

Critical Inquiry Seminar

Manifest versus Scientific Image



Writing Assignment Due Tues, Sept. 7

One skill worth developing is the ability to lay out another person's position and arguments as clearly as possible. It is very difficult to do some of things one aims to do in an essay — e.g., successfully criticize someone's view — without first clearly summarizing the person's position and arguments for that position. Think about this exercise as writing the first part of a good essay.

As we discussed on the first day, Descartes is looking for *reasons to doubt* or *ground to doubt* various classes of propositions. In the fifth paragraph of Meditation I Descartes mentions dreaming.¹ In a **one to two page essay**, explain:

1. What propositions Descartes intends dreaming to call into doubt.
2. How dreaming is supposed to provide a reason to doubt these propositions.

With regard to the second task: be as *specific* as you can. What feature or features of dreams give grounds for doubting the propositions described in (I)? How, precisely, are these features supposed to do this? It is not a trivial task — people have devoted chapters and even books to this issue!

Some Suggestions

Your goals are, first, to explain the claim for which the author is arguing; and, second, to present, as clearly as possible, the argument or arguments for that claim. Because **precision** is a central virtue in philosophy (running a close second only to clarity); you need to give more than a *rough idea* of the author's position and argument.

Your explanation may go beyond what is written in the text; if it does, aim to make your reasoning as clear and as plausible as you can. Are you relying on general rules or principles, or is this a unique case? If so, what makes it unique? Does your reasoning depend on understanding one of the key terms in some specific way? If so, what is it? (See the note on appeals to the dictionary below.)

The intended audience for your paper is not myself, nor the other students in the class — you know we are familiar with the argument and the vocabulary in which it is stated. Your aim is rather to make this argument easily understandable to someone completely *unfamiliar* with the material, like your average college student. Pretend your reader will be another Pomona freshman who switched in to IDI, and your paper is all they have to catch them up. By far the best way to do this is to express the view or arguments in your own words. If you introduce a bit of new terminology you think your average reader won't

¹ In our translation, this paragraph begins, "A brilliant piece of reasoning!"

know, you should explain what it means (though you may assume your reader is familiar with the basic logical vocabulary discussed in the next section).

Philosophical Terms

Some ordinary terms have acquired very specific meanings in philosophy. For example, in our discussion of arguments we discussed what it is for an argument to be valid, or sound. Some other logical terms and expressions include “it follows”, “therefore”, “thus”, “prove”, “refute”, “always”, “false”, “true”, “begging the question”. Try to avoid loose use of logical language. If you mean to say that a point or a claim is true, do not say that it is valid. Only arguments can be valid. Do not use “thus” or “therefore” or “it follows” to make assertions or state opinions; these words should be reserved for stating the conclusion of a chain of reasoning.

There is no need to include dictionary definitions in your paper (“Webster’s dictionary defines ‘evidence’ as ...”). If this term is one under philosophical scrutiny, the dictionary’s authority will not settle the matter. If it is not a philosophical term, you may assume that your audience already understands the meaning of the term.

Mechanics and Style

It should go without saying that papers will be word-processed or typewritten and should always have the following: a large, easy to read font (at least 12 point); double spacing; standard margins; page numbers; correct spelling and grammar.

This is not a complete essay, so you do not need an introduction or a conclusion.

Avoid rhetorical flourishes; e.g., “Throughout the ages, humans have been mystified by everything from thunder to drought to the meaning of life, and they have consistently turned to God for explanation and solace.” Get right to the point.