

Comments on first drafts of minipapers

PHIL 13195

Abbreviations on papers:

1. WC: “wrong conclusion.” You presented an argument for the wrong conclusion.
2. IV: “invalid.” Your argument is invalid (or at least I can't see why it should be valid); I indicate the step which is (or seems to be) invalid.
3. UP: “unused premise”. Your argument contains extra premises (the ones I list or circle), which are playing no role in the argument. Note: this does not mean that these are not premises which *should* play a role in the argument. It is just that, as your argument stands, you do not claim to have derived anything from this premise, and the premise is therefore irrelevant to the argument as formulated.
4. WFFW?: “What follows from what?” This means that you've failed to indicate how the premises are supposed to logically imply the conclusion; you have not explained which premises are supposed to follow from which other premises, and which premises immediately imply the conclusion.
5. C2: “combines two premises.” You have combined two or more thoughts into one premise. It's always better to keep premises separate to make clear how the different assumptions made in the argument relate to the conclusion. Often, this happens when you try to give an argument for the premise within the premise itself, as when the premise says: “XYZ because ABC.” Better to make ABC its own premise, and make XYZ a separate premise which is claimed to follow from it.
6. NIP: “not an independent premise.” You have taken a claim for which Aquinas gives an argument, and treated it as though it was a basic assumption of his argument.

Overall, I thought that the papers were very good for first attempts at doing this sort of thing. A few thoughts about common problems:

- The best arguments are simple and clear. The fewer premises, the better -- so long as you are making all relevant assumptions explicit.
- When you say that two premises imply a third, it should be obvious that they do. It is not enough that the three premises are all on the same general topic.

- Your premises should be claims that you think the author thinks are true. So, for example, you should not have a premise which says “Everything has a cause” unless you think that Aquinas believed that everything has a cause. He didn't believe this, since he thinks that God does not have a cause. In general, you can't have a premise which contradicts the conclusion — this guarantees that your argument will be unsound.
- The point of writing an argument in premise/conclusion form is to separate the different assumptions at work in the argument. So, if you have one premise which makes two or more points, it would be better to separate it into several premises. Short, simple premises are best.
- It is rare to have an argument with, say, four or more premises which combine to yield a conclusion without first yielding certain intermediate conclusions. So, if you have a longish argument, probably some of what you are calling premises are in fact conclusions drawn from previous premises. In that case, you should try to indicate this via numbers at the end of the intermediate conclusions, saying which premises led to them.
- It is natural to, at first, stay close to the wording of the author, in large part because it is often difficult to know what the author is saying, and therefore difficult to come up with an acceptable paraphrase. However, part of your task in presenting an analysis of an argument is to give the clearest version of the argument possible. That means presenting it as clearly as possible using your own language. Examples of phrases from Aquinas which are tempting to reproduce, but might not be needed when trying to give the simplest, clearest analysis of the argument: “order of causes” / “efficient cause” / “this we call”.
- Simple sentences are easier to understand than complex sentences; so, when possible, use simple sentences. Simple words are easier to understand than complicated technical terms; so, when possible, use simple words.
- Avoid scare quotes. They are a device for indicating that what you want to say is not quite what the words you are writing mean — in that way they are kind of a lazy way of writing, since they show that you have not taken the trouble to find words which *do* express what you want to say.
- Many people gave arguments with a structure like the following: (6) follows from (5); and (7) follows from (5) and (6) together. If you think about it, if this is valid, then (7) must also follow from (5) all by itself. If it doesn't — and in most cases like this in these papers it didn't — you know that at least one of your claims about what follows from what must be mistaken.