

Writing and Doing Philosophy

Master Course in Practical Philosophy (September 2019)

Course Description

Reflecting on philosophical issues and expressing the thoughts those reflections generate on paper seem to be distinct activities. How are they related? Can the writing facilitate the reflection, and if so how? There are straightforward ways to argue that it can. Writing a philosophy essay poses a number of pedagogical challenges, since we want our readers to be able to follow our thoughts and arguments. Success in this respect requires some ability to predict our readers' responses and to view one's text from the perspectives of others. The more distanced attitude that such perspective-taking involves may allow us to discover distinctions and problems that we would have otherwise ignored.

However, the relation between doing and writing philosophy also raises more profound questions, about how language relates to reality, what philosophical queries really concern, and what the best methods for answering those queries might be. For instance, a common practice in philosophical argumentation is to rely on one's "intuitions" about hypothetical cases. A philosophical theory is viewed as implausible if it conflicts with such intuitions. But if the subject matter of philosophical theories is the mind- and language-independent reality, as it is often said to be, then why should the practice of invoking intuitions be viewed as a reliable guide to said reality? Can it be argued that some intuitions are less trustworthy than others, for example because they are illegitimately influenced by cultural factors or human evolution, or perhaps because they are not shared by other competent judges? Or do such arguments risk leading to global skepticism, according to which no belief-forming method whatsoever can reasonably be trusted? These substantive philosophical questions interact with questions about philosophical writing in several interesting ways. To take just one example, evaluating the "method of intuition" presumably requires knowing how it is best practiced, which in turn requires knowing how one's intuitions can be best expressed.

These and other questions about writing and doing philosophy shall be addressed in the course. The course will have both practical elements, such as writing exercises and paper workshops, and theoretical ones, concerning e.g. the understanding of concepts that tend to be central in philosophical argumentation. The topics on which we shall focus correspondingly range from more clearly philosophically substantive ones to ones whose relevance to substantive issues may at first seem less obvious. The aim by doing so is to give the students an opportunity to reflect not only on philosophical writing, thinking and argumentation, but also on how these activities relate to each other.

Learning Outcomes

After completing the course the students are expected to:

- Have an increased understanding of how empirical claims, thought experiments and other elements of a philosophical dialectic are used efficiently when defending a philosophical thesis or argument.
- Be familiar with how to employ common philosophical argumentative strategies in one's writing, such as the use of counter-examples, intuitions, and debunking explanations.

- Have reflected on the role of writing in the process of sharpening and articulating one's philosophical ideas.
- Have reflected on how different styles of prose and different forms of exposition may affect a reader's uptake and interpretation of a text.
- Have considered and practiced different methods of co-authoring texts with others.

Teachers and contact details

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Olle is a PhD student who has already published a number of articles in peer-reviewed, international journals and expects to defend his doctoral dissertation in 2020. Folke is the chair professor of practical philosophy. His publications include the book *Moral Disagreement* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and a large number of peer reviewed articles. Olle and Folke have also recently co-authored a number of texts, including "A New Route from Moral Disagreement to Moral Skepticism", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, forthcoming (First View, DOI: 10.1017/apa.2019.3).

Assessment

Class participation and a 3500-word essay (a 5000-word essay for PhD-students) on a topic approved by the teachers. Students may be asked to initiate the discussion at a lecture by giving a short presentation of relevant text(s).