

Presenting and Assessing the Views of Others

Jim Pryor
New York University

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If you plan to discuss the views of Philosopher X, begin by figuring out what his or her arguments or central assumptions are.

Then ask yourself: Are X's arguments good ones? Are the assumptions clearly stated? Are they plausible? Are they reasonable starting-points for X's argument, or ought he or she have provided some independent argument for them?

Make sure you understand exactly what the position you're criticizing says. Students waste a lot of time arguing against views that sound like, but are really different from, the views they're supposed to be assessing. Remember, philosophy demands a high level of precision. It's not good enough for you merely to get the general idea of somebody else's position or argument. You have to get it exactly right. (In this respect, philosophy is more like a science than the other humanities.) A lot of the work in philosophy is making sure that you've got your opponent's position right.

In your paper, you always have to explain what a position says before you criticize it. If you don't explain what you take Philosopher X's view to be, your reader cannot judge whether the criticism you offer of X is a good criticism, or whether it is simply based on a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of X's views. So tell the reader what it is you think X is saying.

Don't try to tell the reader everything you know about X's views, though. You have to go on to offer your own philosophical contribution, too. Only summarize those parts of X's views that are directly relevant to what you're going to go on to do.

Sometimes you'll need to argue for your interpretation of X's view, by citing passages which support your interpretation. It is permissible for you to discuss a view you think a philosopher might have held, or should have held, though you can't find any direct evidence of that view in the text. When you do this, though, you should explicitly say so. Say something like:

Philosopher X doesn't explicitly say that P, but it seems to me that she's assuming it anyway, because...

Quotations

When a passage from a text is particularly useful in supporting your interpretation of some philosopher's views, it may be helpful to quote the passage directly. (Be sure to specify where the passage can be found in the text.) However, direct quotations should be used sparingly. It is seldom necessary to quote more than a few sentences. Often it will be more appropriate to paraphrase what X says, rather than to quote him or her directly. When you are paraphrasing what somebody else said, be sure to say so. (And here too, cite the pages you're referring to.)

Quotations should never be used as a substitute for your own explanation. And when you do quote an author, you still have to explain what the quotation says in your own words. If the quoted passage contains an argument, reconstruct the argument in more explicit, straightforward terms. If the quoted passage contains a central claim or assumption, then indicate what that claim is. You may want to give some examples to illustrate the author's point. If necessary, you may want to distinguish the author's claim from other claims with which it might be confused.

Paraphrases

Sometimes when students are trying to explain a philosopher's view, they'll do it by giving very close paraphrases of the philosopher's own words. They'll change some words, omit others, but generally stay very close to the original text. For instance, Hume begins his *Treatise of Human Nature* as follows:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.

Here's an example of how you don't want to paraphrase:

Hume says all perceptions of the mind are resolved into two kinds, impressions and ideas. The difference is in how much force and liveliness they have in our thoughts and consciousness. The perceptions with the most force and violence are impressions. These are sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas are the faint images of our thinking and reasoning.

There are two main problems with paraphrases of this sort. In the first place, it's done rather mechanically, so it doesn't show that the author understands the text. In the second place, since the author hasn't figured out what the text means well enough to express it in his or her own words, there's a danger that the paraphrase may inadvertently change the meaning of the text. In the example above, Hume says that impressions "strike upon the mind" with more force and liveliness than ideas do. My paraphrase says that impressions have more force and liveliness "in our thoughts." It's not clear whether these are the same thing. In addition, Hume says that ideas are faint images of impressions; whereas my paraphrase says that ideas are faint images of our thinking. These are not the same. So the author of the paraphrase appears not to have understood what Hume was saying in the original passage.

A much better way of explaining what Hume says here would be the following:

Hume says that there are two kinds of 'perceptions,' or mental states. He calls these impressions and ideas. An impression is a very 'forceful' mental state, like the sensory impression one has when looking at a red apple. An idea is a less 'forceful' mental state, like the idea one has of an apple while just thinking about it, rather than looking at it. It is not so clear what Hume means here by 'forceful.' He might mean...