

Developing objections

Objections = criticism of a view or an argument offered for it.

- range from constructive (aiming at clarifying the view) to devastating (aimed at showing that the argument fails irredeemably or the view is definitely false).
- Should always aim to start from the **most charitable** reading of a view (or to arrive at it, in the case of a constructive objection).

Kinds of objections:

- The premises don't **entail** the conclusion (→ build a **counterexample**).
- One or more of the **premises** is **false** (→ identify and explain why)
 - One option: One of the premises has **undesirable consequences**, and therefore should be rejected. (Or the same for the conclusion)
- **Ambiguity or vagueness**: The argument slides from one meaning of a term to another (in which case it is not valid).
- The argument draws on an **analogy or comparison** that doesn't really hold.
- The author relies on **false dichotomies**: they consider only two explanations for a phenomenon, but there is another one that is yet superior (→ describe it! This can be a good way to build an argument for a view of your own).
- The author relies on **inconsistent premises** or principles.
 - Not just that they say things that are in tension, but that these things are all important for the argument to work.
- Active reasons to think that **the view is false** (regardless of the argument given; but should still be able to point to where the argument goes wrong).

Developing objections (to other views and your own)

- Start from your **annotations**, thoughts during class, etc.
- **Use your philosophical nose**; rely as a starting point on your feeling that something is not quite right at a point in the argument (and then really explore those points).
- **Pause** at the end of sections and try to reconstruct what is going on; sometimes, things can feel convincing as we go along but not once we state them alone.
- Think about **explaining the argument in simple terms** to a smart person outside the field —what would they say? (Best objections are often about general orientation)
- Be guided by your **more general philosophical commitments** and preferences: if what this author is saying clashes with those, then you can almost certainly develop an objection.
- Get very clear on the core assumptions and argumentative moves — that is what you want to target. Write down a **schematic reconstruction** highlighting those.
- Once you have isolated the key moves in the argument, really **focus on trying to design counterexamples** (Is there any way this could be false? Consider scenarios)
- Brainstorm **analogies** to other arguments (and then transfer objections to those) and **alternative** views on the topic (and rely on that better view to object to the inferior one)

- Check if your objections are nitpicky, about peripheral points. Aim for **objections that get at core assumptions** or aspects of the view. You don't need to include every objection! The objections you select should help **illuminate** the central points of the view.
 - In your papers, your replies should not only defend the view, but **reinforce** it by bringing out what the objection gets wrong.
- **Try** your objections out on other people, see what they say (or what they come up with when they hear your arguments!)

Presenting objections in papers

- **Simple style:** Have a section called "Objections and Replies" where you systematically go through objections one by one. Can use sub-sections; typically start with more peripheral ones and move to more central objections.
 - **Pros:** Easier to write and follow; streamlines the presentation of your central argument.
 - **Cons:** boring (esp. if many objections); readers can be annoyed waiting to see if their objection is addressed; too choppy, can miss out on really motivating a view as you go along and articulating a holistic picture for what motivates your view.
- **More sophisticated style:** integrate as you go along, e.g. when motivating your key principles. And reduce the number of objections considered by pre-empting as many as possible (e.g. by immediately delivering the version of your premise that already takes into account potential objections you thought of to an earlier version).
 - **The motto:** Taking the reader by the hand on a nice stroll to see beautiful things!
 - Pros and cons are roughly reversed.
- **My advice:** start with the simple style when brainstorming and outlining; then at later stages, with conversation, presenting, etc one often comes to see how to integrate objections.
- Avoid defensiveness or over-explaining; try to occupy a **space of confidence** in your own views (even if you are faking it!). It can help to **give it time**: objections often feel more devastating when they first occur to us than later on.
- Always be VERY clear when you are **presenting an objection vs stating your own view!**
 - **Language to use:** "One may object that..."; "A worry one might have is..."; "A concern about this claim is..."; "This claim faces a serious challenge, namely,..."
- Sometimes, you want to do **objection – reply – counter – your final reply**. But not every time; if possible, especially if not the most central objection, one round is enough. Concision still matters!