

Critical Inquiry Seminar

Manifest versus Scientific Image



Writing Assignment Due Tues, Sept. 28

You've had the chance to think and write about the debate between Austin and Stroud. Now I'd like your *critical assessment* of one point in the debate. Austin defends the following principle: we need rule out only those alternatives to a knowledge claim that we have some "special reason" to consider. Stroud rejects Austin's principle.

In roughly **three pages**:

1. Describe Austin's principle, and how it can be used to counter the skeptical argument.
2. *Critically discuss* this principle in light of Austin's and Stroud's articles.

In your critical discussion, you should come out for or against the principle. But a critical discussion presents more than your opinion on the matter. I want to be *persuaded* that your opinion is the right one, so I'm looking for your *reasons* for holding that opinion, and I want your reasons to be *informed* by the articles we read.

For example, if you think the principle is true, present Stroud's reasons for rejecting it, and explain why you think Stroud is mistaken. If you think the principle is false, describe Austin's defense of the principle, and then explain what's wrong with his defense.

Once again, you don't have a lot of space. You won't be able to review every consideration for or against the principle; you'll have to use your judgment about which considerations are important enough to deserve discussion.

I would also like you to describe any examples you use. If you want to use Stroud's plane spotter example, you have to give a brief summary of the important features of the case. But remember, I'm much more interested in *what an example shows* than the details of the example, so don't spend two pages laying out examples.

This will be this first letter graded assignment. You will be evaluated both on the clarity of your exposition (e.g., how clearly do you lay out Austin or Stroud's arguments?) and the quality of your discussion.

As usual, please **email** me your paper (in Word format) sometime *before* class.¹

¹ Come talk to me if you don't have Microsoft Word and can't save documents as Word or RTF files.

Guidelines

Your goals are, first, to explain the view and the argument for or against that view; and second, to present, as clearly as possible, your objection to that argument. 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 argument and objection. (For instance, it is not enough to simply describe an example that the author uses. You must explain *what the example shows*, which premise it establishes or falsifies, etc.)

You are *extracting* the argument and objection from the reading; this is not necessarily the same task as summarizing the entire article from beginning to end. In many of the readings, the author does not present the argument all in one place, or in the clearest way possible. If you just paraphrase the reading, that shows only that you have the fairly low-grade skill of paraphrase, and not that you genuinely understand the material.

Audience

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. 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 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).

Pretend your reader will be another Pomona freshman who switched in to IDI, and your paper is all they have acquaint themselves with the argument or objection in question. You aren't trying to catch them up on everything that has been said in class up until this point, or even on everything in this particular text. You are giving them an opinionated summary of the argument or objection, the sort of thing they'd need to answer a test question about focused narrowly on this argument or objection.

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.

There is a temporary ban on the following words: **valid**, **logical**, **concept**, and **idea**.

» Instead of the first two, will one of the following work? *Plausible*, *reasonable*, *legitimate*, *intuitive*, *obvious*, or *evident*.

» Instead of the latter two, can you use: *thought*, *opinion*, *assertion*, *claim*, or *contention*?

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.

Do not use quotations, unless you think a crucial claim either is so dense or so confused that it has to be unpacked word-by-word.

In a piece this short, you do not need an introduction or a conclusion. Get right to the point.

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.”