# WRITING PHILOSOPHY ESSAYS

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23rd April 2016

In tutorials and classes I have found myself repeating the same instructions and scribbling the same comments in the (too narrow) margins of tutorial essays again and again. To save time and ink, I started to write them up. I hope that you, too, find these notes useful, whether you are preparing your first essay for a General Philosophy tutorial or revising for finals. At any rate, the notes you are reading should be more legible than my annotations in red ink.

There aren't many firm rules (except for my rules on typesetting and deadlines for submission). There is a lot of freedom, and the best philosophy essays in examinations vary significantly in their style and content. I don't claim that all good essays conform to my rules. But you should think twice before you decide to ignore my advice.

I begin with some requests concerning the typesetting of essays for tutorials. These are followed by some remarks that are intended to be relevant for all kinds of philosophy essays. I conclude with some hints on writing essays in philosophy examinations.

I keep improving and expanding these notes. I am grateful for any suggestions and corrections you may have. I owe thanks to Beau Mount for proofreading an earlier draft. Special thanks go to Oscar Arnstein. Finally, I apologize to those who have provided the (bad) examples. I hope they forgive me for using parts of their texts without specifying the source. In this particular case I can be forgiven for not providing references – despite my misgivings concerning plagiarism in section 3.3 below.

## 1 FORM

### *1.1 Authors, date and page numbers*

You should print your name and the date on any of your essays – and, generally, on most of your documents, except blackmail and denunciation letters. The pages should be numbered.

On some evenings I print out about ten essays. I become very easily confused if most of them have no name or page numbers on them. At the time of writing this, I have five essays on my desk from authors who obviously don't want to be associated with the contents of their essays and prefer to stay anonymous.

In most text processing programs you can create templates. By creating one and starting from it, you don't have to retype your name and switch on pagination for every essay.

### *1.2 Typesetting*

To keep me happy, you only need to follow the following two rules:

1. Use 11pt or 12pt textsize. Don't double space the lines of your text.

2. Leave ample margins left and right for my comments. There shouldn't be more than 75–80 characters (including spaces) in your lines.

The document you are reading conforms to these rules. You don't have to read the rest of this section, but I can't keep myself from providing some explanations as an excuse for being pedantic about typesetting. Bad typesetting can make reading and marking texts much harder. The long lines, large fonts and double-spacing still often prescribed for theses make sense for documents produced on a typewriter with their very large text sizes. I don't understand, however, why one would want to stick to those rules today.

There is really no need to typeset your essays in 14pt or 15pt. In particular, the use of large text sizes won't disguise the fact that your essay is too short. Generally, depending on the typeface, 11pt or 12pt will suffice. Even without my glasses, I can comfortably read texts typeset in 11pt. At a normal distance, larger text sizes will make it harder to grasp a phrase or sentence, because you can see only a smaller part of it.

On standard A4 paper, an 11pt textsize will give you either large margins or very long lines. The line you are looking at right now has 76 characters and spaces and is already long by the standards of good typesetting. Up to 75 characters and spaces is usually considered to be acceptable. More will make reading difficult, because it's harder to find the beginning of the next line.

If you follow the two rules about text size and line length above, there will be sufficient space in the margin for my comments.

## 2 LENGTH AND SUBMISSION

I am often asked about the length of essays. I care less about the number of words than about the content. Normally I would expect at least 1800 words, but that's not a firm rule. I prefer to read a short strong essay rather than a long essay without substance. In particular, do not pad out your essay by inserting phrases like 'it is important to note that' to reach 1800 words.

Unless we have agreed otherwise, please send me your essay as an email attachment by 6pm on the day preceding our tutorial.

## 3 THE CONTENT

Writing philosophy is challenging because philosophical reasoning is highly abstract and very few things can be taken for granted. There are only very few assumptions on which every philosopher relies. Hence, in many cases, you need to make your assumptions explicit, even when they look completely obvious to you. What is obvious to one philosopher may sound absurd to another.

Avoid ambiguities and metaphors. In other less abstract disciplines, unintended readings can often be excluded because they are absurd. In philosophy they can lead to fatal misunderstandings. A sentence that is not even intended to be taken literally can be a source of serious misunderstandings. Therefore metaphors and similar figures of speech should be used with great care.

Good philosophical texts can be trite and full of pedantry. Having said this, there are philosophers who are great stylists; but this presupposes an excellent command of the material. In an exam you should not expect to be rewarded for an elegant style.

### *3.1 The introduction*

If students have no clue what they should write as an introduction, they usually emphasise the importance of the topic:

> For centuries personal identity has always been a central and widely discussed problem. The problem has been discussed controversially by many philosophers.

In this opening sentence, the topic 'personal identity' can be replaced with almost any other topic you will cover in the *Knowledge and Reality* or *Early*

*Modern Philosophy* papers. Even this kind of introduction is not free of risk: Are you sure that personal identity has always been a central and important problem for centuries? Have there been periods when philosophers didn't discuss personal identity? You should avoid this kind of introduction. When you start an essay in an examination in this way, the malevolent examiner may suspect that you thought the following:

> I have no idea who was the first to write on personal identity. For instance, I don't know whether ancient philosophers discussed personal identity (otherwise I would have said when philosophers started to think about personal identity). I also don't know *why* personal identity is a problem and how it's related to other issues (if I knew it, I would not only have claimed that it is important but also why). I don't have anything specific to say about the essay question. I'm not prepared to deviate from my standard essay on personal identity, not even in the introduction.

You should try to come up with an introduction that shows that you have understood that the essay question was *not* 'Write your standard essay on personal identity.' For instance, you could say why the question highlights an important aspect of the discussion about personal identity.

If you say something about the history of the topic, try to be specific. If you say that the topic is important, say why. Even better, try to relate your introduction to the question. Still better, skip the introduction altogether and go straight to an analysis of the essay question.

Immediately after the introduction or directly at the beginning in place of an introduction, many essays contain a short plan of the essay. This can be useful, but it's not obligatory and I would rather recommend against it. It may look like an attempt to pad out your essay because you don't have enough material. Especially in an exam, when you are short of time, you should rather spend more time on the actual arguments.

### *3.2 Conclusion*

During the writing of the essay, you should already know what you are going to write as a conclusion. Obviously, in the conclusion you should succinctly answer the essay question and leave no doubt what your answer is. From your conclusion one should be able to tell what the question was. Do not conclude with a general claim that supposedly implies an answer to the question. If possible, make explicit any particular assumptions you have made in answering

the question. Even a whacked examiner, after having marked 100 scripts, should not be able to doubt that you give a direct answer to the question.

Highlight your main point in the conclusion. It will be hardly a very inventive answer to say that Descartes' main argument for dualism is not convincing. Try to be more specific. In the conclusion tell the examiner at least whether the argument itself is faulty or the premises are false (or both).

The conclusion should not come as a surprise. Therefore you may want to mention the gist of the conclusion earlier on, for instance, in the introduction or immediately after it. There are exceptions to this rule and some philosophers are masters in surprising their readers. But this is a stylistic device that should be used with caution.

Avoid conclusions that are grotesquely strong. Maybe some solution of the Gettier problem works for the examples you know, but that doesn't mean it works for all examples in the literature. However, it's also not a good idea to end an essay by claiming that nothing conclusive can be said. But it is perfectly acceptable to say that your answer depends on a specific understanding of the question and certain assumptions that are not further defended in your essay.

Unless the examiner is a Hegelian or paraconsistent logician, it's also not advisable to reach a 'synthesis' by stating that there is some truth in some doctrine *and* its negation. Often it is a good idea to say that under certain specific assumptions, the answer is so-and-so. These assumption should probably be repeated in the conclusion; the assumptions usually form an important part of your conclusion. You could repeat how exactly you understand the question – for instance that you take it to be a question about contextualist theories of knowledge and that your answer relies on the assumption that justification is fallible.

In addition to stating the main conclusion, you may also add a few sentences that connect the answer to the question with another topic. For instance, you may connect a historical theory with a contemporary theory, if that is compatible with the question.

### *3.3 References*

Of course you can't provide specific references in an exam, but you should do so in your tutorial essays. I won't complain every time they are missing, but I don't think it is asking too much to copy the entry from a bibliography into your file. Get clear about who the author is. Don't confuse, for instance, Clarence Irving Lewis with David Lewis. Also don't ascribe an argument or view to the author of an entry in an overview article who just reports the view of another author. Keep track of when some publication appeared.

Incorrect references can arouse the suspicion of an examiner:

> In his famous paper Putnam describes the sceptic scenario of brains in the vat.

It sounds as if one should know this famous paper, but the examiner doesn't and may well think the following:

> The candidate doesn't know that the brain-in-the-vat story is contained in the book (Putnam 1981, Chapter 1, pp. 1–21) rather than in a journal paper. Probably the candidate didn't read the original chapter; otherwise he or she would have noticed that it isn't just a paper. By talking about 'his famous paper' – as if Putnam had written only one famous paper – the candidate avoids quoting the title; this is another clue that she or he has never read the original text.

When you mention a theory or example, you should refer to the original source, not necessarily to the place where you first encountered it. An entry in an encyclopedia is unlikely to contain an original point.

I don't care about a specific way of referencing; but please don't write something silly like 'The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy argues that …'

Finally, you should be very careful to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism. It's obvious that copying and pasting parts from the text of another author into your own essay constitutes plagiarism. There are, however, also less obvious varieties of plagiarism. Consult the University web page on plagiarism for more details. The consequences can be bad when you are caught. Quite a few German politicians, some of them with extremely promising career prospects, have had to resign from their posts when their dissertations were found to be partially plagiarized. Theses that had been written more than thirty years ago were scrutinized.

### *3.4 Dos and don'ts*

*Answer the question and make clear that you are answering the question.* If the marker thinks that you are not addressing the question, you will pay a high toll.

When you think an overworked and not very astute marker might have lost track of why you are saying something or how it relates to the question, you should repeat your rationale for mentioning the point you make. Sometimes it can be useful to repeat some phrase from the question. This may persuade the examiner that you are still addressing it.

Of course it can also happen that you run out of material and your essay is still too short. Then you might still like to mention something you know but which does not obviously form part of a good answer to the question. In such a situation it is probably best not to add anything. At any rate do not just add a paragraph with this material by starting with 'besides this, one must also observe that …' Instead, try to connect the additional points to what you have written so far. For instance, you might be able to claim that the surplus material has an impact on the premises of a previous argument. Therefore, although it does not directly relate to the question, the answer to the question indirectly depends on the additional material. Focus on these connections during revision.

*Don't explain how others would have answered the question instead of answering the question.* Assume you get the question 'Are you justified in believing that the sun will rise tomorrow?' By describing what Hume or other philosophers thought about the topic, you don't answer the question, at least not directly. If you just write 'Hume claimed that we are not justified in believing that the sun will rise tomorrow', the reader will learn at best what Hume's view might have been, but not whether we are actually justified in the belief that the sun will rise. Of course, you can mention Hume. You can even describe Hume's views; but then you need to say how that helps with answering the question. You can say, for instance, that you endorse Hume's view. In most cases, however, the emphasis should be on the claim or argument and not on who defended the view. In a historical paper such as *Early Modern Philosophy* you may get a question like 'In what sense was Hume a sceptic about causality?' and *then* you will have to describe Hume's view. However, even then there is the risk that you will not answer the question if you only summarize what Hume experts say about Hume's account.

This doesn't mean that you should plagiarize thoughts by presenting them as your own. For instance, the following sentence tells us something about Gettier's work: 'Gettier argued that knowledge cannot be defined as justified true belief by considering the example of a man …' Instead you could say something about knowledge by endorsing the view: 'Knowledge cannot be defined as justified true belief, as Gettier showed using the following example …'

*Make sure that the dialectical structure of your essay is clear.* The reader shouldn't be in doubt whether you just report a point of view or defend it, or about why you mention it.

For instance, a paragraph shouldn't start with the sentence 'Williamson claims that knowledge is not definable', only for it to become clear to the reader, as he goes along, that you want to subscribe to that view without actually saying that

you agree with Williamson.

If you only want to claim that many people don't believe in the validity of an argument or in its premises, say so, and don't write the following:

> The analysis of the validity of this argument has resulted in a great deal of scepticism.

Here it is unclear who has analyzed the argument and who has endorsed scepticism with respect to what.

Of course you could clarify your intention by talking about 'scepticism with respect to the validity of the argument' and then also talk about who has come to doubt the validity of the argument. But that's very longwinded. It's much better to say that very few people believe in the validity of an argument. It is better still not to hide behind other people. If you don't want to make a sociological or historical claim, but you wish to say that the argument is not valid or not valid under a specific reading, then do so.

*Avoid phrases like 'One might argue that . . . ' or 'It has been thought that . . . '.* This is even worse than reporting the views of a specific philosopher. If you actually want to state the view expressed by what follows, you should simply do so and not precede it by a phrase of this kind. If you actually want to make a historical claim and say that a certain argument was made or a view held, you should mention a specific author and – in a tutorial essay at least – add a reference.

The sentence 'It has been argued that coherence implies consistency' does not lend any support to the claim that coherence implies consistency. Similarly, but perhaps less obviously, the sentence 'It is generally agreed that coherence implies consistency' doesn't help much to defend the view that coherence implies consistency. Even if most or all philosophers hold a certain view, that doesn't mean that it is true – unless you endorse some weird theory of truth. Appeals to authority were common in medieval philosophy, and medieval authors liked to support their views by adding 'philosophus dixit' (the philosopher, that is Aristotle, said so), whether Aristotle had said so or not. Those times are over.

*Avoid the use of technical terms if you don't intend to use them in their specific technical sense.* 'Idea', for instance, is a technical term. Don't write 'Berkeley discusses the idea of God', if you only want to say that Berkeley says something about God. For Berkeley may have denied that there is an idea of God. Don't use 'essential' if you only mean 'important'. It's amazing how many philosophical term have found their way into everyday language; reimporting them back into philosophy is dangerous.

*Avoid phrases like 'it is also important to note that . . . '.* Use them only when there is a very good reason to do so. The reader may hope that everything you write

is important. These phrases look like a not very subtle trick to make an essay longer. They may also signal to the marker that you have no clue how what you are going to say relates to the previous paragraph or why you are mentioning it at all. If you knew, you would have started the paragraph by connecting it to what you have written so far.

*Don't be afraid of repeating a term.* Some teachers will have told you not to repeat the same word too often; but it is better to repeat a word rather than to circumscribe it and to introduce vagueness. For instance, when Locke talks about 'ideas' do not try to replace this term by 'concept', 'notion' or the like. 'Idea' is a technical term and you should stick to it.

When you vary your expressions, the reader may think that you changed it deliberately. For instance, if you write in your essay on personal identity about 'persons' then about 'subjects' and later on even perhaps about 'people', the reader will wonder why you are using different terms and he or she may think you confused different concepts.

*Don't write summaries.* In my reading lists you find references to articles in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and similar collections. This may create the impression that what you find there is the best style to write philosophy essays. The authors of these articles usually strive to cover all main views and arguments in a given field. You are not expected to do this in your essays. Actually you should not even try to do it.

Of course I understand that it is tempting to use parts of an article from an encyclopedia as a starting point and then base your essay on that. The resulting essay can be decent. But the big risk is that you won't understand some important points. The authors of these articles try hard to polish their articles and to keep them succinct. Because they are dense, it's very easy to miss a subtle point. Moreover, I may not realize that you don't understand it, because you copied it from the article without understanding exactly what the crucial issue is. Then, when you try to reproduce your essay or parts of it in a collection or an exam, you will deviate from the formulations in the article and explain the point using your own words. At this point you may find yourself in trouble. It's much better to show in a tutorial that you haven't grasped an argument than in an exam.

Instead of writing overviews, concentrate on one single argument (or more if they are simple) and discuss it in some detail. It's much better to show that you have fully grasped one single argument than to prove that you have skimmed a few surveys of the field.

*Don't admit that you are not addressing the question.* You might think that no student would actually say that he or she does not answer the question in a

particular part of the essay; but it happens surprisingly often. For instance, I have read many times the phrase: 'Before answering the question one must …'. Writing that one *must* first do something else before answering the question will leave an marker wondering what you think you have to do in an essay other than answering the question. What you can say is that the answer to the question depends on whether a certain assumption is made or on how the question is interpreted.

*Avoid polemical remarks.* Don't rubbish an author, or his or her theories or arguments. If an argument isn't valid, say so; but there is no need to add the claim advocated by an author is obviously absurd and flies in the face of common understanding.

Many philosophers love to make sarcastic and polemical remarks. If you want to learn how to write polemics, read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. But in an undergraduate essay they are out of place.

*Don't use metaphors without good reason.* Often people don't realise that they are using a metaphor. 'Gettier's argument attacks Plato's definition of knowledge' sounds awkward to me. Lions and football players attack, but do arguments attack? It's better to say that Gettier attacks the definition with a certain argument. I also find 'Externalism claims that …' or 'These externalist theories essentially put forward the idea that …' at least awkward. Can abstract doctrines claim anything? Can they put forward ideas? I would rather say 'According to externalism, …' or 'Externalists claim that …'.

*Keep the comments on the structure of your essay short.* In an exam you have little time and you can't afford digression as the author of a book or long article can. Everything you write should be to the point. Hence it should not be necessary to start the essay with an abstract of your essay. In some cases it may be acceptable or even useful, but more likely than not a brief overview at the beginning will look like a desperate attempt to pad out your essay.

*Don't be unnecessarily prescriptive.* If you summarize the structure of your essay, don't say that no other structure is permissible. For instance, the following sentence strikes me as too prescriptive:

> Before we compare apriority with necessity, the concept of necessity must first be defined.

Really? Presumably you will fail to give an adequate and informative definition of necessity. Maybe you can clarify the concept of necessity a little bit. The reader may also wonder why it *has* to be defined first. An essay that begins with the comparison up to the point where some comments on necessity are helpful

may be as good. Be especially careful when you give orders to the reader by writing sentence like 'First we must consider …'. Do we really have to? Or do you just refer to yourself when you say 'we'?

Strangely, commands to the reader are very widespread in English prose. It strikes me, a boisterous German, as impolite. And yes, I realize that this text doesn't contain much beyond orders to the reader.

*Don't trust dodgy sources.* For instance, *Wikipedia* is an unreliable source. Among philosophers there are countless stories about incorrect claims on *Wikipedia*. Philosophers got banned from Wikipedia for trying to correct entries about their own views. On Wikipedia you cannot even trust biographical data. Even dates of birth can be incorrect. I am still grateful to the person who made me two years younger than I actually am in my entry – and somewhat cross with the person who corrected it.

*Be careful with your logical terminology.* Not only pedantic logicians will object to a claim such as 'Clearly Gettier's argument is inconsistent.' Sets of sentences or of propositions can be inconsistent, but not arguments.

A misuse of terminology can lead to mistakes. Consider the following paragraph:

> Schopenhauer gives an argument for the claim that the character of a person cannot change. But, clearly, the claim that the character of a person cannot change is absurd. Therefore Schopenhauer's argument is not valid.

This is really bad. You conclude that the argument isn't valid from the falsity of its conclusion. A valid argument can have a false conclusion. At this point I cannot keep myself from recommending my favourite logic textbook (Halbach 2010) .

Don't call a claim or proposition an argument. Here is an example.

> Frankfurt claims that a person can be morally responsible even if he could not have done otherwise. This argument is flawed.

What does 'this argument' refer to? It does not refer to Frankfurt's claim. Frankfurt does have an argument for his claim and the second sentence means that there is something wrong with the argument. If you wanted to say that something is wrong with the claim, then you need to say so and not talk about the argument. Do not try to avoid the use of logical vocabulary by writing, for instance, 'Frankfurt refuted it' when it is not completely clear what the pronoun 'it' refers to. Say whether you mean the argument or the claim. Generally make

sure the reference of pronouns is never ambiguous. Don't leave it to the reader to figure out whether a pronoun refers to an argument, its conclusion, a premise or something else.

In philosophy definitions can play various roles. They can be just stipulations or introduce abbreviations as in mathematics. But they can also be conceptual analyses. Usually definitions shouldn't be called *true* or *false*. A definition can be adequate or correct or not. For instance, you can say that Gettier (1963) showed that the definition of knowledge as true justified belief isn't adequate. You can also say that the claim that knowledge is true justified belief is false.

There can be different reasons for rejecting or not accepting a philosophical theory. Make clear what your standpoint is and what the reasons for your standpoint are. If you have shown that an argument for a claim is not valid, you cannot conclude that the claim is false. For instance, you shouldn't claim that Descartes' claim that *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are really distinct substances isn't true because his arguments aren't valid. You would need arguments refuting his substance dualism in order to be able to say that it isn't true.

A philosophical claim can simply be false; but it can also fail to be meaningful. Saying that a claim is nonsensical or doesn't make sense is not the same as saying that it is false. When you only want to say that a claim is not true or obviously not true, do not say that it is nonsensical. If you want to show that a claim doesn't make sense, you have to show that it has no meaning or the sentence under discussion doesn't express a proposition.

*Be careful with identity and semantic statements.* The author of the following sentence claims that moral responsibility is identical with a certain idea: 'Moral responsibility is the idea that you should be held accountable for your actions because they originated with you.' I strongly doubt that moral responsibility is identical to any idea. If somebody has moral responsibility, it doesn't follow that he has the idea that you should be held accountable for your actions because they originated with you. I suspect that the sentence is meant to express something along the following lines: 'A person *P* is morally responsible for an action *A* iff *P* should be held accountable for *P*'s actions because they originated with *P*.' However, I'm not sure whether I have understood what the sentence was supposed to convey.

In order to avoid outright identity claims, some people hope that semantic expressions can be used instead. For instance, instead of writing 'moral responsibility is the idea that …', they say 'moral responsibility refers to the idea that …'. This may look better because, in colloquial English, the verb 'refer' is sometimes used in a very loose sense to mean 'is somehow related to'. First, in philosophy (and not only there) 'refer' is often used in a very specific sense to express a

semantic relation. Secondly, in any more specific sense 'moral responsibility refers to the idea that …' is false: moral responsibility doesn't refer at all. A proper name can refer to an object, a person can refer to an object, but moral responsibility can't.

If you want to assert an identity, do so and don't use vague expressions such as 'refer'. Instead of 'determinism refers to the doctrine that …' you should write 'determinism is the doctrine that …'.

*Generally avoid over-abstraction and complicated sentences.* Expressing something in a more abstract way can introduce ambiguities and often makes your text harder to understand. You may be able to intimidate some people by using convoluted sentences and abstract concepts. Philosophers have seen too much of this and aren't easily impressed.

Consider the example above: 'A person *P* is morally responsible for an action *A* iff *P* should be held accountable for *P*'s actions because they originated with *P*.' I have argued that the original and more abstract version 'moral responsibility is the idea that …' isn't correct. However, one can try to express the claim in a more abstract way. I don't really know what exactly the author wanted to say, but I assume that the following abstract version comes close to what she wanted to express: 'Moral responsibility is the relation that obtains between a person and an action exactly in case the person should be held accountable for the action because it originated with the person.' This sentence strikes me as harder to understand and I would plead for the less abstract version at the beginning of this paragraph. There may be different views on this. However, I think it is much easier to get the abstract version wrong than the less abstract sentence.

Here is another example taken from an essay on the Gettier problem:

> The Justified True Belief (JTB hereafter) theory has traditionally formed the framework for the analysis of knowledge, by taking the view that for S to know p, p must be true, S must believe p and S must be justified in believing p.

What would be lost by writing the following?

> According to the Justified True Belief (JTB hereafter) account, S knows if and only if p is true, S believes p, and S is justified in believing p.

*Don't use terminology you do not fully understand in an exam – and not without flagging it in a tutorial essay.* Imagine that you try to make your essay less dull by using terminology you have found in some text. For instance, you begin your epistemology essay with the sentence 'The analysis of propositional

knowledge is one of, if not the, fundamental question of epistemology.' The adjective 'propositional' sounds good, but you have only a vague idea what it could mean. In a tutorial essay you can do this. But then, please, flag it in the margin with something like 'Could you please explain what propositional knowledge is?' At any rate, don't use terminology you don't understand in an exam.

*Avoid longer quotations in tutorial essays.* Of course there is nothing wrong with quoting a philosopher. If you copy sentences directly from an author's text, you are less likely to distort what the author is saying than when you rephrase the sentence in your own words. Hence you would expect that for once I have no reason to complain, if you also add an exact reference. However, I still have worries.

By writing essays and discussing them, you should gain an understanding of the texts. Copy-and-paste doesn't help you much in grasping a text. Instead of direct quotes or indirect quotes that follow the original almost literally, at least paraphrase the text. In an exam you probably won't be able to quote longer passages of a text, unless you memorize it. If you only find out in an exam that you are unable to express a thought in your own words, it's too late.

Especially in an essay on the interpretation of a specific text, shorter quotations can be useful. But don't leave it to the reader to interpret the text. That is your task. If the quote contains special terminology, you have to explain it.

*Be cautious with personal comments.* 'I think' may easily be interpreted by the examiner as 'I believe, but don't have any evidence or an argument.' Your personal attitudes towards a topic are irrelevant and should not be mentioned unless you can support them by good arguments: the examiner will hardly be interested in the fact that Candidate No. 51599 doesn't believe in God. Of course you can say that Descartes' proof for the existence of *res extensa* relies on his proof for the existence of God and that his argument for the existence of God is problematic. But there is no need to add that you are an atheist.

## 4 EXAMINATIONS

### *4.1 Choosing a question*

By choosing the wrong question, you can spoil everything in an exam. Spend some time thinking about the questions. Some questions can be misleading.

> A subject, taking one hand from a bucket of icy water and the other from a bucket of warm water, places them simultaneously into a

> bucket of lukewarm water. She reports that the water feels both warm and cool. What does this show? *from the 2005 K&R paper*

You reason that this must be a question about how we can know anything about temperatures, or, more generally, how we can know anything at all. Hence, you conclude, this must be a question on external-world scepticism. Another candidate has revised direct and indirect realism and is keen to write an essay on this topic. For him or her this is obviously an example of misperception, and she discusses the bearing of cases of misperception on direct and indirect realism. The question is related to these topics, but you should be wondering why the paper setter has chosen this particular example. Temperature often has been used as an example of a secondary property. This example shows that you should worry if you cannot explain why a particular example has been chosen.

Always try to give an answer that is specific as possible to the question. Ask yourself why the examiner has chosen a particular example and whether there is something to that example that distinguishes this example from others. Only write an essay on external-world scepticism or general scepticism if the question cannot be addressed by more specific forms of scepticism.

Don't be misled by catchphrases. Here is another example of a question on scepticism that is dangerous and might lead you to answer it even though you haven't prepared the topic. Imagine that you get the following question in your exam:

> I know that I don't have hands if I am a brain in a vat. Therefore, because I know I have hands, I know that I am not a brain in a vat. Discuss.

Overcome by joy because you have thoroughly revised Putnam's (1981, Chapter 1, pp. 1–21), you start trotting out your standard essay on brains in the vat and the theory of reference. Halfway through the essay you start wondering why the examiner didn't simply ask: 'Do you know that you are not a brain in a vat?'

The answer is that the examiner meant to ask about closure principles, as discussed by Luper (2012).

### *4.2 Reading lists*

In the perfect world, you would have worked through all items on the faculty reading list and read a couple of additional books and papers. If you haven't read everything, it's useful to obtain an overview by reading some entry in an encyclopedia or in a textbook. Of course, by reading a single paragraph on three- versus four-dimensionalism, you will hardly be able to write an essay

about this aspect of the philosophy of time. Nevertheless it can be *very* useful to remember some keywords and key topics. This knowledge may help you to you realise that a question in an exam is about three versus four dimensionalism and not about another aspect of the philosophy of time that you know much better. Thus you know at least that you shouldn't answer the question.

## FURTHER READING

There are numerous style guides to academic writing, some of them specifically intended for philosophers. Some famous philosophers have contributed to the genre. In German Schopenhauer is famous for his rants against what he perceived as bad style.

Here I mention just two texts written by Oxford philosophers. After marking philosophy exam scripts, Dummett (1993) wrote a grammar and style guide. There aren't many points in this book that pertain specifically to philosophy. Mark Thakkar maintains a site by the late Bob Hargrave, who was a tutor at Balliol. The site includes a well-known and useful essay about how to fail philosophy exams.

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