Objection/Reply Sections in Philosophy Papers
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It is fairly common for instructors of philosophy classes to require that essays examine and refute a potential objection. This can be an intimidating challenge to approach. First, they tend to be conceptually confusing; it is not obvious why writing such a thing is worthwhile (“Why would I contradict myself?”). Second, even once it becomes clear what the objection is for, it is common to experience trouble conceiving of both a strong objection and a reply which is pertinent and convincing. This guide offers advice for undergraduate students who have been assigned philosophy papers requiring an objection/reply. It assumes only familiarity with the basics of academic essay-writing and the discipline of philosophy, and is intended for any student who is enrolled in a philosophy class and has had a lecture or tutorial on essay format.

What is an objection?

To understand what an objection/reply section is, it can help to think about what sort of papers philosophy professors (in general) assign, and what these papers are intended to do. For the most part, they are argumentative essays, meaning that more than simply presenting a collection of existing information synthesized from research, they are intended to outline and defend a position. This does not mean that they merely present the author’s opinion in place of consulting sources; it means that the paper emphasizes a critical approach to them. In other words, philosophy essays tend to be marked on the author’s ability to make a convincing point about its topic, and not just on their knowledge of the same. To this end, the assignment guidelines will often require that the author follow up their argument by considering a possible objection. This requires (1) predicting what someone who disagrees might say in order to cast doubt on the paper’s position, (2) outlining the logic behind this counterargument, and (3), in most cases, pushing back against the objection by explaining how the paper might be defended against it.

Why are they required?

Objection sections have complimentary but separate functions, as part of the disciplinary standard for essay-writing, and as a teaching tool. They are common in published philosophy papers, because the genre emphasizes argument in dialogue with others. Authors writing in philosophy typically have a very good idea of how and why others disagree with them. Therefore, objection sections are a useful opportunity to reinforce a paper’s argument by anticipating and acknowledging what is likely to be controversial about it. This allows the author to refute potential criticisms in advance, to clarify their position so they no longer apply, or (in some cases) simply acknowledge that they are untroubled by them.
In the context of education, objections are often required in philosophy essays because they are taken to be a particularly good opportunity for students to demonstrate the core competencies that the discipline teaches. First, anticipating a pertinent objection encourages students to consider possible faults in their argument more thoroughly. This can assist the author with the process of revising and improving the essay. Second, it obliges them to imagine the perspective of another intelligent person whose views are different from their own. This helps with the difficult process of learning to treat those with which one disagrees sympathetically.

How does one think up an objection?

The advice below is illustrated with reference to a single example. Imagine a student has been assigned a health ethics paper that asks them to argue for or against the moral acceptability of genetically engineering human beings. The student has chosen to argue that it is always unethical to genetically modify human beings. Their thesis claims that this is true because manipulation of this kind sends the message that the human genome is a tool or a product, and thus it disrespects the inherent dignity of human beings. Broken up into stages, the argument might look something like the following:

1) It is essential to respect human dignity
2) Altering the genome treats persons as things
3) Therefore, treating as a person as a thing infringes on their dignity
4) Therefore, genetic engineering is unethical

In general, instructors who assign objections do not have any particular ideas in mind for the section to focus on; there is not a “correct” objection that they expect students will latch onto. However, there are several strategies that philosophical objections employ especially often, and identifying these can make it easier to devise one. First, every argumentative essay begins with assumptions that it does not actively argue for, like 1 and 2 above. These assumptions are known as the essay’s premises, which help the argument to get started. Authors always aim to build their argument on the basis of premises that are uncontroversial. However, this is difficult to achieve and often leaves open room for objection. For example, the attempt to argue that genetic modification is immoral because it breaches dignity is only going to be convincing if the audience already accepts that morality has something to do with dignity (1 above). This seems like common sense...but there are still reasonable people who do not agree.

Second, it is common to focus on the ways that the essay connects or interprets pieces of evidence. Once an author has introduced their premises, the next step is to use them to justify the steps of the argument, or “inferences”. The moves from 1+2 to 3 and 1+2+3 to 4 above are examples of this. This can also be contentious; unsurprisingly, not everybody who agrees about an established fact will go on to agree about what further claims can be based on that fact. Thus,
when the premises of the argument seem uncontroversial or obvious enough that it is not worthwhile to imagine an objection to them, the logical next step is to look to the “leaps” made subsequently. For example, even if an opponent is ready to admit 1 and 2, they may not grant that acknowledging 3 necessarily follows from this, as one might agree that treating persons with dignity is important, but object that as things can also be treated with dignity, no necessary tension exists between respecting someone and behaving as though they are, in some respects, a thing.

Responses are much the same, in that many of them fall into a (though again this is not to say that any good response an author comes up with has to be classifiable in this way). The most obvious option is to directly refute the objection. Thus, if the objection maintains that the premises are not sufficient to support the inferences, the response might add an additional premise to the initial argument. Sometimes, however, an author will choose to outline an objection that they actually have some level of sympathy for. In cases like this, it is perfectly acceptable to reply in a way that does not actually assert that the objection is wrong, but merely that it is misplaced or not decisive.

Elements of Objections and Replies

Outlined below are several components of successful objection and reply sections that often present difficulty.

Strength

The first and most critical step is to make sure that the potential objection is significant, or in other words that it actually poses a serious challenge to the paper’s position. Philosophy papers where the objection looks like it has been set up to fail tend not to receive the highest marks. If the example paper were to consider the objection that genetic modification was acceptable because health professionals do not have any ethical reason to care about others’ dignity, it would give the impression that the author had selected an objection on the basis that it would be easy for them to resist. This is not to say that one cannot make use of an objection that they believe themselves able to refute, but merely that the objection should represent a position that readers might realistically find sympathetic.

Students sometimes express the worry that their objection will be “too strong”: that it will decisively refute the paper’s thesis, that they will be unable to devise an adequate response, and that consequently their mark will suffer. This often causes more concern than it needs to. It is, of course, ideal for the reply to be as strong as the objection. However, from teaching point of view, there is not really any such thing as a “too-strong” objection. The viewpoint it expresses will not be the same as that in the thesis statement; nonetheless, a marker will still understand that it is
the student who has demonstrated philosophical acumen in identifying and explaining a relevant objection. If it does make the thesis look implausible in retrospect, the success of the objection still represents the student’s capacity for critical thinking.

Once confident that the objection has some traction, the author’s next task is to ensure that it is relevant. The next three headings all concern the pertinence of objections, and offer advice intended to help ensure that the objection section not merely make a logically valid point, but that they fit well within the paper.

**Appropriate scope**

It is both important to ensure that the scope of the objection matches the rest of the paper. For example, one possible objection might be that there is, in fact no such thing as morality in the first place, and as such no ethical standards genetic modification might fail to meet. This is certainly an intellectually respectable position that many talented philosophers have held. However, it is not one that cannot really be engaged with substantively in this context: a discipline like health ethics has to work with the assumption that ethics are important, and an abstract objection/reply section debating whether or not ethics are “real” is going to have nothing to do with the rest of the paper. An objection and reply section of this kind might contain philosophically advanced argument, but will still lead to a loss of overall focus. In short, the challenge here is to make sure the objection has the potential to undermine the paper’s approach to a debate, without undermining the debate itself.

**Objecting to an argument vs. objecting to a conclusion**

An important but subtle distinction exists between an objection that contests a paper’s conclusion (i.e., the conclusion that gene editing is unethical) and one that contests a paper’s argument (i.e., that gene editing is unethical *for a certain reason*). Generally speaking, authors of philosophy papers tend to strive for an objection that does the latter. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it is easy for an objection to drag a paper off-topic. If the first several paragraphs are about genetic engineering and human dignity, while the objection/reply section is about genetic engineering and decreased genetic diversity, the paper will likely lack coherence. The second is that objections will sometimes come from perspectives that actually agree with the conclusion. After all, it is entirely possible for another author to take issue with the logic justifying opposition to genetic engineering, while agreeing that genetic engineering itself is unethical.

**The “So what?” problem**

Finally is also important to make it clear what purpose a hypothetical opponent might have in making an objection. The “So what?” problem arises when an objection finds some sort
of potential problem with the argument, but does not directly explain why it is important, or what conclusion should be drawn from said problem. This, in turn, makes it harder to compose a clearly linked reply. To continue with the example above, imagine that the paper’s author has decided to reply to the objection that editing the human genetic code is unethical only if done with malicious intent. It clear that this is an objection. However, it is not clear what it means for the argument. If the objection is not refuted, what problem would this pose the author? To put this another way, it is unclear why it is important whether or not the objection stands. Often, this difficulty arises when authors approach objection/reply sections without a clear idea of the interests or ideology of the party imagined to make the objection. It can help to think about who might be imagined to raise a certain objection, what they believe, and why they might not want to acknowledge the position argued by the paper.

Conclusion

All of the problems above tend to lead to objection and reply sections which are, or appear to be, tangential. It can be helpful to remember that while it is important that the objection be substantive and convincing enough to pose a “threat” to the paper’s argument, these is not the only criteria by which one should be selected. It is important that it be recognizably a part of the same conversation as the rest of the paper. In the end, objections and replies really just amount to a second round between a philosophy paper’s author and their real or imagined opponents in civil debate.