Writing Essays at Oxford

Introduction

One of the best things you can take from an Oxford degree in philosophy/politics is the ability to write an essay in analytical philosophy, Oxford style. Not, obviously, because you're going to spend the rest of your careers doing whatever it is you do asking 'what is the point of equality?', but because of the skills which it requires you to develop: concision, rigour, clarity, originality. Most students spend the first few weeks of term just learning how to write; this is a short guide to set you on the right path early, so that we can move on to discussing the arguments, rather than technique, as soon as possible.

The General Idea of an Essay

The three requirements of a first class essay are these:

1. Mastery of the debate.
2. Technical aptitude.
3. Originality.

The very least you must do is answer the question. Essays should be about 2500 words long, but what matters primarily is not length, but that you satisfy these requirements.

Answering the Question

This sounds obvious, but it must be taken very seriously: when set an essay, you are not being invited to present a general series of meandering thoughts concerning the week's topic, or reading. Still less are you being asked to present a serious and in-depth discussion of something that interests you but is not really indicated by the question. You are being asked a specific question, and you must provide a specific, clear answer, as well as a sense, throughout the paper, that everything you are writing is contributing, in some way, to your answer.[1]

Often the question will come in the form of a quoted claim, which you are invited to 'discuss'. This means, first, explaining what is meant by the statement, and unpacking any contentious concepts therein. Then you should evaluate whether the statement is defensible or indefensible (although you might conclude that the matter is undecidable). The most important thing is to present an argument. Critically assess everything that you write to ensure that it all contributes either to falsifying or proving the essay title. If you find you have strayed from the title, or that you are just writing generally about the topic rather than making a specific argument, then you need to rethink.

[1] You can use footnotes to make points that digress from your core arguments.

Mastery of the Debate

You are expected to engage with the reading in your essays, but *not* to reproduce it. Whenever you refer to the reading you should make sure that you are *using* it. That is, you must either be deploying it critically to support your argument, or making your own critical assessment of the philosopher in question, and explaining why you think his or her position is wrong. Mere paraphrase without critical engagement is not sufficient. On the other hand, unless you have a perfectly cohesive argument that stands entirely on its own, you are advised to ensure that you do seriously engage with the literature.

There are two main types of essay, which we can roughly describe as positive and negative. A positive essay sees you putting forward an argument, and defending it against objections. A negative essay sees you presenting an argument, and trying to refute it with objections.

It's important to get the right balance between your use of the literature, and your own contribution to the essay. Roughly, it will look something like this: in a negative essay, the argument that you present will not be your own, since there's no point inventing an argument to refute it (that's called creating a straw man). However, you should try to incorporate your own objections alongside particularly telling ones that you find in the literature. In a positive essay, you can present either your own, or someone else's argument. If it's your own argument, then the objections you consider may come from the literature, or you may just try to foresee and rebut plausible objections. Alternatively you can present someone else's argument, and defend it against objections present in the literature (there's less point imagining objections to rebut in this case). For example, you might defend Nozick against Cohen's objections, say.

When you are presenting arguments and objections made by other authors, it is vital to interpret their positions as charitably as possible. You don't get any points for scoring cheap shots: always think to yourself, 'has *x* considered this problem, does he have an answer?' You look pretty stupid if you triumphantly make an objection that the author has considered and completely rebutted within the text.

Technical Aptitude

This is really about two things: the structure of the essay, and the analytical rigour of the specific arguments within it.

Your essay should have an introduction, a series of paragraphs each of which seeks to make one principal point, and a conclusion. The introduction should give a clear idea of how you are going to answer the question, immediately signalling that you understand it and are focused on it. The conclusion should review what you have done, indicating clearly the positions you have taken within the debate. It is best to use each paragraph to make one distinct point, or to present one stage in your argument, and there should be a clear sense of how each paragraph contributes to your overall answer to the question.

The word 'analyse' means 'to break down into its component parts'. Accordingly, the first element of what is meant by analytical rigour is consistency and clarity in your use of the concepts that compose your argument. You need to start by breaking the problem down into its component parts, and establish clear meanings for the major concepts that you are

going to use (where these meanings are in dispute—you don't have to analyse concepts whose meaning is comparatively self-evident). You then need to stick to these meanings.

The second component is the means by which you bring your concepts together to form arguments. The goal here is to achieve as close an approximation to logical clarity and rigour as you can, given the complexity of the subject matter. The basic idea here is, whenever you are making an argument, to get as clear as you can about its formal components, which are your premisses, and how you move from them to your conclusion. Almost any argument can be broken down into this format: we assert the authority of a series of premisses, then we argue that those premisses, taken together, entail a specific conclusion. For example:

P1. People do not deserve their natural talents.

P2. The benefits of social cooperation should be distributed according to morally relevant criteria.

P3. If an attribute is undeserved it is not morally relevant. Therefore

C1. (From P3 and P1) Natural talents are not morally relevant, and

C2. (From C1 and P2) The benefits of social cooperation should not be distributed according to natural talent.

This argument is impeccable logically—that is, it is *valid*, but I have done nothing, yet, to show that it is sound, i.e. that its premisses are true. This brings us to the third component of analytical rigour: the provision of reasons. In order for you to believe that C2 and C1 are true, you must first believe that P1-P3 are true. And to show you that P1-P3 are true, I must provide substantive reasons. For example, I might argue for a specific conception of desert, which states that a person A deserves property *x* if and only if A has acted, in a morally defensible way, to produce or procure *x*. I would support this by the appeal to our considered judgments, or intuitions, about hypothetical examples, saying, for example, that if you're walking along the street, and a bar of gold suddenly materialises in front of you, then you have done nothing to deserve that bar of gold. I would then have to do the same thing for each of the other premisses. In particular, it would be a good idea to think, for each one, what someone might say who was not immediately impressed by these premisses. A person might complain, for example, that P3 is wrong, and that attributes that are undeserved can be morally relevant, arguing, for example, that we do not deserve the fact that we are born into a particular family, but this can, nonetheless, be morally relevant in specific contexts. Or one might argue, against P1, that people do deserve their natural talents, because it is only through hard work and training that people are able to make the most of those talents.

The three positive components of analytical rigour, then, are conceptual clarity, logical rigour, and the provision of persuasive reasons. These combine with a clear and concise overall structure to produce a technically adept essay.

Originality

Originality cannot, obviously, be taught, although it should emerge through a series of successful tutorials, if it is not there to begin with. The ideal here is to make a contribution to the debate that has not yet been made, but that will only happen rarely. A better approach is to make sure, whenever you consider a question, that you think it through very carefully, completely independently. Set aside the literature for a period, and reflect on the question,

what it means, how it would apply in a person's life. Think about it for yourself, and really try to get a handle on your thoughts about it. It should be clear from the 'mastery of the debate' section, that there are key places in any paper where you can make your own contribution to the debate—whether in producing your own objection to Nozick's theory of justice in holdings, or in presenting a defence of Cohen against Rawlsian critiques etc.

Practical Tips

Reading

The literature that you will deal with is often very complex. You are advised to take careful notes on each paper that you read, and, where you are stuck for time, to concentrate on reading fewer papers very well, and properly understanding them, rather than skim-reading a larger range of material. If you find something too difficult, you can email me to ask for help. I will usually be able to reply fairly promptly. In general you should aim at doing all the core reading, and some of the additional reading, but it is much more important to understand a few papers well than to cover all the ground but thinly.

Planning

Plan your essays before writing them. Work out how your argument is going to develop before you commit yourself to it, the goal is to think everything through, then present a polished, finished argument, not to discover things along the way while writing. Write your introduction last and make sure that it gives a clear sense of purpose, specifically, indicating how you are going to answer the question.

Answering the Question

It is worth remembering one technique when considering these essay titles. In many cases, they will be elliptical versions of substantive arguments. There will be premisses, and a conclusion. There are, then, three tasks that face you in assessing any question: first, you must establish whether you think, on its own terms, that the conclusion is true. Second, you must consider whether the conclusion is validly inferred from the premisses. Third, you must assess whether or not the premisses are true. For example, take this question: 'Since there is no morally relevant difference between abortion and IVF therapy, and abortion is always immoral, IVF therapy must also always be immoral.' Discuss. Start by breaking this down: there are two premisses, and a conclusion. P1 Abortion is always immoral. P2 There is no morally relevant difference between abortion and IVF therapy. C Therefore IVF therapy is always immoral. Start by considering your gut response to the conclusion. My gut response is that it is false. So let us see whether it is validly inferred—if there is a logical problem here. There appears to be no logical problem. If, therefore, the conclusion is false, it must be true that either P1 or P2, or both, is also false, since you cannot validly infer a false conclusion from true premisses. If you think, then, that C is wrong, you must show that either P1 or P2, or both, are also wrong. It seems likely that there will be problems with both. Conversely, you may find yourself quite in agreement with the proposition to be discussed, in which case the method is the same, except at each point you should provide

additional reasons to reinforce, rather than undermine, the truth of the premisses or the conclusion, and/or the inference from one to the other. One effective method is to consider objections that a critic might raise, and to show how they can be rejected.

Editing

Re-read every essay before you send it to me. Look at each sentence and think 'what is this contributing to the essay?' If you don't have an answer then delete it. For every substantive point that you make, think, 'what is the foundation of this claim?' If you are not providing any reasons to support it, then it constitutes nothing more than an assertion, or statement of faith, and should be deleted. This is absolutely crucial: the biggest problem in undergraduate papers on political theory is the tendency to make incredibly bold claims without providing any argument or evidence to support them. The second biggest problem is the tendency to overstate the force of one's case. Think very carefully about whether you've actually proved what you are claiming to have proved.

If this means taking a little extra time, or getting the essay in a little later, then I would rather you did that than sent me something unfinished. Editing and planning are really very important. Do make sure you allow time for them.

Footnotes

Overview

Proper footnoting not only makes your essay easier to read, and properly attributed, it can also enable you to hone your argument so that the extraneous bits are properly confined to the footnotes, and it can enable you to situate your argument in the debates that you have been reading about. It is a prerequisite of coursework essays, and any postgraduate writing that you might one day hope to do, so it is a good idea to get into the habit now.

Discursive Footnotes

Often you will want to make a point that, while unrelated to the specific argument that you are making in the essay, is nonetheless interesting and pertinent. You should use a discursive footnote for this purpose.[2] All you have to do is insert a footnote (ALT+CTRL+F).

Attributive Footnotes

Sometimes you will want to directly quote authors, or perhaps just paraphrase something that they have said. I might note, for example, that Robert Nozick is sceptical about whether we could justify inflicting a tiny wound on a person in order to prevent thousands of cattle from suffering a grisly death.[3]

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[2] Discursive footnotes are sometimes discouraged by academic journals, but are a useful device in your tutorial essays, because they help you remember what is, and what is not, relevant to your answer to the question.

[3] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974) at 41. Reference articles like this: Jeff McMahan, 'The Ethics of Killing in War', *Ethics,* 114/1 (2004), 693-732 at 701. And chapters in edited volumes

Similarity Footnotes

Sometimes you aren't directly referring to someone, but you are making a point that chimes with something that you have read elsewhere. You should note this, because it helps show that you understand the debate to which you are contributing.[4]

Endnote

Your life will be much easier if you can get hold of Endnote, or a comparable software package, which handles all your references for you.

Bibliography and Page Numbers

Every essay should have a proper bibliography and page numbers.

Examples

I've attached an example of an essay with some clear originality and promise, but very poor technically, and an essay that ticks all the right boxes. It's worth having a good look at them and working out how one is better than the other.

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like this: Jeff McMahan, 'The Limits of National Partiality', in Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (eds.), *The Morality of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 107-38..

[4] Cohen makes a similar point in G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) at 56.