

## How to Start an Argument (The Mantra)

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Philosophy is an ancient discipline, going back at least 2500 years. Some of its central questions, unlike those of many other ancient disciplines, have remained virtually unchanged since the time of its first practitioners. This is not because philosophers have not made progress, but because much of that progress has consisted in getting rid of old questions rather than posing new ones. Philosophy gets rid of questions in two main ways: one in showing them to be misguided, in which case fruitless avenues of inquiry are closed off, the other in showing how they might be answered definitively, in which case they are handed off to special sciences. It is in this second way that the physical conjectures of the earliest philosophers led to physics, and their logical conjectures to mathematics. Practically physics and mathematics had independent origins, but they owed and still owe much of their theoretical development to free philosophical thought.

Between the pointless questions and the definitively answerable ones lies a rich territory of curiosity and interest, where thinking confronts natural and human environments that have remained constant in basic ways since the beginning of civilization in spite of dramatic changes in culture and technology. People still have bodies, they are born and grow old and die, they speak to one another and collaborate with one another, they are involved in familial and sexual and social relations, they require food and shelter, they have emotions and creative impulses. They look for meaningful connections between events, for other people's intentions, for the satisfaction of desires, for the truth of assertions, for the availability of instruments, for the likely consequences of their own and other people's actions.

Philosophical interest in these things is not mainly practical – it goes deeper than that: it is concerned not merely with what is meaningful but also with what meaning is, and similarly for what intentions are, what it means for a desire to be

satisfied, when assertions are true and how we can know this, how instruments (including language) serve our purposes, and how actions change the world. So for the purpose of starting an argument about any statement that involves a claim about belief or action we need at least to pose one or more of the following questions: what does it mean? does it matter? is it true (or right)? what would follow if we believed it (or acted on it)? Reduced to a formula that can be memorized and repeated as a reliable way to open up an argument they offer what I think of as a philosophical mantra:

*meaning, mattering, truth, and consequences.*

I recommend to students that they write this up on their mirrors and invoke it at every philosophical opportunity.

It is worth noticing before we go any further that these four questions can be asked about themselves or about one another, and that doing this recursively and in context will generate most of the discussions philosophers have ever had about anything. Philosophy has confronted them in much the same way since the beginning, namely by constructing and testing arguments. All its practice requires is a clear head, a command of language, and a critical interlocutor, who can and often has to be oneself.

(There are advantages and disadvantages in working with other people - a disinterested listener can keep you from deceiving yourself or from being satisfied with a less than rigorous inference, can point out flaws in your reasoning, and can suggest lines of approach you hadn't thought of. But at the same time he or she can be obtuse or distract you, throwing you off the scent of a development or an objection of your own by irrelevant questioning or appealing to the authority or the opinions of others. So argument doesn't *have* to be shared. But it's best eventually to expose it to a skeptical audience, particularly if you want to convince other people of something important. Whether it really is important is of course a matter for further argument.)

One basic requirement for engaging in philosophy is intellectual honesty, a

willingness to follow the argument where it leads, even is that isn't where you wanted to go. But before you can follow an argument it has to get started. People often think of arguments as necessarily adversarial, opponents squaring off against one another, maintaining and insisting on contradictory positions. That would hardly do for the arguments with oneself envisaged above. In fact a good argument has to start from an agreement - an agreement to use words with understood meanings, so that even if we are on opposite sides at least we know that we are talking about the same thing. The very first question to be looked into, then, is the question of meaning.

A detour is called for at once. If we are going to start an argument from agreed meanings we had better be clear just what "argument" means. Actually "getting clear" about something, such as the meaning of a word, is itself a large part of the story. Our English word "argument" has a root that goes back to Greek and Latin, a double root in fact (as is often the case with words that trace their origin to classical antiquity), one line of which is mythological and the other conceptual. The mythological line can be traced to the name of the Greek monster Argos, the many-eyed, who was hired by Hera to keep watch over Io, one of Zeus's girlfriends whom Hera had turned into a heifer. The conceptual line can be traced to the Latin verb *arguo* (itself no doubt derived from the Greek), which means "to put in clear light." The metaphor of seeing is pervasive in philosophy ("it is easy to see that ...," "oh, now I see"), and the process of argument is a process of clarification, more than of dispute for its own sake.

Meaning is the first thing to get clear about if you want to start an argument that will really do its work and not be merely a standoff between rival claims: the interlocutors have to establish the meaning of the terms in which the topic of the argument is couched. For the moment meaning itself is the topic, so we have to agree on the meaning of the term "meaning." This is the first of the recursive moves mentioned above - it is a characteristic of philosophical argument that it pushes back in this way to its own presuppositions and in turn to their

presuppositions. So getting started may be harder than we expected.

Fortunately, in the matter of meaning, we can fall back on a couple of strategies that cut the regress short: we can ask what the dictionary says (now that we have dictionaries, which was not the case for the early practitioners of our discipline), or if the person who is making a statement is present we can ask what he or she actually means by it. We could call these “dictionary meaning” and “speaker’s meaning.” One thing to note is that these may not be at all the same thing, although they are certainly connected: what the dictionary says is what most people mean or have meant by the term in question, but that doesn’t mean that a particular speaker may not in the course of an argument be meaning something quite different.

So it’s a good idea to be sensitive to the implicit meanings that may be in play in beginning an argument, in your own case as much as in the case of another participant - what biases may enter into the use of a particular term, what ambiguities or double meanings may be concealed, what rhetorical strategies may be involved, and so on. Teasing these things out can take quite a bit of effort and attention, in fact some arguments may never get beyond the meaning stage. Plato’s dialogues, for example, often start and end there: the meaning of some commonly used term is called into question, and it turns out that the speakers in the dialogue really don’t know what they mean by it, so after a while they all go home without having reached an agreement. There’s not much point in continuing the argument if the participants don’t really know what they are talking about.

What is the point of entering into the argument anyway, let alone continuing it? We want to get clear about something, to throw light on it, perhaps eventually to agree at the end as well as at the beginning, but we wouldn’t want that if the topic was not of some significance for us. However there is an important class of argument in which the topic doesn’t matter, in which the whole purpose of the exercise is to test the *structure* of the argument, how its assumptions and premises

lead logically to its conclusions without regard to content. All dogs like bones, Ruffles is a dog, therefore Ruffles likes bones - no one really cares about Ruffles one way or the other, but the argument is valid. From a philosophical point of view it is formally correct but uninteresting once it has been used as an example - to go on and on about it or cases just like it would be pointless. There are of course much more complex formal arguments that pose challenges to logicians and mathematicians, and they have their own interest and justification, but only specialists engage in them. The content doesn't matter but the structure does.

In everyday cases however it makes sense to ask whether the content matters, whether there's any reason to engage in the argument at all, or to devote to it the time and intellectual energy it requires if it is to be taken seriously. So when the meaning is clear the next question to ask is about mattering. What does "mattering" mean? "To matter," says the dictionary, is "to be of importance," which takes us back to the meaning of "importance." "Significance," says the dictionary - dictionaries are like that, they will lead you from one meaning to another, in this case around to "meaning" itself, which is an important meaning of "significance." But "significance" misses something that is conveyed by "importance," and also by "mattering" - something about the weight of our concern, matter having a suggestion of mass, of substance, and importance suggesting the freight carried into ports (i.e. what we call imports). (The origins of words do not, of course, determine their current meanings - language has a life of its own, and words do not necessarily imitate their ancestors any more than people do - but they can often be suggestive of what people must have been thinking when particular words came into use.)

Significant or important to whom? and why? Presumably I want something out of the argument, and this may be more or less crucial to me - anything from amusement to the answer to life's mysteries. A negative answer to the "mattering" question may serve as much as anything to save the trouble of engaging in the argument, once the "meaning" question has been answered - it

doesn't really matter, let's not bother to continue. (But "it doesn't matter" may be a strategy of avoidance - it may mean "don't bother me with it" or "I don't want to talk about it." Whatever it is may matter very much, so much that I don't want to run the risk of having it threatened by argument. Failure to rise to a challenge or to be willing to examine cherished beliefs can under some circumstances - for example if the beliefs lead to oppressive or discriminatory action - pose a moral problem.)

For most thoughtful people what matters is to understand what others have said or written, to know whether claims on belief, or recommendations to action, are well grounded or untrustworthy, to follow lines of inquiry in new directions, to profit from experience or example. In such cases no defense of motivation is called for - if these things matter to us, then they do. If I don't share the motivation in a particular case I'm not obliged to pursue the argument. But if I do share the motivation then I have an obvious interest in pursuing it, along with my interlocutors, and in that case we can move on from knowing what the claim or question means and agreeing that it matters to another and more substantive question: namely the question of whether the claim, or the suggested answer to the question, is justified, whether what it says is true.

Logicians make a distinction between the validity of arguments and their soundness. The Ruffles argument above (in the form of a syllogism, which really means just a bunch of sentences taken to form a whole) is valid because its conclusion follows from its premises, but it is sound only if its premises are actually true - if there are no dogs who don't like bones, and if Ruffles really is a dog and not a clown. We could go off here into a discussion of the difference between syntax and semantics - between grammatical correctness and empirical relevance - but for present purposes we can fall back as before on accepted first-approximation definitions of truth: truth as correspondence with the facts, truth as coherence with other truths already accepted, and even truths accepted provisionally as we say "for the sake of argument." In this last situation we

advance a hypothesis, supposing something to be the case in order to see what would follow if it were the case (“hypothetical” and “supposed” mean exactly the same thing, one from Greek, the other from Latin: something “put down under” the argument so that it can proceed), taking care to see if this assumption leads to a contradiction, or an absurdity, or an inconsistency with something else obviously true.

Given the truth of an assertion it normally follows that you have knowledge of what it asserts. This isn't as straightforward as it may seem - but before launching into a full-fledged discussion of the theory of knowledge I must remind myself that this brief essay is about how to start an argument, not about how to end it. Let me assume, then, that we have arrived at a proposition whose meaning is understood, whose importance is agreed upon, and whose truth - or untruth - is established sufficiently for some weight to be put upon it. Untruth has to be included here because the acceptance of false propositions can have consequences as serious as, indeed often more serious than, the acceptance of true ones. And this leads us into our fourth question, as to what follows - logically, practically, morally, personally, politically etc. - from having arrived at this point. Working out what actually does follow in particular cases from the acceptance or rejection of a proposition (the commitment to a belief, perhaps, the troubling of a complacency, the realization of a difficulty, the assumption of an obligation) would take us beyond the limits of this exposition. And again there are different cases to be distinguished: what must follow, if we truly accept the argument; what will probably follow, given suitable conditions; what ought to follow, if we live up to the moral challenge the proposition poses. Learning to make these distinctions and working out the structures of argument to which they lead is not necessarily comfortable. (A line in T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion" comes to mind: "after such knowledge, what forgiveness?"). But it is the core of a responsible philosophical education.