

Guide to Objections

Objections are one of the hardest parts of doing philosophy, and one of the most distinctive. An objection is a criticism of a view or an argument offered for it. Objections come in many varieties. At one extreme are objections that aim to be devastating, that is, that aim to show that the argument fails or that the view is false. But not all objections are like this: objections can also consist of requests to further explain the reasons for the view, or in offering cases that the target view has difficulty explaining.

To write an objection, you should take the perspective of someone reasonable who disagrees with the view you are considering. Crucially, objections need to take the argument they are considering seriously. It won't do to deliberately misinterpret the argument to paint it as weak, or to attack the author (e.g. for being a hypocrite, or for having unpalatable views on other questions).

Instead, to object to an argument, you must give reasons why it is flawed. For example, your objection could consist of arguing that:

- The premises don't support the conclusion
- One or more of the premises is false
- One of the premises makes sense in this case but has undesirable consequences in other cases, and therefore should be rejected
- 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.

You can also directly object to the view defended (the conclusion of the argument) by giving reasons why that view is false, or why we should doubt it. Remember, though, that if the view is wrong and it is supported by a valid deductive argument, then at least one of the premises has to be false. For that reason, you should still consider the argument and identify which premise is false or explain why the argument is not valid.

For a quick example, suppose you are given the following brief argument for the claim "You should not become vegetarian":

Do you think your local butcher will reduce the amount of meat she orders from the slaughterhouse if you become a vegetarian? Of course not! The supply chain for meat just isn't sensitive to the quantities that a single person consumes. So by becoming a vegetarian, you'll never save a single animal's life! But by becoming a vegetarian you'll deprive yourself of the pleasure of eating meat, and you should only do that if the benefits would outweigh the losses. So you should only become a vegetarian if doing so would save some animals' lives.

To object to the argument, it isn't enough to say that you disagree with the conclusion, or to say that anyone who reasons in this way is selfish. Instead, you need to identify a specific premise that you disagree with, so as to show that the author of this argument does not give good reasons for the claim.

There are many ways to object to this argument. For example you could note that: the argument does not establish its conclusion for people for whom eating meat isn't pleasurable; the argument ignores benefits of not eating meat, such as health benefits; the argument ignores that you might influence others into becoming vegetarian, leading to impact on the supply chain; etc. etc. In each of these cases, you would then want to develop the point so as to be persuasive.

In writing a philosophy paper, you will be expected to consider objections to your own view (which, presumably, you agree with). That requires more effort of the imagination: you need to put yourself in the shoes of someone who disagrees with you. The aim of considering objections to a view you are defending is to strengthen your own argument. Essentially, you are telling the reader that you are aware of a potential problem for your argument or view and showing that you can deal with it.

How do I come up with good objections?

Coming up with objections requires thinking carefully about the view you are considering. In some cases, when reading an argument, the reasons given for it will strike you as obviously fishy. In those cases, developing an objection is easier: you can hone in on the points that seem dubious, and explain why they are wrong.

In many cases, though, it won't be clear what could be wrong. A strategy here is to lay out the argument you are objecting to first. You should do this even when you are in one of the easy cases, above, to make sure that you are really objecting to the argument and not to a tangential observation.

Once you have laid out the argument, coming up with an objection is a matter of arguing that the argument is not valid or that one of the premises is false. To do so, carefully inspect the argument, think through each of the premises and whether it seems right to you, and (ideally) talk with others to see what they think.

The same points apply when coming up with objections to your own arguments. In sum, a good general recipe to come up with objections is the following:

1. Write up the argument in standard form.
2. Identify which premise(s) seem weakest.
3. Develop an argument against those premise(s)/give reasons why someone might think they are false.

Perhaps even more so than for other stages of writing, talking with others helps with developing objections—especially when you need to object to a view or argument that you favor. Others bring in an external perspective that will help bring forth potential problems to consider. And even just trying to explain ideas to others often makes clear what some gaps or points of unclarity are. Detecting such points is a great way to start developing an objection.

Once you have sketched an objection, here are some questions you can ask to make sure that it is strong:

- Have I made clear what part of the argument I object to?
- Have I explained why I object to that part of the argument?
- Have I assessed the severity of my objection? Is it a devastating objection or one that simply requires the author to do more work?
- Have I thought about and discussed how the philosopher might respond to the objection?
- Have I focused on the argument itself, rather than just talking about issues that the conclusion raises?
- Have I discussed at least one objection thoroughly rather than many objections superficially?