

*For my mother
and
in memory of my father*

Philosophical Writing *An Introduction*

THIRD EDITION

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Exercises

Consider the relative strengths of the propositions within each of the following sets. Which, if any, proposition is the strongest *true* proposition of the set? (Of course, there will be disagreement about the answers.)

1. (a) All empirical statements are based upon observation and nothing else.
(b) All empirical statements are based upon some actual observation.
(c) All empirical statements are based upon some possible observation.
2. (a) Lying is always wrong.
(b) Lying is usually wrong.
(c) Lying is sometimes wrong.
(d) Lying is never wrong.
3. (a) Killing is wrong.
(b) Killing is wrong except to protect one's own life.
(c) Killing is wrong except to protect someone's life from an attacker.
(d) Killing is wrong except to protect someone's life from an unfair attack.

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The Structure of a Philosophical Essay

1 An Outline of the Structure of a Philosophical Essay

Socrates was no friend of rhetoric, as he understood it. Still, he was willing to concede this much: "Any discourse ought to be constructed like a living creature, with its own body, as it were; it must not lack either head or feet; it must have a middle and extremities so composed as to suit each other and the whole work" (*Phaedrus* 264C). To extend the metaphor, just as body parts have different shapes and functions – arms, legs, wings, and horns – essay parts have different forms and functions. Further, just as different animals have different anatomies, philosophical essays have different anatomies. Some are more complex and unusual than others; yet all evolve from a basic form.

* In this book, the most basic form and its immediate evolutionary descendants will be discussed. These forms all have a head, trunk, and tail. In prosaic terms, every essay should have three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. It was Winston Churchill, I believe, who put it this way: say what you are going to do; do it; say what you have done. You may have heard this before, for a good reason: it is true. Further, as a first shot at specifying the structure of an essay, it is a valuable remark. Yet, this truism would be objectionable if more were not said about what goes into the structure of an essay and how a writer might construct one. What is needed is a more informative guide (given below) to writing.

In the more informative guide, the first element, “Say what you are going to do,” and the third, “Say what you have done,” are substantially unchanged. They appear below as segments I and V. The second element, “Do it,” however, divides into three segments: II–IV.

The Structure of a Philosophical Essay

A Simple One

- I State the proposition to be proved.
- II Give the argument for that proposition.
- III Show that the argument is valid.
- IV Show that the premises are true.
- V State the upshot of what has been proven.

Segment I, stating the proposition to be proved, is the beginning of the essay. The statement to be proved is often called “the thesis sentence,” or, more simply, the thesis. The thesis might be a statement like “Justice is rendering each person what is due to him,” or it might be a historical thesis like “Descartes’s method of doubt is the same as Sextus’s skepticism.”

Aristotle said, “A speech has two parts: you must state your thesis; and you must prove it.” Although an essay is not exactly a written speech, what Aristotle says about a speech can be applied to an essay. The most basic division of an essay is into a statement of the thesis and its proof. The statement of the thesis comes before the proof. If you begin your essay with your first premise, rather than with a statement of your thesis, the reader will have great difficulty in understanding the relevance of the premise. One reason for this is that from any proposition, an infinite number of propositions follows. (It is easy, but not relevant here, to prove this. Anyone who has taken a course in logic should be able to do it. Those without a course in logic might ask their professor, some rainy day, to do it.) Although virtually all of the infinite possible propositions will have an absurdly low probability of being drawn by the author, often there will still be a relatively large number of propositions that have a relatively high probability of being drawn; and it is unfair and irrational for an author to expect the reader to anticipate which of these she might draw.

Compare writing an essay with riding in an automobile. If a passenger does not know the destination, it will be difficult for him

to remember the roads he has taken. If, on the other hand, the destination is known, then every left and right turn, every sign and traffic signal, is organized in relation to that destination. Since philosophy can be difficult, it is important to make as clear as possible what you are trying to prove in your essay. There should be no surprises in philosophy, except those caused by an insight, expressed with brilliant clarity. Do not confuse rhetorical pyrotechnics for philosophical light.

Of course, your principal purpose in writing a philosophical essay is Truth for Truth’s sake (*Veritas gratia Veritatis*). Another purpose, however, may be to show your professor that you know the material. Before reading your essay, your professor will assume neither that you do nor that you do not know the material; but once he does begin reading it the burden of proof is on you to show that you do know the material. An unclear essay is evidence of unclear thought.

Segments II–IV constitute the middle of the essay. Concerning segment II, it is good practice to get out all of your premises as soon as possible. This gives the reader the opportunity to see the general structure of your argument. The reader has a chance to see the overall picture of how you are going to get to your thesis. Then, in segment III, show your argument to be valid, i.e. that the premises you have set out will in fact get you to your conclusion. Explain how your premises entail your conclusion. Since a valid argument guarantees a true conclusion only if all the premises are true, the next step in your essay (segment IV) is to prove that your premises are true. First, state your evidence for your premises. This is the most direct and straightforward way of pressing your case. Typically, your audience will be more or less dubious about one or more of your premises. Raising the objections that you anticipate your reader might have will help clear the air of that doubt *if* you can answer those objections. More, answering the objections will solidify your case and make it more compelling for your reader.

Segment V is the end of your essay. There are several ways to end an essay. One way is to summarize your argument. This is in line with the notion “say what you have done.” Because it comes at the end of your careful explication, your summary can assume a lot. You may use technical terms freely and assume that the meanings of your propositions are clear. Another way to end an essay is to explain what further implication it has; or you might say what the next step in your research

is. This last conclusion is ill-advised if you are submitting your final essay for a course.

Still another way to end an essay is to explain why your results are important, if their importance could not be appreciated by stating them earlier in the essay. Typically, you should explain why your results are important near the beginning of your essay in order to pique your reader's interest. Sometimes, however, the importance cannot be appreciated before one goes through the argument, or the relation between the results and the importance is implausible without the argument. In these cases it is both justified and advisable to explain the importance of your results at the end.

I have briefly described the simplest structure a philosophical essay can have. Typically, the structure of a philosophical essay will be much more complicated. To help reflect this additional complication, let's look at a more complicated outline of the structure of a philosophical essay.

The Structure of a Philosophical Essay A Slightly More Complex One

- I Beginning: State the proposition to be proved.
 - (a) Orientation *
 - (1) Specify what general topic will be discussed.
 - (2) Report what previous philosophers have thought about this topic.
 - (b) State what is to be proved; state the thesis.
 - (1) Report who has held the same or a similar view.
 - (2) Report who has held the opposite or a different view.
 - (c) Motivation: Explain why this thesis or topic is interesting or important.
 - (d) State what you will assume in your essay without argument.
- II Give the argument for the proposition to be proved.
 - (a) Explain the general force of the argument.
 - (b) Explain what the premises mean.

- III Show that the argument is valid.
 - (a) Explain those terms that are used in a technical sense, or which are ambiguous; resolve the ambiguity.
 - (b) Explain how the conclusion follows from the premises.
 - (1) The inference to intermediate conclusions will have to be explained as part of the complete explanation.
 - (2) Sometimes one can explain the inferences by citing rules from a natural deduction system, e.g. *modus ponens* or *modus tollens*. More often the explanation concerns explaining the conceptual relations between the concepts expressed in the premises.
 - (c) Give the rules that justify the inferences that are not apparent from the initial statement of the argument.
- IV Show that the premises are true.
 - (a) Give the evidence for the premises.
 - (1) Explain the premises; and explain the meaning of those terms that might be misunderstood and which bear upon the truth of your premises.
 - (2) Adduce the intuitions of the audience; supply examples and subsidiary arguments that lend support to the truth of your premises.
 - (b) Raise objections.
 - (1) Raise objections that have actually been raised against your position.
 - (i) Raise the objections that historically significant philosophers have already raised to that problem.
 - (ii) Raise the objections that your professor or fellow students have raised.
 - (2) Raise objections that no one else has raised and which, when answered, further explicate and shore up your thesis.
 - (c) Answer the objections.
- V Conclusion:
 - (a) State the upshot of what you have proven.
 - (b) Indicate further results that one might try to get.

The outline is in large part self-explanatory. Still, other things need to be said about it, since it is an abstract and schematic entity. First, not every essay will contain every element of the outline. Second, not every essay will contain these elements in the order in which they are given here. The order given is a standard order, but it should not be considered invariable. Your material should dictate the order. Third, some items in the outline are roughly the same, e.g. I(a)(2) and I(b)(1). One reason for this is that essays typically unfold one step at a time. It is often rhetorically more effective to follow this procedure: provide some general background, then state your own position, then provide more detailed background, and so on. Another reason why the same general topic is listed in more than one place in the outline is, again, that your material should dictate your order, and sometimes that means discussing a topic in one place and sometimes in another. Finally, parts of this outline – even the whole of it – can be embedded as subordinate elements within other parts of the outline. For example, at the beginning of an essay, in the course of explaining what previous philosophers have thought about this problem, you might want to introduce the argument that some other philosopher gives for his position. In other words, you would want to introduce segments II–IV of the “Outline” as an element subordinate to I(a)(2). If you were to do this, then the outline for the early part of your essay would contain embedded elements. (See the accompanying box on p. 55.)

Of course, this kind of embedding can occur at almost any other place in your essay, and it can occur an indefinite number of times, even with one embedding within another. For example, for segment IV “Show that the premises are true,” the truth of some premise may depend upon some argument that contains a premise that itself depends upon some argument that needs to be explained, so one will need to revert to segments II–IV as many times as is necessary to explicate each premise. Although it may seem complicated to have several embeddings, in fact, it is not. The human brain is quite capable of multiple embeddings of diverse types. If you signal each successive embedding for your readers, they will not be confused by the apparent complexity. The “basic” outline suggests that a philosophical essay contains only one argument. This is not correct, as we just saw in discussing the need for embedded arguments in supporting one’s premises. Furthermore, though an essay might have one *main* argument, most essays contain other subordinate arguments

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| <p>I Beginning: State the proposition to be proved.</p> <p>(a) Orientation</p> <p>(1) Specify what general topic will be discussed.</p> <p>(2) Report what previous philosophers have thought about this topic.</p> | <p>II Give the argument for the proposition to be proved.</p> <p>III Show that the argument is valid.</p> <p>(a) Explain those terms that are used in a technical sense, or which are ambiguous; resolve the ambiguity.</p> <p>(b) Give the rules that justify the inferences that are not apparent from the initial statement of the argument.</p> <p>IV Show that the premises are true.</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
- (b) State what is to be proved; state your thesis.
- (1) Report who has held the same or a similar view.
- (2) Report who has held the opposite or a different view.
- (c) Motivation: Explain why this thesis is interesting or important.
- II Give the argument for the proposition to be proved.
- III Show that the argument is valid.
- IV Show that the premises are true.
- V Conclusion.

which will relate to the thesis in various ways. The author will subscribe to some of these arguments; but in many cases she will merely be reporting arguments of those opposed to her view or “flawed” arguments made by those who will have supported her main thesis. In writing your own essay, you should attempt to show your opponents’

views to be faulty while overcoming the problems of previous arguments in support of your thesis.

2 Anatomy of an Essay

Printed below is a sample essay, "Hobbes's Divine Command Theory of Morality," which illustrates most items in the structure of a philosophical essay discussed in the previous section. Passages within the text have been numbered [1]–[22] as references to the commentary provided below the text of the essay. For best results in using the commentary, skim the entire essay first (it is quite brief). Then return to the beginning of the essay; read each numbered item and the note for it.

[1] *Hobbes's Divine Command Theory of Morality*

[2] The central problem in Thomas Hobbes's moral philosophy is answering the question, "Why are humans obligated to follow the moral laws?" [3] There are two basic ways of interpreting Hobbes's

[1] The title is an extremely important part of an essay because, if it is aptly formulated, it helps to satisfy the two most important parts of the beginning of an essay. Since the title is always the first thing a reader sees, even before the author's name, it creates the first impression. The title should convey a narrow range of topics from which the actual topic is selected. This delimitation of the range orients the reader. The title, "Hobbes's Divine Command Theory of Morality," obviously indicates that the main topic of discussion will not include elephants or geological ages. It restricts the topic to the intersection of topics about Hobbes and the Divine Command Theory of Morality.

Of course, understanding the title also relies upon a great deal of background information. The title is more informative to someone who knows who Hobbes is and what the divine command theory of morality is.

[2] The first sentence must effect a transition from the abstractness and sketchiness of the title to the concreteness and specificity of the essay itself. The transition is very smooth in this essay since the phrase, "Hobbes's moral philosophy," in the first sentence echoes two of the key words in the title. Item [2] satisfies I(a)(1): Specify what general topic will be discussed. (The difference between I(a)(1) and I(b)(1) and I(b)(2) is solely in the relation the sentences have to other parts of the essay. I(a)(1) is a report of the history of the problem without relating that history to the author's own thesis; I(b)(1) and I(b)(2) report that history in relation to the author's own thesis.)

[3] This sentence introduces I(a)(2): report what previous philosophers have thought about this topic.

answer to this question. [4] One interpretation is that humans must obey moral laws because God commands them to obey. [5] This is generally known as the Taylor–Warrender Thesis. [6] The other interpretation is that humans must obey moral laws because these laws are rational, in the sense that they are deducible by reason. [7] This might be called the Secular Thesis.

Item [3] is also *proleptic*; that is, it sets forth in a general way something that needs to be related in detail. Proleptic sentences are like implicit promises to say more about the topic. Such promises need to be kept as soon as possible. In this case, the promise is kept in the sentences immediately following: [4]–[7].

[4] This sentence is the first part of specifying the claim made in [3].

[5] This sentence names the interpretation referred to in [4]. It would be appropriate to introduce a note here that would give references to the scholarly work of Taylor, Warrender, and any other scholar the author thinks provides relevant background to the issue. Such a note is not provided here for simplicity's sake.

Item [5] also marks the place where a discussion of the work of Taylor and Warrender could be inserted, if the author wanted to expand the essay. For example, sentence [5] could easily be expanded into three:

[5] This is generally known as the Taylor–Warrender Thesis. [5a] A. E. Taylor first presented the thesis in these words: "I can only make Hobbes's statements consistent with one another by supposing that he meant quite seriously what he so often says, that the 'natural law' is the command of God, and so to be obeyed *because* it is God's command" (A. E. Taylor, "The Ethical Doctrine of Hobbes," in *Hobbes Studies*, ed. Stuart Brown, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965, p. 49). [5b] Howard Warrender later elaborated a variation of it in this way: "[According to Hobbes] the reason why I *ought* to do my duty is that God commands it" (H. Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957, p. 213).

² These three sentences ([5]–[5b]) could be further expanded into a dozen or more if needed or desired, preferably by describing their views rather than by quoting them.

Quoting or otherwise indicating what scholars have thought about some philosophical view provides background for the ideal reader and evidence for your professor that you have done research on and are well-informed about your topic. There are many other places in this essay that could be expanded in various ways. For example, see the note to [11].

[6] This and the next sentence complete the discussion of I(a)(2). Notice the parallel structure of [4], which begins "One interpretation" and [6], which begins "The other interpretation." This kind of structure ties together different sentences and contributes to what is called "coherence" or "cohesion" in an essay.

[7] This sentence is co-ordinate with [5]. It completes the discussion of I(a)(2): "Report what previous philosophers have thought about this topic."

[8] In this essay, I present an interpretation that is a version of the Taylor–Warrender Thesis. [9] Its claim is that, according to Hobbes, an action is moral when God commands it. [10] But my interpretation also incorporates the main feature of the Secular Thesis, since what God commands is deducible by reason.

[11] Hobbes often asserts that moral laws, which he identifies with dictates of reason, are divine laws (*Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson, Penguin Books, 1962, c. 31, p. 399). He also says “The *Word of God*, is then also to be taken for the Dictates of reason, and equity”

[8] This sentence satisfies I(b): “State what is to be proved; state the thesis.”

[9] This sentence partially satisfies I(b). It further explains the thesis. It slightly repeats the information given in [6], but the repetition is worthwhile if the author thinks that the audience might not be very familiar with Hobbesian scholarship. The repetition saves the reader from looking back to see what the Taylor–Warrender Thesis is.

[10] This sentence continues to satisfy I(b). Like [9], it slightly repeats earlier information.

[11] The sentences of this segment satisfy both II: “Give the argument for the proposition to be proved;” and IV: “Show that the premises are true,” especially IV(a): “Give the evidence for the premises.” The argument is so brief and simple that its premises are not even stated in the essay. One consequence is that there is no need to include in the essay anything that would satisfy item III: “Show that the argument is valid.”

If the argument were spelled out, it would look like this:

If Hobbes says that laws of nature are divine laws, then

Hobbes believes that laws of nature are divine laws.

Hobbes says that laws of nature are divine laws.

Hobbes believes that laws of nature are divine laws.

(Some philosophers would claim that [11] does not express an *argument* but only a proposition and the evidence for its truth. I do not wish to argue the point here, and ask that it be accepted as an argument for the sake of exposition.)

There is a good reason to spell out this simple argument here, though not in the essay itself. Some scholars think the argument is unsound; depending upon how “say” is defined, it is either the first or second premise that is false. For example, Leo Strauss thinks that for political reasons Hobbes, like many other philosophers, wrote words that he did not intend to be taken literally. In an essay as short as this one (two pages), there is no room to discuss Strauss’s interpretation or even to mention it.

If the essay were expanded into a 10- or 20-page version, then it would be appropriate to introduce Strauss’s views at this point. (For further discussion of this issue, see chapter 4, section 4, “Successive Elaboration.”)

(*Leviathan*, p. 456; see also *De Cive* 4.1). From the many passages that could be cited, it is clear that Hobbes’s adherence to this doctrine is genuine; it was not asserted only once or half-heartedly.

[12] The view that the moral laws must be obeyed because they are commanded by God can also be proven by an argument that Hobbes has to accept. Moral laws are laws. All laws require a lawgiver. There is no lawgiver for moral law other than God. Therefore, God is the lawgiver of moral law.

Let’s now consider how [11] satisfies item IV. In the first sentence of [11], the author gives a reference to *Leviathan*, which purportedly substantiates her position. In the next sentence, the author actually quotes Hobbes’s own words as evidence for her view and also provides a further reference to Hobbes’s work. The last sentence of the paragraph claims that other evidence could be provided although it does not provide any of it. The author has presented a fair amount of evidence for the truth of the premise, “Hobbes says that the laws of nature are divine laws.” However, in a longer essay, more evidence and some discussion of the evidence would have to be provided.

[12] This paragraph develops a second argument for the author’s thesis. Although in theory one sound argument for a proposition is sufficient to prove it, in practice it is often necessary to develop more than one sound argument in an essay in order for the author to succeed in her purpose. There are at least two reasons for this. First, an audience will often not recognize an argument as sound if it is the only sound argument presented for the conclusion. It seems to be a psychological fact about humans that it is easier for them to see some argument as sound if there are several other arguments, even logically independent of the first, that have the same conclusion. Second, an author’s audience is diverse. Different people will recognize different arguments as sound. One person may be persuaded by one sound argument while another person by another, depending upon each person’s previously held beliefs and principles of evidence. Thus, in order to persuade a lot of people, it is typically necessary to develop several arguments for the same conclusion. To say this, however, is not to encourage an author to present her arguments too briefly or with insufficient detail. It is also not to encourage the author to present as many arguments as she can, no matter how bad or seemingly bad. Presenting a bad argument, or even one that appears to be bad, might be detrimental to the author’s goal. Even though an unsound argument for a proposition does not indicate that that proposition is false, it may have the psychological effect of causing the audience to think that the proposition is false. So far as the persuasiveness of an essay is concerned, presenting 20 bad arguments for a thesis might do more harm than simply presenting one sound argument. It should still be emphasized that a conclusion is true if there is even one sound argument for it; and the existence of a million bad arguments in support does not prove that the conclusion is false.

[13] One objection to my thesis is that Hobbes makes no appeal to God when he deduces the moral laws. [14] My reply to this objection is that it is not necessary for Hobbes to mention God in the deduction of the moral laws. [15] The first step in understanding why this is so is to draw a distinction between the form and the content of a law. [16] For Hobbes, as for any command theorist, a law has two parts: there is its content, which expresses what is to be done, and

If the argument of item [12] were made explicit, it would look like this:

Moral laws are laws.

All laws require a lawgiver.

There is no lawgiver for moral law other than God.

God is the lawgiver of moral law.

[13] This sentence introduces item IV(b): Raise objections. It is the topic sentence of the paragraph. It invites the question, "Why doesn't Hobbes mention God in his deduction of the moral law?" The question is answered in the immediately following sentences.

The objection is a standard one raised by opponents of the Taylor-Warrender Thesis. Thus, this objection fits more specifically under section IV(b)(1)(i). In a longer essay, it would be appropriate to give a reference to at least the most important of these opponents, and even to describe their objection at some length. If this essay were a draft of a longer essay that the author was composing by the method of "Successive Elaboration," then this would be an appropriate place for expanding the essay in the way just described. Because this essay is brief, even the references to the opponents of Taylor and Warrender have been omitted. It expresses in an unqualified way the general view of the author. This general view needs elaboration, which is presented in the following sentences.

[14] This sentence begins the answer to the objection expressed in [13]. It thus begins to satisfy item IV(c).

[15] This sentence continues item IV(c). Although it is not obvious – and it needn't be – from this sentence that the distinction between form and content is a very important one, it will become obvious in due course. It is important for an author not to rush her exposition. She shouldn't try to say everything that needs to be said in one or two sentences; she needs to uncover her thought step by step in neither a hurried nor a dawdling way.

The most important point of an essay should not be introduced as a reply to an objection, for a reply is by its nature a subordinate part of the essay. Nonetheless, it is often legitimate to introduce somewhat important points as replies. If all the replies were relatively unimportant, then the essay would be rather boring to read.

[16] This sentence continues item IV(c). Further, although it begins by relating to Hobbes ("For Hobbes"), it immediately broadens its importance by generalizing it ("as for any command theorist"). The rest of the sentence then

there is its form, which expresses the authority that obliges that it be done. [17] For example, the sentence, "I command that anyone who borrows something returns that thing in the same condition that it was lent," is properly used to express a law, when it is uttered by a sovereign. [18] It is divisible into two parts. [19] The phrase, "I command," expresses the form of the law; or, as Hobbes says, "The stile of a Law is, *We command*" (*Leviathan*, p. 588; see also p. 317). [20] The rest of the sentence expresses its content.

[21] Although the form of moral laws is immediately clear ("I, God, command"), the content is not. For humans have no direct access to God, since He is invisible and otherwise unable to be sensed. Nonetheless, humans do know some things about God, such as that He is rational. Further, laws must be rational. An irrational or contradictory law is an impossibility. Now, since whatever is rational is deducible by reason, the content of the moral law is deducible by reason.

[22] The upshot of this discussion is that the content of the moral law is deducible by reason but not from our knowledge of the nature of God; and God's command is what makes this content a law and hence obligatory.

characterizes the difference between the form and content of a law. A characterization is always general and abstract.

The next sentence makes the characterization clearer by illustrating it with an example.

[17] This sentence gives an example of what is characterized in [16]. It makes the characterization less abstract.

[18] This sentence begins an explanation of the example. It is proleptic and finds its realization in the following two sentences, items [19] and [20].

[19] This sentence explains which part of the example concerns the form of a law and relates it to Hobbes's own words ("as Hobbes says"). There is a certain redundancy in the information given in [19], but it is justified, because the author's point is not one that is likely to be familiar to the reader and having it explained in two different ways makes the reader's burden lighter.

[20] This sentence is co-ordinate with [19]. But [20] is much briefer than [19]. More, it seems, needs to be said, and it is said in the next paragraph.

[21] The phrases, "the form of moral laws" and "the content" in the first sentence of this paragraph tie this paragraph to the immediately preceding one. Again, this creates cohesion.

Most of this paragraph presents a reconstruction of how Hobbes relates the content of a moral law as rational (or deducible) to the form of a moral law.

This completes the discussion of IV(c).

[22] This paragraph satisfies V: Conclusion. It summarizes the argument of the entire essay.

3 Another Essay

There is no need to follow the outline structure that I have given. Here's a well-structured essay that does not tightly fit "The Structure of a Philosophical Essay." Comments are in footnotes, in order to avoid having them confused with the numbered propositions in the essay.

*The Great Fear and Ignorance Argument*¹

The single most impressive argument in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes is what I shall call "The Great Fear and Ignorance Argument."² It is a crucial part of his argument that human beings need an absolute sovereign to govern them.³

- (1) Some people in the state of nature are dangerous.
- (2) It is very difficult to know who these people are.
- Therefore, (3) It is necessary to be afraid of everyone.⁴

The argument occurs in *De Cive*, the second of Hobbes's three books on political philosophy.⁵ The argument is impressive because it

¹ Titles are important. They should always be informative, and sometimes they can be catchy too, as this one is supposed to be. How could fear and ignorance be the topic of an interesting argument in philosophy? Perhaps the word "ignorance" indicates that the essay has something to do with skepticism. Is the argument about great fear or is it a great argument? The essay itself will show that the author intends both. At this point the title is simply provocative.

Trying to be provocative is dangerous; it might offend or reveal callowness. A less catchy title might have done just as well, say, "Thomas Hobbes's Argument about Fear in the State of Nature."

² This first sentence orients the reader by giving him background information. The essay will be about an important argument in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

³ This second sentence continues to orient the reader by giving information about the immediate context of Hobbes's argument.

⁴ The author is not wasting any time in presenting the argument. She is confident that this brief argument is intriguing and will incline the reader to continue reading. It also gives the reader the opportunity to stop reading if he thinks that there is no hope of this argument being interesting.

⁵ A student author provides this kind of information in order to show her professor that she has some wider knowledge of Hobbes's philosophy than just the argument of *De Cive* and also to provide context.

is very brief and yet cogent. It begins with an indisputable⁶ premise. The state of nature is the condition human beings are in when there are no laws.

In addition to its importance for proving the necessity of government,⁷ another reason for holding that the argument is powerful is that it is easily adapted to explain the reasoning of other social phenomena. Every schoolchild is instructed in the program "Stranger Danger." Here is its underlying argument:

(SD-1) Some strangers are dangerous.

(SD-2) You, child, cannot be sure which strangers are dangerous.

Therefore, (SD-3) You must be afraid of all strangers.

Notice its similarity to the Great Fear and Ignorance Argument.⁸ The Stranger Danger Argument may be even more forceful than the original argument because children are more vulnerable in our society than adults are.

But the general argument form has many more applications. Here are two that may be called "The Policeman's Argument" and "The Feminists' Argument."⁹

(PA-1) Some motorists who are stopped for a traffic violation are dangerous.

(PA-2) A policeman cannot be sure which motorists are dangerous.

Therefore, (PA-3) A policeman must be afraid of all motorists.

⁶ The author was tempted to write "incontrovertible." That would have been a very good word to use in the seventeenth century, but since "indisputable" is more familiar and does the same work, it is better. Don't use unfamiliar words unnecessarily.

⁷ This opening phrase connects this paragraph with the earlier statement of the importance of Hobbes's argument. So the phrase contributes to the coherence of the essay.

⁸ This sentence contributes to both the logical and rhetorical coherence of the essay.

⁹ The form of Hobbes's argument is given wider application. Notice that the essay unfolds in stages: Hobbes's argument, an argument of the same form about strangers, two arguments of the same form about policemen and feminists. Contrast this with giving all four arguments at once or Hobbes's argument followed by the three others. Readers need to be given time to process the information being presented.

(WA-1) Some males are rapists.

(WA-2) A woman cannot be sure which males are rapists.

Therefore, (WA-3) A woman must be afraid of all males.

Other forms are easily constructed using the fears that African Americans have about White Racists.¹⁰

Let's now introduce an additional aspect of Hobbes's Great Fear and Ignorance Argument.¹¹ Each person *I* in the state of nature is intelligent enough to construct the argument for himself and will know that every other person is constructing the same argument with respect to *I*. That is, every person thinks that *I* is dangerous. So each person has a good reason to launch a preemptive strike against *I*. Knowing this, *I* also has a good reason to launch a preemptive strike against everyone else. But this is the same as being in a state of war with everyone else, for, as Hobbes said, war does not require actual fighting, but any tendency to fight. That is why the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the second half of the twentieth century were called a Cold War. It was a war with little actual fighting.

The Policeman's Argument invites introducing another aspect of Hobbes's original argument.¹² What attitude will a motorist take when she realizes that the policeman is suspicious of her behavior? It will be negative and probably something that includes anger and resentment. This will make relations between the policeman and motorists worse.

The point of Hobbes's argument is to get people to see that unrestricted freedom is not a good thing and that government is necessary for a decent life. Government reduces the number of dangerous people and the occasions when they can act. But the power of government is always limited; and even within civil societies, children, women, some minorities, and even policemen have reason to be afraid.¹³

¹⁰ It's unnecessary to spell out the premises and conclusion for these arguments since the form of the previous arguments makes it clear how it should be done.

¹¹ Another aspect of the original argument, or something related to it, is now being presented. Uncover your argument step by step.

¹² The essay concludes with a provocative question and a comment about the practical implication of two of the arguments discussed. A further generalization of that implication is straightforward.

¹³ The concluding paragraph repeats the main point of Hobbes's argument and describes the importance of the related arguments.

4

Composing

There are various ways and stages of composing an essay. One might distinguish between preliminaries to writing; writing the first draft; and writing successive drafts. Among the preliminaries to writing are selecting a topic and outlining your essay. Writing successive drafts includes writing second and third drafts and polishing. Not all of these topics will be discussed in this chapter. You can find discussions of all of them in any number of general books on writing. Yet, there is one point that I want to underscore: writing must be done in stages. Do not expect to produce an essay of high quality if you write it straight through in one draft. Too many students think that they have a genius for writing. They are wrong. Fewer people than you think are geniuses and even people with a genius for writing recognize the need for preparing to write and rewriting. Perhaps Thomas Edison was right, "Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration." Too many students do not realize that writing is a kind of labor. After Adam sinned, God said to him (Genesis 3:17):

Because you have listened to your wife
and have eaten from the tree which I forbade you,
accursed shall be the ground on your account.
With labor you shall win your food from it
all the days of your life.
And with labor you shall write your essays
all the nights of your life.

Appendix A: “It’s Sunday Night and I Have an Essay Due Monday Morning”

You have already promised God that if he gets you out of this mess, you will never wait to write your essay until the night before it is due. What do you do now?

The first thing to do is to think about your topic. The topic may have already been assigned or you may be allowed to choose from several, such as:

- the nature of universals;
- the nature of free will;
- the concept of determinism;
- the relationship between mind and body;
- Plato’s theory of the Good;
- Anselm’s ontological argument;
- Descartes’s use of *cogito, ergo sum*.

The next thing you should do is to make your topic more specific. The easiest way to do this is to transform your topic into a thesis. Notice that the topics listed above are formulated as noun phrases. They do not commit the author of an essay to any particular position. The topic, the problem of universals, does not require that the author argue either for or against the existence of universals. It is important for you to transform your topic into a sentence that does commit you to some particular position, such as

There are no universals. (Only particulars exist.)
No humans have free will.
Determinism is true.
Mind and body are identical.

For our purposes, it is not important whether you argue that there are or are not universals. What is important is that you commit yourself to one position or the other. Your thesis, whatever it is, motivates everything that you write in your essay. It is what causes everything else to hang together in an engaging way. To change the metaphor, your thesis gives you a perspective on the problem and helps shape what you will say and how you will say it.

The next thing you need to do is to think of reasons why a rational person should believe the position you have chosen to defend. Your professor is not interested in how you *feel* about the proposition but in how you view the world. He is interested in how well you can *argue* for your position. You should have read about valid, sound, and cogent arguments in chapter 2 quite some time ago. But it is too late now to read it for the first time. You will have to rely upon your intuitions as to what counts as good reasons or sufficient evidence for believing something. To put it another way, why should any rational person believe your position?

Don’t just think about these reasons; write them down. If possible, work these reasons into a brief outline. Ask yourself which reasons are the most important and which ones are less important. Which reasons are subordinate to which others; that is, which reasons support other reasons for your position?

There is now only one more thing that needs to be done before you begin writing; to think about the qualities you want to aim at in your writing. I suggest you choose these four: clarity, precision, orderliness, and simplicity.

Clarity is important because your first obligation is to communicate with your audience. If your professor does not understand what you are getting at, it is very likely that you will get a bad grade.

Precision is important because it makes your essay more informative. Vague, inexact, ambiguous, or otherwise imprecise language is less informative than precise language.

Orderliness contributes to clarity; it makes your argument easier to understand. Your reader ought to know at all times where your

argument is taking him; how he is going to get there, and where he is at any particular point.

Finally, simplicity is important. Keep your syntax as simple as possible. This does not mean that your sentences need to be short or choppy. The syntax of your sentence should only be as complicated as the thought you want to express requires. Use subordinate clauses when one thought is genuinely subordinate to another. Students often try to write complicated sentences because they (think that they) were taught to do so in high school. What they should have been taught is how to write complicated sentences when such sentences were necessary but not to write them as a matter of course or to mimic profundity.

Now begin writing. But do not try to write your essay in one draft. Your first draft should be a short version of what you intend the completed essay to look like. That is, in 50 to 150 words, write a draft in which you put only the most important reasons for your thesis.

Once this is done, rewrite your original draft. Expand it by filling in some of the details you need in order to make your original draft more intelligible or persuasive. Your second draft should be somewhere between 50 and 100 percent longer than the first one — precisely how much longer depends upon how long the original is and how much more you can think of at the time.

Continue rewriting and expanding in this way until you are within the word limits that your professor set. (I am not being sarcastic. You have an obligation to work within the limits set by your professor, and word limits are a kind of limit. Professional writers are restricted to word limits all the time.)

This method of successive elaboration, which was discussed in chapter 4, does not increase the time it takes to write your essay if you are using a computer. You simply insert the additions at the appropriate place, and the word processing program makes the required adjustments.

One advantage of the method of successive elaboration is that you never lose sight of the basic structure of your essay. Whenever you add something you know why that particular place needs further elaboration in order to contribute to the whole. Another advantage is that each part of the essay has the right proportion relative to all the other parts. If one part of the essay begins to overshadow the others, it can be brought back into line by expanding the other portions in

successive drafts. However, you might alternatively find that if one part naturally grows while the others remain stunted, then the naturally growing part may be the one that should be nurtured and the others pruned in editing. If you add material to each part of the essay in each draft, then no part should be over-developed or underdeveloped.