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Submissions are due in M101 McGraw Hall by Monday, December 16. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2019 James F. Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize Application

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Instructor's name Benjamin Sales

Dept & Course # PHIL 1110 Course title Philosophy in Practice: Freedom and Authenticity

Phone/Cell _____ Email (Cornell) _____ Student ID # _____

Address (to mail prize stipend if applicable) Street: _____

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Finding Context, Constructing Arguments, and Cutting: Writing Fundamentals

Title of Assignment Sequence

Instructor's signature  Date 12/20/19

James Slevin Assignment Sequence Prize

Finding Context, Constructing Arguments, and Cutting: Writing Fundamentals

In this paper I outline a sequence of three assignments (taken from the middle to end of my course) designed to enhance students' writing abilities. The assignments are ordered to help students first see how different arguments fit into the context of a wider dialectic, then to help them build an argument that fits into this wider debate, and finally to help them learn to cut an argument down into its clearest form. I also focused on helping students develop their writing through the use of multiple revisions, collaboration, and editing.

Key Terms: *assignments; writing; writing sequence; revisions; editing; philosophy; argumentation; context; cutting; dialogue; dialectic; structure; original thought*

Assignment 3

Construct a dialogue between two speakers: a believer in free will, and a free will skeptic. Aim to represent each position as charitably as possible – that means for both sides of the dialogue have your interlocutor defend their stance in what you take to be the strongest possible way. See how far you can have them hold a back-and-forth debate – have your speakers cover a number of topics in the discussion, all while trying to defend their positions.

(3 pages)

Rationale

Something I noticed from previous essays is that students often have a hard time locating what they are talking about within the context of a broader debate. This manifests in their papers as a confusion regarding the import of their arguments, and how their views support or impugn other thinkers. The purpose of this assignment was thus to help students understand the wider dialectic into which their arguments fit. Being able to identify the different camps in a debate, as well as recognizing each camp's strengths and weaknesses, will greatly help students' abilities to write clear papers, and to follow the thread of the overarching debate. This leads to more effective papers, where the students are able to understand the upshots of differing views, while keeping in mind the strengths and weakness of opposing positions.

This paper also served to broaden the scope of what we had been talking about in classes in previous weeks (in which we focused on particular authors' accounts of free will), and to zoom out to talk about bigger issues – whether or not free will even exists, and why it matters. I wanted to remind students of the real-life importance of the topic at large, as well as to help them see the costs and benefits of each position. I had found sometimes students got lost in the specifics of accounts when focusing heavily on single philosophers and arguments, so this paper helped combat that and maintain perspective.

I also wanted students to feel able to write in a more conversational, less formal, tone. At this point, I really wanted to elicit deep thinking about how a conversation might go between staunch defenders of each view, and have students put themselves in the shoes of their opponents, rather than having students focus on constructing a formal argument. This gave them the opportunity to really wrestle with the issue, without the pressure of coming up with a new claim or structuring their thoughts in a formal way.

Learning Goals:

- Identify the context surrounding a topic
- Practice writing in a different format
- Experiment with tone and style
- Defend a position that is not your own
- Experience the back-and-forth nature of philosophical writing
- Write convincing rhetoric

Responding to Drafts

I accepted (though did not require) drafts for this paper. Most of what I saw were that students, as expected, had a hard time having the interlocutors not simply talk past one another. Students were tempted to have each party simply state their position in turn, without really any back-and-forth over the issues. Draft revisions thus focused on capturing the dialectic. The following kinds of questions arose as prompts: What can one speaker say in *response* to a given issue raised by the other? Has that speaker really defended her position as much as truly possible, or are you turning the position into a strawman? Are the speakers really listening to each other, or are they just taking turns making points?

How I Prepared Students

To prepare students for this assignment, we looked at another dialogue written by a professional philosopher, which focused on topics that we weren't currently studying: Perry (1978), *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality* (this reading also gave some foreshadowing into the latter parts of the course). I told students not to worry about the content of this dialogue, but to focus on the structure of the dialogue itself. As a class we explored how the author effectively had the interlocutors go back and forth to (hopefully) get at what the truth might be. This exercise also familiarised students with what I expected their assignments to look like.

Leading up to this assignment, class readings also became more about the free will debate at large, and the importance of free will in the first place. These readings were designed to help students focus on the larger issues, and the state of the wider debate, giving them some textual grounding for writing their dialogues.

Further Reflections

I originally assigned this dialogue to be rather short – only three pages. In retrospect, I would have liked to have given students more space to work with. First, because of the format of writing a dialogue (i.e. many line breaks) space was already tight, and second, and more importantly, I would have liked students to have more room to push the dialogue as far as they could take it, really trying to make each debater say as much as possible in defence of their positions. In the future, I would run this assignment with five pages.

In future, I would also spend more time in class making it explicit *why* I had chosen this exercise – that is to help them see how the dialectic has progressed over time. I would like to encourage students to really think about the flow of the argument, rather than just trying to capture every point we have talked about in class.

Assignment 4

1. Imagine you are one of the interlocutors from your previous dialogue. Write a more formal argument going into detail defending **one** of the claims that they made during the dialogue.

Write your argument first, without an introduction or conclusion. Focus on using the space given to really develop a **single** point, as well as thinking hard about the objections that could be made to this point, and the responses you would make to these objections, and so on.

(3-4 pages)

2. Once you have written your argument, briefly sketch out the rest of the structure of your paper (e.g. simply indicate where your introduction would go, or where a reconstruction of an another author's view would go – *do not* actually write out a full introduction or reconstruction, this paper should be wholly your own argument). Write a paragraph explaining why you have structured your paper in the way you did.

(1 page)

Rationale

Now that students have a better idea of the lay of the land, I wanted to have them focus on carefully constructing a more formal argument. With the previous assignment in mind, students were better prepared to locate what they were saying and to have something to push against when thinking about the arguments.

I have noticed one common trend in teaching philosophy is that students often have a bad habit of using what I call a 'shotgun' approach to writing a paper. This is where they, rather than trying to come up with one good argument for their point, write as many different arguments for their point as possible, even if these arguments are not very strong, or they do not leave room for proper discussion because of the sheer volume of them. One primary goal of this paper is thus to prevent students from doing this, by forcing them specifically to narrow in on a specific point, rather than trying to cover too much at once.

Another thing I learned from the students' first two assignments (as well as from meeting them individually) was that students would typically write their papers from start to finish. I found myself repeatedly giving the same feedback – to experiment starting papers in different ways, for example trying to write by starting with the most important or interesting material first, then building the rest of the paper around that. In this assignment, therefore, I wanted students to practice writing their papers from the 'inside-out', starting with an argument they come up with, then later connecting their own argument with an introduction, recapitulation of another view (something they already practiced in a previous assignment) etc. Even if this method isn't something they use after this paper, I wanted to give students the space to experiment with this way of starting a paper.

This forced approach also had students focusing on something that many of them struggled with – making original philosophical arguments as opposed to restating arguments we have covered in class. This left many students nervous, which was intentional, as they didn't quite know where to start. This further showed me how much students needed this kind of practice with building a paper around the most important part – their own original argument.

Finally, the second part of this assignment was designed to have students explicitly think about the structure of their writing. While I didn't want them to worry, at this point, about actually writing an introduction, a recapitulation of someone's view, etc., I did want them to think directly about how they would choose to incorporate their argument into a paper. How would the student divide up their paper? How does the way of structuring the paper help with comprehension of the argument? These are questions that students rarely stop to think about – this assignment forced them to do just that.

Learning Goals:

- Develop an original philosophical argument
- Structure a paper around an original thought
- Focus on one key issue in the debate
- Locating key issues within a wider context
- Using technical language properly and appropriately
- Shift from a conversational to a more formal philosophical style

Responses to Drafts

Because the bulk of this assignment was entirely argumentative, and not descriptive writing, I expected students to be careful when constructing their arguments. This assignment was one of their most technically inclined papers, and I expected them to attempt to use proper logical arguments and terms. I wanted to make sure they know when to use the technical language associated with the topic, and also when not to use it. Thus, feedback to drafts consisted mostly of making sure the students themselves knew what it was precisely they were arguing, rather than trying to discover if they understood the views we had talked about in class.

Peer Review

Students also did collaborative work on these papers. Once the paper was handed in, I paired students up and told them to spend time critiquing their partner's paper. I tried to pair up students such that partners would be able to learn from each other (e.g. a creative thinker paired up with a clear writer), in the hopes that the exercise would be most beneficial to both parties.

I gave them the following questions to help them structure their peer review: What are the best parts of your partner's argument (find at least two)? What parts would you have liked to see developed more (find at least two)? Does the structure of the paper help situate the argument being made? What is one way you could change the structure of the paper? These questions provoked the students to look at their peers' writing in a critical way, and thus to use the same thoughts they had about those pieces of text to help augment their own writing going forwards. They also forced the students to be critical of each other's works in a constructive way. After this peer review sessions, students were given more time to show how they would accommodate their partners' feedback into their papers.

Further Reflections

I was very happy with the results of this assignment. I think students showed some impressive original thought when given the chance, and when the pressure was off of writing a full paper, they really flourished in giving a single point due care and consideration – something which is quite rare in undergraduate papers.

The peer review section of the class worked well too, but something I would like to try next time would be to lead a discussion in which we collectively come up with a rubric for which to grade their next paper. I think this discussion could be beneficial in helping students see, having read their partners' papers, what makes a *good* and a *bad* paper. By collectively coming up with an actual rubric, students could get a new level of perspicacity to their writing, and keep their papers focused on achieving the specific goals they themselves have come up with and endorsed. This way students could go into their next paper with certain key points to focus on – how to structure their paper, how to write carefully and clearly, how much time to dedicate to different writing tasks, etc.

Assignment 5

1. Are you the same person you were when you were a child? Write a long paper exploring different approaches to diachronic personal identity and show which of the approaches you cover are the most and least successful. Conclude by answering the question of which account of personal identity is most convincing to you.

You should try to cover multiple (though not necessarily all) positions and topics we have talked about in class (examples include the ship of Theseus, the Cartesian approach, the Lockean approach, Reid's objection to Locke, etc. etc.)

(8 pages)

2. Edit this paper down to half its original length. Your goal here is to carve out an argument from the content you have already written. Cut out sections of the paper that now seem extraneous or irrelevant, while leaving behind the parts that serve to build a single argument.

(4 pages)

Rationale:

This assignment came after a bit of a topic change in the course (moving from talking about free will to personal identity). Because it was a new topic, and we were covering a lot of novel material, it made sense to use the opportunity to have student write a paper where they had to handle multiple different writers and thoughts at once. This task also lent itself to achieving the primary purpose of this assignment – practicing cutting down extensively. The two parts of this paper thus had students practice extensive and lengthy writing, and then practice a task of utmost importance to clear prose: editing and cutting.

As previously mentioned, students often struggle with a 'shotgun' approach, which leaves their papers without development of important points, as well as filled with unnecessary content. I allowed students to use such an approach in the first draft of this paper, encouraging them to cover many different positions. Students are typically comfortable with recapitulation of class material, and in general this task was designed to be in their comfort zone, only challenging them in terms of sheer length (which is good practice in its own right). Only after I had them write this lengthy paper did I reveal to them they must now cut half of it away – a task which was much more daunting to the students. By forcing them to cut 50% of the paper, they would have to make difficult decisions on which sections to remove, rather than just trying to make every sentence shorter.

This task reinforced the lesson from assignment 4 to avoid the shotgun approach, while also building from that assignment to write a more complete looking paper. I also wanted students to experiment with what they could (and couldn't) get away with cutting. By forcing them to cut so much, I forced them to really think about what the most important points to their

argument were, rather than just writing down everything they could to show they understood the content.

This assignment was designed to reveal the difference, too, between what is helpful for the author to write, versus what is needed for the reader to read. By allowing them the comfortable task of writing down basically everything they could about personal identity in section 1 of this assignment, I let students grapple with the material in a familiar way. But section 2 of this assignment was designed to show them that, even though this may have been helpful for them to write (in terms of getting to grips with the ideas), it is not necessarily helpful for a reader (in the context of effective philosophical writing), and their final product should be much more carefully constructed.

Learning Goals:

- Write at length about a topic, covering multiple authors and texts
- Structure a paper around multiple topics
- Cut a paper down extensively
- Pare an argument down to its most essential points.

Responses to Drafts

For the first half of this assignment I wasn't too worried about students' structures, and I focused mostly on making sure they had understood the class material. It was really in the second part of this assignment that students needed help, where they had to find a thread of argument in what they had already written. One thing that helped with this was giving individual feedback, as well as discussing as a class, how to thematically group different writers and concepts. To do this we used a similar approach as in assignment 3 – identifying the wider dialectic that the views fell within. This helped students to reorganise their papers along such lines which helped when it came to choosing what to cut.

Further Reflections

While it wasn't the primary goal of this paper, students did have a lot of trouble structuring their initial 8-page papers. What that tells me is that next time I should try to spend more class time discussing the best strategies for organising a long paper such as this. Students that excelled, for example, typically broke up their paper into sections, which also made cutting content much more easily achieved. In general, I found that going into a paper like this with a clear organisation and structure in mind is what separated the stronger writers from the weaker writers. Most students struggled to keep a structure in mind, and this could be remedied by returning to the practice of always thinking (as per assignment 3) how different thoughts fit within the broader dialectic.

Conclusion

These 3 assignments can be thought of as respectively having students practice different components of essay writing: understanding how what they write about fits into the wider debate, coming up with and structuring their paper around their own original thought, and cutting extraneous details to form a clear and concise argument. Having practiced these different tasks, as well as experimenting with different approaches and styles etc., students were ready to tackle a more standard philosophical paper for their final assignment. These skills, however, go beyond the realm of philosophy and into all writing, and this assignment sequence thus is designed to really develop the fundamental components of effective prose.