Philosophical Arguments

As philosophers, we are primarily interested in making and critiquing arguments.

This means that in addition to clearly stating whatever position we are defending, we must:
- provide clear, well-articulated reasons for taking that position,
- and (when necessary) explain why those reasons are relevant.

This does not mean that we never make assumptions. Virtually all arguments assume something. But as philosophers we are always explicit about the assumptions that we are making.

Nor does it mean that we never rely on intuitions. Many arguments do. But as philosophers we are always explicit about the role that intuitions are playing.

In ordinary language, the word 'argument' has a negative connotation—arguments are often heated, antagonistic, personal. Philosophical arguments should not be any of those things.

A philosophical argument is just a bit of language that includes both premises and a conclusion.
- *Premises* are sentences that are relevant to the conclusions.
- *Conclusions* are sentences that are supposed to follow from the premises. They are usually given a flag like 'so' or 'therefore'.

Often you will be asked to reconstruct and critique some author's argument. In order to reconstruct an argument you should:
- Identify the author's conclusion, and put it in your own words.
- Identify the author's reasons for believing that conclusion (her premises), and put them in your own words.
- Explain (if necessary), in your own words, why the author thinks the conclusion follows from the premises.
- Explain, in your own words, why the author thinks the premises are true.

The most important way in which we will evaluate arguments is in terms of their logical structure. In particular we will be interested in whether or not an argument is *sound*.
- An argument is *valid* if and only if, if all the premises are true, then the conclusion is true.
- An argument is *sound* if and only if it is valid and all of the premises are true.

You should always begin by asking whether an argument is valid. If you think it is not, you should be able to come up with a counterexample—a case where the premises are true but the conclusion is false.

When evaluating whether an argument is sound remember that it's not enough to show that the premises *could* be true. Nor is it enough to show that the premises *could* be false. What matters is whether they *are* true (or false).

When evaluating others' arguments it is important to be *charitable*. It is often possible to attribute several different arguments to an author. You should always attribute the strongest possible argument that there is evidence for in the text.

In particular, if you think an author's argument is invalid, see whether you can make it valid by adding some premises. Then ask: is it plausible that the author had those premises in mind, but thought they were to obvious to state explicitly? If so, then a charitable reconstruction of the argument will include those unstated premises.

When making your own arguments, keep in mind that in addition to being sound, good arguments fulfill the following criteria:

Good arguments are *clear*:
- Make the logical structure of your argument clear. State explicitly the claim you are making (the conclusion) and your reasons for believing that claim (the premises).
- State your point as simply as you can. Use words that you understand.
- Use terminology correctly. If a term has been defined a certain way for the purposes of the discussion, stick to that definition

Good arguments are *honest:*
- Make sure you are explicit about what you are assuming.
- Only say things if you believe them. Don't say things just because you think they are clever.

Good arguments are *relevant*
- Make sure you're following along with the discussion, and that your point is relevant.
- Avoid needlessly questioning assumptions.