

Comments on final Hume papers

PHIL 13185

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1. Suppose that you give this version of the argument:

1. If God exists, God is omnibenevolent.
 2. If God exists, God would eliminate any evil that he could. (1)
 3. If God exists, God is omnipotent.
 4. If God exists, God can eliminate any evil that he wants to. (3)
 5. If God exists, there is no evil. (2,4)
 6. There is evil.
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- C. God does not exist.

Now suppose you are choosing which premise to object to. The important thing to see is that you cannot just choose (2), (4), or (5). The reason for that is that these premises are supposed to follow from other premises. So, if they really do follow from those other premises — as they must if your argument is valid — those other premises must be false as well.

Often people objected to (for example) something like premise (2) in the above argument, when what they were really concerned about was whether (2) follows from (1). In that case, you should make explicit the assumption that you are objecting to by adding an extra premise which expresses the assumption that (2) follows from (1), as in the following version of the argument:

1. If God exists, God is omnibenevolent.
 - 1a. Anything which is omnibenevolent will eliminate any evil that it can.
 2. If God exists, God would eliminate any evil that he could. (1, 1a)
 3. If God exists, God is omnipotent.
 4. If God exists, God can eliminate any evil that he wants to. (4)
 5. If God exists, there is no evil. (2,4)
 6. There is evil.
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- C. God does not exist.

Then (1a) is something that you might object to. In general, one of the most important things in discussing arguments is being clear about which premise/assumption of the argument you find objectionable.

2. When interpreting an argument, you should always try to give the strongest, best version of that argument. You should not give a bad interpretation of the argument and then criticize it for being bad — its badness in that case is your fault, not the author's!
3. After you write your paper, you should be able to look at any sentence in the paper and see how it contributes to the argument that you are trying to make. If a sentence makes no contribution to the argument of the paper, delete it.
4. Avoid 'scare quotes.' Either you are trying to say something by using them, or you are not. If you are not trying to say something by using them, delete them. If you are trying to say something, say it.
5. One of the biggest problems in the papers was repetition. In general, the papers contained too many sentences which simply repeated something said by another sentence; this is problematic. Something to avoid in the future is having several sentences in the paper which all try to make the same point. If you look through your paper and see that several sentences all say roughly the same thing, then try to make your point with just one of these sentences. As a rule, it is best to avoid redundancy; i.e., using different words to say the same thing. Repetition is bad; it doesn't add any content, and bores your reader, as this paragraph illustrates.
6. Use the simplest, most direct language that you possibly can. Much better to say "The first premise of this argument is false" or "I don't see any reason to think that the fourth premise of this argument is true" than "There is an obvious question about this premise, which can therefore be called into question."
7. Probably the most common problem was a failure to explicitly connect what you have to say with the premise under discussion. For example, taking the second argument above, suppose that you want to object to premise (1a). Lots of people said stuff like: "This premise fails to take into account free will, which is a great gift and one which God would give people he loves." It is correct that free will is relevant to the truth of this premise, but you need to say how and why it is relevant. For example, you should say something like this: "An omnibenevolent God might well give his creatures free will, since it is a great good. If God gives a creature free will, he can't ensure that the creature will always avoid evil, since to do so would be to take away that free will. And, in many cases, it may be more important for the creature to have free will than for the creature to avoid evil. So, at least when free will is involved, an omnibenevolent God might not always eliminate any evil that he's capable of eliminating."