<u>So You're Going to Write a Philosophy Paper…</u>

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Introduction.

This document is meant as a guide to writing a philosophy paper in an undergraduate course at Johns Hopkins if instructed/graded by me. It is supposed to give advice on how to proceed in doing so, clarify expectations both formal and content-wise, and give an idea of how the paper will be graded. Much of what I say is standard in philosophy, and you will find similar documents in many other places. However, as a cautionary note, there are small differences between what I expect in a paper and what other people may expect. For example, I do not expect you to use references according to some specific style guide (but there are some requirements, see below) – other people may require that. Conversely, I do want the introduction of a paper to meet certain standards that others may not expect. In this sense, do not assume this guide applies to all other philosophy papers you may have to write; and neither assume that you can use some other guidelines instead of this one when I have to grade your paper.

What does this guide cover?

I mean to address here a very typical writing assignment in philosophy classes: an *argumentative essay*. These essays are texts that may be as short as three pages or as long as 30 pages (in which case this would likely be your only writing assignment). They are supposed to establish a certain claim in response to a question by a convincing line of reasoning that provides the structure to the paper – I will go into more detail about this later. An important feature of these essays is that in evaluating these we do not presume that there is a *correct* answer that you need to give. Rather, we focus on whether you

can establish the answer you put forward in a *convincing* way while displaying *competence* with the material in the background of your argument. That being said, there are other important aspects that I will talk about below.

The argumentative essay is different from some other papers that you may be asked to write. For example, you may be assigned to write a *summary* of a reading, in which case you would need to give the central claims and lines of reasoning in a given paper. There are also *quizzes* that require a short answer of a specific question (in this case there would be a definite correct answer). In some case, you may be asked to write an *outline* of a paper to write later in the course. What I say here does not apply to these types of assignment, although some aspects such as correct referencing are relevant to summaries and outlines, too.

1. The topic and how to find it.

What am I supposed to do?

You will be given an assignment to complete in a certain period, usually two or three weeks. These assignments vary in how much they specify the topic. Often the first assignment you get will give you a specific *question* to answer, or a list of questions to choose from. Later assignments will often ask you to find your own question within certain boundaries. You should think of your essay as a carefully developed and focused answer to whatever the question is that concludes with your own *thesis*. The assignment should also specify a rough length for the paper.

What types of questions are there?

As a rough approximation, there are the following types of questions:

- You might decide or be asked to *argue for or against a certain philosophical claim X*. This is the most common type of essay. These essays introduce X and usually some reasons for and against holding X (which will often be familiar from class). You then either try to make a convincing case for X and/or defend X against one or multiple objections, or you make the case against X arguing that X cannot evade at least one of the objections. For example, you might argue that free will and determinism are compatible by making the case that there are convincing cases of people acting freely despite the fact that they could not have acted otherwise.
- A related type of essay is the *problem discussion*. Here, you introduce the reader to a philosophical problem that arises, maybe given some kind of background view. You then discuss options how one might tackle this problem, which, again, will usually be familiar from the readings. After that, you evaluate whether these responses can really solve the problem (or perhaps give rise to new problems), either arguing that one of them is superior and will ultimately work, or that none of them is actually convincing. For example, you may start with Frege's Puzzle, the problem that identity statements seem to be trivial and yet can sometimes be informative, and compare Frege's own response with Russell's, taking sides with one of them or opting for a third view.
- Another possibility is to write a *comparison*. You are asked to present two different views on a topic and point out their differences. Comparisons should be in an effort to understand better what lies at the heart of these views. This can be useful especially in historically oriented classes. For example, you may compare Aristotle's views on power with Max Weber's and point out that Aristotle's view is less concerned with how power comes about.
- Almost exclusively in historical classes you may write an *interpretative essay*. This means you pick a passage from a historical text and try to give a clear statement of what the author is trying

to say. The more advanced your class is, the more you may move towards working out details that are unclear in the original and open to interpretative discussion. In an introductory course, you may be asked to discuss the relation between practical wisdom and virtue in Aristotle. In a more advanced class, you may want to discuss Wittgenstein's conception of *sense* and whether it does or does not trace back to Frege. Rima Hussein has a very helpful guide for this type of essay here: https://www.rimahussein.com/write-a-paper-in-history

Fine, but how do I come up with a good question?

If you are not given a question in the assignment, that means you need to think about what you want to write about. Sometimes the assignment will give you a limited range of choices (for example, the assignment might ask you to discuss one of three views on Y that were put forward in the readings). In this case, I generally recommend going into the direction you have most thoughts on (and that you are most confident to have gotten the gist of). If the assignment leaves your topic more open, it is harder to give general advice. You are invited to come to office hours or make an appointment with me to bounce around ideas. It is worth mentioning that good student papers may very well be spun off from a point you may have made in class. Also, if you had a moment of inner resistance to some aspect of one of the readings, it may be worth pursuing where this resistance came from.

2. The writing process

What kind of writing are you looking for?

Writing a good argumentative essay may be different from what you have written before, or from what you may be having in mind when thinking about philosophy. Two things are very important: first, I have already mentioned that your essay needs to be an answer to a question. This means that every

aspect of your paper needs to be geared towards a line of reasoning that supports your thesis. This is important when structuring your paper: your paper as a succession of steps that describe a straight path to your thesis.

Second, we are looking for an academic paper. This has some formal implications regarding referencing I will get into below. But it also means that your paper needs to be a self-standing piece of writing. As a result, you cannot refer to portions of the lecture – do not write “in class we discussed….” You will also need to explain every position (“consequentialism”, “realism”) you mention or technical term (“sense datum”, “implicature”) you make use of. The easiest way to make sure you comply with this is to imagine a reader who is generally interested but unfamiliar with the philosophical background of your paper and who is not sitting in on the lectures. If you can, you may actually have a student with this background read your paper and tell you where they did not understand what was going on.

This is how Jim Pryor puts this point (http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html):

> „In fact, you can profitably take this one step further and pretend that your reader is **lazy**, **stupid**, and **mean**. He’s **lazy** in that he doesn’t want to figure out what your convoluted sentences are supposed to mean, and he doesn’t want to figure out what your argument is, if it’s not already obvious. He’s **stupid**, so you have to explain everything you say to him in simple, bite-sized pieces. And he’s **mean**, so he’s not going to read your paper charitably. (For example, if something you say admits of more than one interpretation, he’s going to assume you meant the less plausible thing.) If you understand the material you’re writing about, and if you aim your paper at such a reader, you’ll probably get an A.“

How should I go about in writing the paper?

To a certain extent, people are different and a process that works for one person may not necessarily work for another. However, because we want you to write a focused and streamlined paper, it is

important that you develop the structure of your paper early on and keep improving it as it becomes necessary. Once you have an idea for a question and a thesis, try to think about how the essay as a whole might look like and which things you will need to cover in order to make your thesis both comprehensible (in the sense of understanding what it entails for the broader debate) and convincing to a reader not familiar with the material. If you notice that you would have to cover way more material than what can be discussed within the given page number or that you have time to research, pick a narrower question.

Here's a process that works for many people:

- Revisit the readings and develop a tentative question and thesis.
- Write an introduction that gives your thesis and an overview over what you want to write about (this will be the tentative structure).
- Write the main part that gives the actual argument you want to make, and write a conclusion. This can be in a "sloppy" language and without paying attention to formal features.
- Rewrite the introduction and adjust it to what you have actually done.
- Rewrite the main part. Revisit your statements as necessary, polish the language, add "signposts", correct referencing, add tweaks.
- Proofread.

So how should I structure my paper?

Your paper should consist of three parts: the *introduction*, in which you tell the reader what you are going to argue; the *main part*, in which you actually argue these things; and the *conclusion*, in which you sum up your results.

The introduction, in a short (3-5 page) paper, will just be the first paragraph, and should not be much longer in any other case. It should include a *motivation* of the topic, i.e. some reason why your question

is interesting, maybe within a certain context or debate (e.g. “Contextualists claim that X, but this is in tension with our intuitions on Y”, but there are many other possibilities). It should also include a *thesis statement*, i.e. a statement of the claim you will be arguing for (e.g. “In this paper, I will argue that...”). Finally, it should include an *agenda*, i.e. an overview over the structure of the paper that allows the reader to separate the paper into distinguishable units (e.g. “First I will explain X, then I will show how it leads to problem Y, then I will discuss proposed solution Z etc.”).

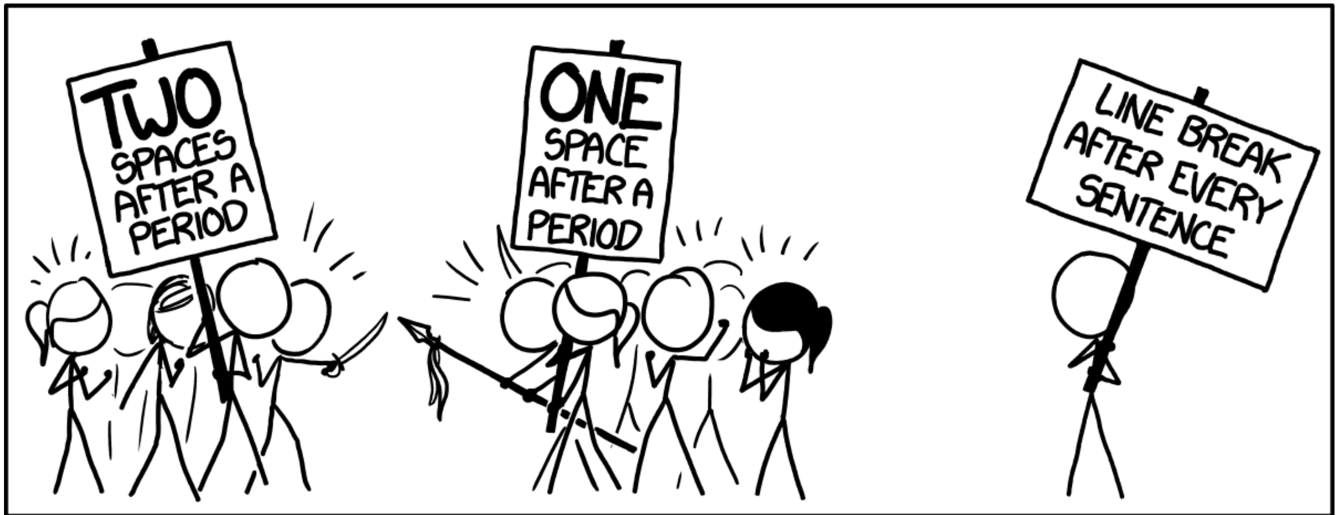
The main part should follow this agenda (if not, adjust your introduction). It will often begin with *explanations* of certain positions, arguments, or problems relevant to the paper. Remember that you cannot simply assume these things just because the reader (me) is probably familiar with them. Your explanations should be clear and to the point – this is where you can demonstrate that you payed attention in class and did the readings thoroughly. Depending on the type of question you are writing about, this may then be followed by a critical discussion of some view or argument, by the motivation of a new proposal, by a discussion of problems or objections to a view you are defending, by an evidence-based interpretative argument, or by a comparison between two views that points to the most crucial differences and shared features.

The conclusion should include a very brief *summary* of the argument you have provided for your thesis. It may include such things as an outlook that points out questions that have remained open (you can’t do everything!) or what you take your arguments impact to the debate to be from a “big picture” view. The latter things are not required, however, and may be more natural in some case than in others. Importantly, the conclusion should *not* include any *new claims or arguments*. In a short paper, your conclusion will simply be your last paragraph.

How do I make my structure visible to the reader?

Good question! Trying to figure out what a student is getting at can be one of the hardest parts of grading a paper – why are they bringing X up? Is this a new argument or are they trying to discuss an objection? You should not bring me into such a situation (a) because a clear and obvious structure counts for something with respect to your grade and (b) I might actually end up not understanding you. To avoid this, do the following things:

- Give me an *agenda* for your paper in the introduction so I know what the steps of your argument are going to be. I know I've already said that, but from my experience you can't say it often enough.
- Use "*signposts*" throughout your paper. These are single sentences at the beginning or (sometimes) end of a paragraph that sum up what you have done so far and what you are going to do now. For example: "So far I have discussed X and concluded that Y. Now I will turn to Z and argue that…". These signposts are extremely helpful to the reader and they show that you've thought about your argument and divided it into separate steps.
- Use *paragraphs* well. Nobody likes to read a paragraph that stretches over three pages, but just separating all statements by a line break will not help the reader either. Instead, think of paragraphs as the smallest structuring unit of your paper. For example, one paragraph may contain an explanation of a philosophical view (or two views in immediate contrast), or discuss an example you want to draw from, or present one objection to a claim you are discussing.



(https://xkcd.com/1285/)

Can you help me write my paper?

I can try to help you, but I will not *help* you. You can always come to my office hours and talk to me about your ideas for a paper and how you would structure it, and I will try my best to provide feedback that helps you understand what you need to do and how you can go about to get there. You can also ask me questions about the readings. However, I will not tell you what exactly to write. Writing good argumentative papers yourself is maybe the most important thing you can learn from your first few philosophy courses, and I will not do it for you.

3. Style, layout and referencing

How should I write my paper, stylistically?

I subscribe to what is fairly common in philosophy, at least in the analytic tradition: prioritize *clarity* over everything else. This is not to say that your paper cannot be elegant, but do not exclusively rely on metaphors or vague expressions that are open to interpretation. Think of your paper as a bit of research

rather than a work of art. If you can avoid technical vocabulary (you often can), keep your language simple. If you need to use technical terms, explain them at their first use (even if they were explained in class). Use examples to illustrate what a position claims or what you have in mind. Consider using *italics* on words that you would stress when reading the text out loud (I do this excessively, as this document demonstrates).

Do you give/deduct points for grammar etc.?

A little bit, it is the first point on the grading rubric. Make sure you proofread the paper before you submit it, these are easy points and many students get full points on that portion. However, if your writing is so bad that it affects the clarity of the paper, this will be a problem. If you are an English language learner or if you are having problems expressing yourself verbally, the Writing Center is a great resource Hopkins offers.

May I use the word "I"?

Sure, there is no good I-free alternative to "First I will discuss...". However, avoid autobiographical remarks such as "At first I thought that X, but then I noticed..." or "In my leisure readings I have come across...". Such remarks do not contribute to your argument, if anything they will distract from it.

Should I use gendered language?

It's up to you. Your options are (a) to use the generic masculine ("he"), (b) to use the generic feminine ("she"), or (c) to use the plural ("they") when referring to unidentified persons ("the skeptic", "the scientific realist", …). Which option you choose is up to you, but stick to your choice consistently. On a related note, use the correct pronoun for every author you discuss (a quick Google search will usually tell you how to reference an author).

What layout should my paper have?

It’s mostly up to you, but please use double spacing and page numbers. I strongly prefer justified text alignment and small indents at the beginning of the paragraphs, but this is not a grading criterion. Aside from that, a page is presumed to have around 300 words, so a 5-page paper will have around 1500 words. If you stretch out your text, I will notice this simply from looking at the word count.

My paper is too long/short. Do you care?

If your paper deviates from the norm by less than 20%: no. If your paper is shorter than that, it will probably be too short to go into as much depth as we expect from that paper, and will not receive a good grade on those grounds. If your paper is longer than that, please check back with me.

When and how should I cite readings I have used when writing the paper?

This is important: your text needs to meet academic standards of referencing (the same that apply to academic research articles). This means that you need to use references in such a way that it is obvious to the reader of your paper *what exactly you are drawing from which source*. This means that you do not only need to cite direct quotes, but also paraphrases of any passages from any source as well as ideas you are taking from these sources. This applies to anything that is not so common that it would be found in a general encyclopedia (not Wikipedia).[1] If you do not cite anything and something is not common knowledge in this sense, it will be considered your own contribution. If it is in fact not, you are committing plagiarism (for more info on plagiarism, see https://www.plagiarism.org)

As for how to use citations, the exact format is up to you, but you need to comply with the following:

1 Note that specifically philosophical encyclopedias like the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* are not general encyclopedias, so if you use them, you need to cite them.

- Citations need to be in the text or footnotes and make clear what exactly you are drawing from this source. You can add these references in parentheses or in a footnote.
- If you quote directly, you need to use quotation marks or indented paragraphs. Whether you quote verbatim or paraphrase, you need to include the page number(s). E.g., you can add “(Bach 1994, 134)”.
- You usually do not need to cite the lectures in your paper. The material in the lectures to a large extent (a) is common enough not to need a citation or (b) is material from the course readings or (c) other papers cited in the lecture, in which case you should cite those papers.
- In addition to the in-text citations, you need to add a list of references at the end that includes identifying information, including author name, year, title of the paper and information about where it was published. The precise format is up to you, but it needs to be uniform. For example, you can use the following format (the first is a journal article, the second a book and the third a book chapter):

Bach, K. (1994). Conversational Implicitures. *Mind & Language* 9, 124–162.

Blome-Tillmann, M. (2014). *Knowledge and Presuppositions*. Oxford University Press.

DeRose, K. (1998). Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense. In J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (187-205). Blackwell.

4. Submission, grading and feedback

What do I need to submit and how?

Depending on the course setup, you will need to submit your paper either via Turnitin, which you can access via the Blackboard page’s “Contents” section, or by email. You can submit an office file (docx, odt) or a pdf file – the commenting function in office programs is a little better, so please don’t

convert your office file to a pdf before you submit. If you are using LaTeX, submitting a pdf is fine, of course.

Can I get an extension?

Only if you have an acceptable reason for this. Such reasons include family emergencies, certain disabilities (contact the disabilities office to get a letter), and religious holidays. Any extension needs to be agreed on ***before*** the regular deadline. In case you have a sudden illness before the deadline that prevents you from contacting me, please send me a doctor's note. (Note that the Student Health Center does not issue these notes.)

When will I get my paper back? What will I get back?

I will send you back your paper within two weeks. On most papers, you will get your paper with some comments and a completed grading rubric that includes your grade (as a percentage). Sometimes, we might decide to use a different grading system for the first paper.

A note on the comments: these are usually a few sentences on aspects of the paper that could be improved. I only occasionally comment on the stronger passages, and it is often just the word "good". I may not always have the time to couch negative aspects carefully. It may also be a side-effect of coming from the German academic culture, in which this is the norm. Don't take this too much at heart: it would be extremely unusual to write a paper that could not be improved.

How will I be graded?

I will use a grading rubric, which you can find attached to this document (when using it, I will often include comments that explain briefly why you lost points). Using the rubric helps me compare papers that do well and poorly on different counts (e.g., a poorly structured paper with great ideas vs. a well-

structured paper that shows imperfect grasp of the topic). I will admit that this is not exactly rocket science, as there are always “close calls.” But I will try to pay attention to cases where there are multiple of those close calls and try to balance them out.

Two notes: first, you may lose or gain points for aspects that are not listed on the rubric. This will be the exception, but I reserve the right to do this if there is an unusual feature in your paper. (If you are Friedrich Nietzsche, you will lose points for lack of clarity, but you will get them back for brilliance in style.) Second, the rubric places the greatest emphasis on argumentation, but you may still lose very significant numbers of points in any of the other sections.

How do the percentage points in the rubric translate into grades?

I use the standard system: an A+ begins at 97%, an A at 93%, an A- at 90% and so forth.

I got my paper back. Can I meet with you to discuss how to improve my next paper?

Yes, this is a good idea, come to my office hours or make an appointment.

I’m unhappy with my grade.

I don’t usually change grades, unless you have a real case for it. One example of this would be a calculation error on the grading rubric.

5. Credits

A chunk of these remarks is based on Jim Pryor’s guidelines for writing a philosophy paper, which can be found here: http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/index.html. I am also drawing from a presentation

I was given as an undergrad in Göttingen by Tina Ellermann and Tim Kraft. This guide has greatly benefited from feedback from Rima Hussein.

Appendix 1: grading rubric

Language, style and formal correctness (20 points)					
	yes	mostly yes	in parts	mostly no	no
The paper is written in orthographically and grammatically correct English.	X				
The author presents their case in a plain and clear language and chooses adequate formulations that make it easy to understand them.	X				
Technical terms are explained at their first use (even if they are familiar from the course readings) and terms introduced by the author are explicitly defined.	X				
The text includes references that make it clear which aspects of the text rely on which material from the literature. Direct quotation and paraphrases are cited clearly with a page number.	X				
The paper includes a list of references at the end, or a full reference of each secondary source at their first citation. The references are listed following an unambiguous and consistent system.	X				
comments and further aspects:					
total points:	20				

Structure (20 points)					
	yes	mostly yes	in parts	mostly no	no
The paper has an introduction that sets up the question or thesis guiding the paper and gives an accurate and helpful roadmap for the paper	X				
The paper concludes with an answer to the initial question or a thesis that is clearly stated as a result at the end.	X				
The entire paper is well organized around the guiding topic and every part of it makes a clearly recognizable contribution to establishing the author’s thesis (counts twice).	X				
The author’s line of reasoning leaves no “gaps” and the author does not elaborate on topics irrelevant to their topic or thesis in the main text.	X				
comments and further aspects:					
total points:	20				

Discussion of literature (20 points)					
	yes	mostly yes	in parts	mostly no	no
The author cites all the literature immediately relevant to her topic that was discussed in class (bonus points for *relevant* additional literature possible).	X				
The relevant ideas of the literature are portrayed in accordance with the actual text and their discussion shows understanding of the texts (counts twice).	X				
The literature is discussed in a fair way, e.g. the author does not omit important qualifications, interpret a text in an unfavorable way, or attack the author personally.	X				
If papers from the literature contain unclear or incomplete ideas, the author makes an effort to explore clarifications or amendments rather than simply criticizing this.	X				
comments and further aspects:					
total points:	20				

Content and argumentation (40 points)					
	yes	mostly yes	in parts	mostly no	no
The paper topic is limited in a way that allows for a clear and coherent line of reasoning that ties the entire paper together (counts twice).	X				
Assumptions made to narrow down the topic are stated explicitly in the introduction or early in the paper.	X				
The paper locates its thesis or arguments in the debate surrounding it (at least inasmuch this debate was referenced in class).	X				
The author supports their claim with one or multiple arguments (that do not just support a broader or loosely related claim) as a conclusion (counts twice).	X				
The steps of the argument(s) are convincing and leave no room for obvious moves of sidestepping them (counts twice).	X				
The author's argument is developed in depth and with attention to detail and subtleties.	X				
The author brings in a creative idea (e.g. an objection or a suggested amendment) or a useful clarification that goes beyond the literature (bonus points possible)	X				
comments and further aspects:					
total points:	40				

Total: 100

Appendix 2: sample paper

The following is a paper by Connor O'Keefe submitted for a 100-level course on philosophical classics. It has been mildly edited, mainly in terms of formatting. The paper is a nice example of a well-structured line of reasoning: pay attention to the devices used within the paper to help the reader navigate it. For reference, here is the prompt the paper was written in response to:

> *After using the method of radical doubt to isolate the mind, how does Descartes attempt to reconnect the mind to the world? Do you think that his argument is successful?*

Radical Doubt in Rene Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Rene Descartes begins his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with a decision to "hold back [his] assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as [he does] from those which are patently false" (AT VII 18) and concludes that "the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable" (AT VII 89). What could cause such a reversal of opinion in such a short period of time? Perhaps there is something romantic in Descartes's audacious attempt to build philosophy from the ground up in the *Meditations.* However, this same romanticism is arguably the most important source for criticisms of the *Meditations*. The present paper questions Descartes's conclusions about what can be known. First, it will present the problem of radical doubt as presented in the *Meditations* as well as Descartes's attempt to solve it. Then, it will assess the strength of Descartes's argument, specifically how he attempts to escape the problem of radical doubt. Ultimately, this paper will conclude that Descartes fails to overcome the challenge he sets for himself in *Meditations on First Philosophy* and examine the implications of this failure.

A proper analysis of the *Meditations* would start with the radical doubt established in the First Meditation. The necessity of radical doubt comes from Descartes's recollection of "the large number of falsehoods that [he] had accepted as true in [his] childhood," (AT VII 18), which forces him to reconsider all his beliefs, which surely had their roots in some of these falsehoods. Modern readers will likely recall their experience with Santa Claus, religious doctrines, and the like. This motivates

Descartes to undertake "the general demolition of [his] opinions" (AT VII 18), resulting in his method of radical doubt: "I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false" (AT VII 18). More simply still, Descartes chooses not to believe anything of which he is not absolutely certain. This principle results in a general distrust of everything, from external perceptions through his "hands or eyes, or flesh or blood or senses" (AT VII 23), to even that "two and three added together are five…or even some simpler matter" (AT VII 20-21). Radical doubt leads Descartes to renounce all his former opinions and gives rise to Descartes's primary goal: to "recognize something certain, or, if nothing else…[to] recognize for certain that there is no certainty" (AT VII 24).

To illustrate his radical doubt, Descartes conceives of a "malicious demon" (AT VII 22) who has taken extreme measures to deceive him about everything he has considered true hitherto. The evil deceiver enters many of Descartes's arguments, as it represents an extreme example of how his prior beliefs may all be erroneous. For example, Descartes's central thought established in the Second Meditation begins by asking "what remains true?" (AT VII 24) given the existence of the evil deceiver. This yields Descartes's first major conclusion: "[the evil deceiver] will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (AT VII 25). In this conclusion, Descartes posits that since he has a belief that nothing is true, then either he has convinced himself of this belief, or he has been deceived. In both cases, some form of consciousness, whether convinced or deceived, exists. This doctrine of *cogito ergo sum*, according to Descartes, holds even when allowing an evil deceiver. Thus, he concludes that there remains "something certain," which even the method of radical doubt cannot disprove.

The practicality of *cogito* may appear dubious, but this doctrine establishes a basis for Descartes's attempt to reconnect his mind to the world. Descartes in this respect turns to those fundamental arithmetic, geometric, and otherwise logical truths which he originally doubted. This argument returns to the evil deceiver, the main obstruction to his assent to said truths:

> "When I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: Let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction." (AT VII 36)

In other words, Descartes can assume the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions, except in the case of the evil deceiver. The existence of the evil deceiver is, to be sure, highly unlikely, so Descartes

concludes that "any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is very slight and, so to speak, a metaphysical one" (AT VII 36). However, under the confines of radical doubt, it must be considered.

Therefore, Descartes concludes that he must disprove the evil deceiver by proving God's existence and thence proving that God cannot be a deceiver. This last point is made explicit to motivate Descartes's proof for the existence of God: "I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else" (AT VII 36). Descartes consequently stakes his conception of first philosophy on his forthcoming proof of God's existence. Therefore, a careful exposition of said argument is in order.

Descartes begins by distinguishing between "objective reality" (AT VII 40) and "formal reality" (AT VII 41), which both are characteristics of ideas within the mind. Formal reality refers to the existence of an idea in the mind, such as what the mind perceives as heat. Objective reality refers to how well that idea represents something else, such as how well our perception of heat reflects what heat actually is. Hence, Descartes argues that "it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause" (AT VII 40), and then that "it follows…that what is more perfect…cannot arise from what is less perfect" (AT VII 40). Accordingly, any idea of the mind must be caused by "an archetype which contains formally all the reality which is present only objectively in the idea" (AT VII 42). The mind, therefore, cannot cause an idea which contains more objective reality than is in the mind. On these foundations, Descartes constructs his proof of God's existence.

To do so, he begins by synthesizing the above points: "if the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, it will necessarily follow…that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists" (AT VII 42). This conclusion leads Descartes to his idea of God. The mind's idea of God is by definition wholly "infinite" (AT VII 45), so its cause must contain infinite objective reality. The mind is finite. Thus, the idea of God must have been produced by an archetype outside the mind. Since the idea of God contains infinite reality, then its cause likewise must contain infinite reality. Only one such cause contains infinite reality: God himself. Descartes's idea of God must then have been caused by God himself, who then necessarily exists.

Descartes bases the remainder of his arguments in God's existence. In the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Meditations, he uses it to justify "freedom of choice" (AT VII 56), the "true and immutable natures…

[of] everything of which I am clearly aware" (AT VII 64-65), and "the existence of corporeal things" (AT VII 74). This final conclusion represents Descartes's clearest connection of the mind, as isolated in the Second Meditation, back to the outside world, which was hitherto assumed false. While these last three arguments merit their own considerations, it is important to note that they all depend on the proof of God in the Third Meditation. In Descartes's own words: "I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him" (AT VII 71).

A close inspection of the causal argument for God's existence is now necessary. Consider the principle of radical doubt once more. A true adherence to this principle would likely result in much more doubt than even Descartes presents in the *Meditations*. If one is to doubt that two and three make five, then it would follow that one should additionally doubt simpler mathematical truths. Thus, one might doubt even closure of addition on real numbers, that two and three can be added at all. One might even doubt the basic logical principles underlying mathematics. It would thence follow that one should not infer conclusions from premises. Under this more proper interpretation of the method of radical doubt, Descartes should not be allowed to use logic in his proof of the existence of God. Therefore, even without an examination of the specific premises and conclusions which Descartes uses in his proof, the mere fact that he uses a deductive form of argumentation presents a major weakness in his argument.

To further illustrate this point, consider the example of the evil deceiver in the First Meditation. To justify his *cogito*, Descartes points to the fact that even with an evil deceiver, the existence of the *res cogitans* cannot be denied. However, this same principle would *not* apply in any other case. There certainly exists the possibility that the evil deceiver could manipulate basic principles of logic to appear to hold when, in fact, they do not. Thus, Descartes's proof of the existence of God does not necessarily hold in the case of the evil deceiver. By Descartes's very principle of radical doubt, therefore, God's existence and all its consequences as delineated above cannot be known with certainty.

Descartes's supporters might escape the above counterargument by arguing that God's existence was not proven but rather intuited in the Third Meditation. In a reply to an objector, Descartes himself used such a refutation to justify *cogito*: "When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind" (CSM II 141). What exactly does intuition entail? Given his rationalist view on epistemology, Descartes would likely argue that intuition involves recognition of the

mind's innate ideas. "On first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before," (AT VII 64) says Descartes in the Fifth Meditation, seemingly echoing Plato's doctrine of recollection (Newman 1.4). This explanation fails to consider intuition's fallibility, however. An evil deceiver could surely deceive one into mistaking some fabrication for a pure intuition. Additionally, applying this line or reasoning to the Third Meditation does not yield a perfectly analogous comparison. Descartes's argument for the existence of God cannot be written without the explicit or implicit use of a syllogism. It necessarily involves inference in the deduction of its conclusions. In the face of this criticism, a characterization of Descartes's proof of God as an intuition cannot fully justify his argument.

A more effective refutation of the above argument might invoke the "bounded doubt" interpretation of the Third Meditation. Under this interpretation, there exists "a special class of truths [which] is outside the bounds of doubt" (Newman 6.1). This special class of truths would include *cogito*. Descartes might likewise include the basic rules of logic in this category. Such an interpretation nonetheless involves its own assumptions. Supposing that this interpretation holds, how can it be proven whether a claim belongs in this special class? Since those truths which belong in the special class by definition do not merit justification, then categorizing a truth as such would necessitate *assuming* its self-evidence. Since the assumption of anything violates the principle of radical doubt, then there is no feasible way for the bounded doubt interpretation to fully refute the logical counterargument to Descartes's causal argument for God's existence.

In Descartes's own words, "once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord" (AT VII 18). Since the preceding analysis of Descartes's attempt to build a first philosophy has discovered "at least some room for doubt" (AT VII 18), then readers "should hold back [their] assent from [it]…just as carefully as [they] do from those [claims] which are patently false" (AT VII 18). Importantly, it was Descartes's use of fundamental assumptions that ultimately unraveled his argument. This is ironic, considering Descartes's original goal to exclusively use "natural reason" (AT VII 2) to prove God's existence to nonbelievers for whom it is not "enough to accept on faith" (AT VII 1). Although most would likely agree that the magnitude of belief in the existence of God differs from that of logic, either belief involves a sort of assent to that "which I do not understand" (AT VII 58). Therefore, it appears impossible to know anything with absolute certainty outside one's own consciousness.

Ultimately, Rene Descartes does not manage to reconnect the mind to the world after isolating it through “the general demolition of [his] opinions” (AT VII 18) in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Descartes’s attempts, however, do merit consideration in the debate over the existence of God. In his failure to prove that God’s existence can be known by natural reason, Descartes succeeded in demonstrating that some form of faith, or belief in the unknowable, may be a much more omnipresent and even necessary reality than previously believed. Indeed, the atheist and theist alike assume many fundamental truths about mathematics, proof, and many other facets of common sense. These assumptions cannot be proven conclusively yet also cannot be disproven without causing a manifest contradiction. Descartes’s futile attempt to escape these assumptions may point to a flaw in the strictest atheist’s purportedly rational position. Hence, the *Meditations* confronts the one who does not believe in God for lack of conclusive evidence by posing a simple question: what *can* be known through natural reason alone?

Reference List

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