one, and the writer's ideas unusually deep. The appropriate conclusion, however, will generally be a rather less positive one – namely, that the author either has muddled ideas, or lacks the ability to communicate his or her ideas to others in a satisfactory fashion. Obscurity is not a sign of profundity.

I suspect that this point probably needs to be labored a bit, as there are reasons for thinking that many people, in their secondary school education, are encouraged to express their ideas in a fashion that sounds profound. Consider, for example, the following experiment, carried out by two English professors at the University of Chicago. Joseph Williams and Rosemary Hake took a well-written paper, and changed the language to produce two different versions. Both versions involved the same ideas and concepts, but one was written in simplified, straightforward language, while the other was written in verbose, bombastic language, loaded with pedantic terms. They then submitted the two papers to nine high-school teachers, and found that all nine gave very high marks to the verbose paper, but downgraded the straightforward essay as too simple and shallow. Williams and Hake then repeated the experiment with a group of ninety teachers, and came up with similar results. Three out of four high-school teachers (and two out of three college teachers!) gave higher marks to pompous writing!

What should you be aiming at, in terms of clarity, simplicity, and intelligibility? One way of estimating how successful your essay is in these respects is by considering how it would seem to a secondary school student who knew nothing about the topic. Would he or she be able to read it without difficulty? Having read it, would he or she be able to say exactly what view you were defending and how you were supporting that view? If you can confidently answer 'Yes' to both questions, then all is well. But if there is any room for doubt, then you need to rewrite your essay so that your ideas are expressed in a simpler and more straightforward way.

Checklist for Overall Clarity and Conciseness:

1. To what extent is the writing clear and straightforward?
2. Is the writing concise?

9. Planning your Essay

In the preceding sections, I have discussed the features that make for a good essay that is focusing upon the critical discussion of a moral issue. In this final section I want to mention briefly what I think is the most helpful idea for producing an essay that has these characteristics - namely, the formulation of an explicit plan, both for the essay as a whole, and for individual sections.

To do this, you might proceed as follows. First, on a filing card, or a small sheet of paper, list the main sections into which your discussion will be divided, as discussed above.

Secondly, for each of those sections, take a filing card, and write down both the main claims that you want to advance in that section, and a brief description of any arguments that you'll be putting forward, or examining.

Thirdly, for each of the arguments that you'll be discussing, write down, on another filing card, the basic structure of that argument.

Finally, re-examine everything that you have written down. Can you see a more effective way of dividing the discussion up into sections? Is there a better way of organizing the material within a given section? Can any of your arguments be given a better step-by-step formulation?

The plan that you initially draw up is not, of course, set in concrete, and as you do more reading for your essay, or talk to other people about the issue that you're considering, you'll often see a better way of organizing the material, or other arguments or objections that you need to consider, and so on. You can then modify your original plan. The crucial thing is always to have at least a tentative plan in mind, for even when you're just beginning to think about a topic, that will help you to do so in a focused way.