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HOW TO WRITE A PHILOSOPHICAL ESSAY

Abstract: The primary focus of this paper is to discuss how to write clear and concise philosophical essays by presenting the necessary tools that are indispensable for working in philosophy. We will start by emphasizing a few issues concerning philosophical methods and research methodology. All the works we consult have the purpose of enabling our documentation and of orienting us within the field in which we are carrying out research. We will show that it is for this reason that all scientific texts, such as the essay – which is the subject of our paper, adopt as premise that fact that they are the expression of a research activity, of a reflection, a personal seeking formulated as a question in search of an answer.

Key words: philosophical essay, objectivity, accuracy, methodology

1. Objectivity and clarity in research

Despite all differences in philosophical perspectives, usually, philosophers insist on the method of obtaining clarity about the question that is being asked and it's structural and argued answer. In this respect, they discuss objectivity by reference to different domains to which concepts, facts, objects and their properties belong[1]. All the more, if we think of a scientific writing, then we can argue that clarity is essential. The question whether the account of simplicity and perspicuity is the main characteristic of scientific inquiry is noticed, among others, by Robert Day who states that "successful scientific experimentation is the result of a clear mind attacking a clearly stated problem and producing clearly stated conclusions"[2]. Of course, one could say that different domains can be objective in many ways, so that defining objectivity and what makes a specific domain objective it's quite difficult. A classical philosophical perspective will state that a field of knowledge is objective if the objects that populate it, are mind-independent. In this approach, our thoughts, interpretations and feelings, our beliefs about objects are considered to be objective in virtue of the fact that reality comprises the objects that it does independent of the mind. This approach faces many difficulties such as the character of the reality, the individuation of the objects, the nature of the reference and so forth. Considering the topic of this paper that is, how to write a philosophical essay, I think that another philosophical perspective on objectivity will be more appropriate. Therefore, I will emphasize, according to research requirements, a process of detachment, which can be achieved by stepping back from an initial point of view concerning the subject matter. The new formed perspective allows us to consider the initial one as an occurrence which can be corrected – if this is the case, by reference to the detached perspective. In other words, this kind of approach considers objectivity, as a form of understanding, which is necessary to all research and scientific inquiries.

2. Scientific methods used in philosophy

Mastering scientific research methodology is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for transforming the activity of elaborating papers into a permanent source of information. First, let us make a remark regarding the etymology of the word "method". In the Greek language, the word "method" is formed from the word "meta", meaning "toward", and the word "odhos", meaning "path" or "way"). In the exploration of the different problems in order to clarify the question

and to give an answer, philosophy uses a plurality of methods. Starting especially with modernity, philosophers have looked to science for a method designated to solve philosophical problems, and in this respect, they have distinguished the method of philosophy from that of science. Furthermore, some of them wanted to promote their own philosophical method, which is why we can talk about scholastic, Cartesian, phenomenological, pragmatic, semiotic, and other methods.

This draws attention to the dangers that threaten an essay, of which, the lack of method or, more specifically, of methodological rigor, is probably the most important of it. Without rigor, our scientific exploration is prone to getting lost at random, lacking a clear start and finish point. Otherwise said, references to the etymology of the term "research method" show that this is the path to follow in order to carry out research successfully, and research methodology represents the assembly of processes followed by thought in order to discover and demonstrate a scientific idea, i.e., to produce scientific knowledge and bring a plus to science. The term "science" comes from the Latin *scire*, which means knowing, being instructed and knowledgeable about the complex phenomenon of knowing the natural and human world. For this reason, method occupies an important place in a first and approximate definition of what science is: an assembly of knowledge with a determined object and a proper method. In what regards the origins of scientific knowledge, there are various types of explanations, the most important of which being the inductive and deductive ones. Let us first of all consider these two, before following up on the rest of the steps to be taken in order to write a philosophical essay.

The inductive method

The inductive view was named after its modern creator, Francis Bacon. In the inductive vision, as in the experimental one, all scientific knowledge has its origin in facts. This conception was supported and refined by the empirical philosophers, especially by the English empiricism (John Locke, David Hume, John Stuart Mill). The theory on the "science of experience" (Bacon) thus gains existence by induction and came as a liberator from theological dogmas, pushing research to higher grounds. In his work, *A System of Logic*, J. S. Mill defines induction as "generalizing from experience", then mentioning that induction is the method of inferring, that is, of carrying toward something; it is the action of extracting from a fact or a statement a conclusion based on several particular cases, in which a phenomenon is observed and which can then be presupposed valid for all other cases that resemble these few particular ones. Induction is, thus, the

reasoning that starts from observing a fact and extracting a general rule from the latter. We can, therefore, state that, by induction, an extrapolation of experience toward the future is carried out.

In philosophy, there are two types of induction that became commonly used. The first was used especially in Kant's philosophy and it refers to formulating a generalization after all cases of the same kind have been reviewed. Many philosophers considered this the only valid generalization model, for, if a single case remains unexamined, it is sufficient to stop generalization and drawing a conclusion. Other philosophers have observed that this method is too formal and general, and it only rephrases what was already known, thus having little importance in knowledge, for it adds nothing to our science. This is how the second type of induction was born, consisting in considering a certain number of cases in order to draw conclusions for all cases of the same type. Basically, in this type of reasoning, which was proposed and used by J.S. Mill, one would reach a general idea of things, even if not all things were analyzed. For science, this method turned out to be more effective, because if yielded greater results by smaller efforts. The main justification for this method is that it does not take interest in the number of cases considered, but rather in the nature of those cases. It proved itself very useful in experimental research, where it is admitted that, if a phenomenon was proved to exist in a certain number of cases, there is sufficient evidence to consider it will be reproduced in future cases, as well. This is why it raised many problems regarding the legitimacy of going beyond the limits of actual experience, thus increasing the risk of error.

The deductive method

The other perspective on the origin of science is represented by the deductive method, especially the hypothetical-deductive method. It must be noticed that resorting to deductive reasoning presupposes the pre-existence of an inductive construction. In other words, it is only besides and complementary to induction that the deductive method intervenes in the process of producing scientific knowledge. But between induction and deduction there are essential differences of structure, meaning and valor. The main difference is the, while induction starts from facts and formulates concepts, laws and theories, deduction works the other way around, i.e., it builds upon theory, principles, laws or simple postulates[3] and issues new statements, which it then confronts to the facts via verification. Deduction thus defines the mental path, that is, the operation of thought by which, from one or more statements, called *antecedents* or *premises*, one extracts another

statement, called *consequences* or *conclusions*, the latter being logically yielded by the former. The essential characteristic of deduction is the logical rigor with which conclusions are derived from premises.

A correct deduction ties the consequence to an antecedent, such that the two could not have been otherwise bounded. Though interesting to continue this reflection, it is not the purpose of this paper to do so here, therefore we will conclude by saying that, leaving aside the types of deduction[4], within deduction we generally part from a postulate or hypothesis, which represents an anticipated and provisional answer to a scientific problem. This answer necessarily derives from the hypothetical antecedent and is formulated solely for being subjected to experimental verification. To continue discussing about the structure of an essay, we shall end this lecture on methodology by a conclusion: in science, the researcher may emit an hypothesis, either by starting from observing a fact and asking what is the law governing that fact, either by starting from a general law and asking about the implications of that law on the facts it governs.

3. Structuring a philosophical paper

A philosophical essay is structured to meet the needs of valid publication. In this respect, "it is, or at least, it should be, highly stylized with distinctive and clearly evident components part"[5]. We have to say, from the start, that philosophical essays could have many different structures, and choosing one of them may prove quite difficult. When talking about the structure of a scientific paper, to which a philosophical essay belongs, even though it seems more like a platitude, we can distinguish as Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*, a beginning, middle, and an end, which are essay's elements that carry out specific functions. Understanding these elements, the ways in which they can be put together, and when each structure works, provides a powerful tool for approaching different writing challenges. In his work, *Philosophical Writing*, Martinich provides us a simple structure for a philosophical essay, as he calls it: I. stating the proposition to be proved which marks the beginning of the essay; II. giving the argument for this proposition; III. showing that this argument is valid; IV. showing that the premises are true; V. stating the upshot of what has been proven.[6] In the following, we will analyze them at a time in order to see which the requirements that a philosophical essay should fulfill are.

Generally speaking, all philosophical essays require providing a thesis or an argument – where a thesis is a claim that is true or false. In doing so, one have to explain the thesis, offer an argument in support of it, offer an objection to it and starting from here, defending it against

casual exceptions. In order to strengthen his thesis, the essay's author will try to include some potential objections and replies that will eventually help him to support his argumentation. The thesis is inserted in the introduction of the essay, and it would be desirable to outline de philosophical consequences it might have. A good thesis must be formulated clearly and concisely, so that the reader understands what the essay wants to achieve. This implies also the originality of the essay and, of course, this can be quite difficult. To deal with this issue, Gen and Kelly Tanabe advise us: "Instead of racking your brains to come up with a 100% original topic, take an ordinary topic and approach it in an original way"[7]. One good way of finding the essay's topic is to turn to what some writing theorists call *free writing* and others brain-storming. Selecting a topic (besides the case in which the topics are imposed) is not easy because essay topics should not be neutral, that is, the author must commit himself to one position or another. This is why the thesis should be formulated in declarative sentences (e.g. "we cannot know the thing itself"). The thesis can be either true or false, what is important is that the author has an opinion that he wants to argue. This represents in fact, the primarily focus of the essay. It would be also good if the author can motivate his thesis, why he has chosen it and why should anybody care about it, why it is important to study it.

Usually, many essays require some sort of research, some investigation of the secondary literature, that is, how other people dealt with the same topic of the essay. In this regard, if the essay offers a critique to someone else's argument or point of view, than the author must explain first that perspective and its logical structure in his own terms, before presenting his critique. It is advisable that the author present his argument quickly and without any digression or within a vast historical narrative. He must indicate when he is speaking in his name and when he is explicating the perspective of another philosopher. In this respect, Martinich draws attention upon the danger of using the authority. He says that it is legitimate for the people to rely upon authority for many of the beliefs they have and the decisions they make, but that "it is a mistake to substitute an appeal to some philosopher's authority for his evidence"[8]. Usually, an authority can be quoted if it has a compelling eloquence in order either to express a position to which the essay's author subscribes or to express o perspective that the author intends to attack.

After presenting his argument, the author will offer his conclusion, and in this point he might formulate a possible objection. In this way, he can sketch some answers which will lead him to an even more reliable conclusion. Since, for any research, drawing conclusions represents the most important part of the process, the author will

emphasize what his work has established. In this final stage he can also determine further steps of investigations or other possible recommendations based upon his research results. The key is to establish what the meaning of the results is and what has been learned.

Notes:

[1] Steven M Cahn and Paul A Roth (eds.) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Social Sciences* (Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

[2] R.A. Day, *How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* (5th ed. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1998), 1.

[3] The postulate is a statement that asks it is accepted as true in order to ground a demonstration or an action.

[4] For further details, see the Aristotle's theory of syllogism and Descartes' deductive method.

[5] R.A. Day, op. cit. 11.

[6] A. Martinich, *Philosophical Writing* (3rd edition, Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 50.

[7] Gen and Kelly Tanabe, *How to Write a Winning Scholarship Essay* (Belmont: SuperCollege, LLC, 2009), 49.

[8] Martinich, op. cit. 135.

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