

Philosophical Dialogue

This is a joint assignment to be completed by two people working together. So the first step is to choose someone to work with. You might consider working with someone who holds views opposed to your own, since that will possibly produce a more vigorous debate. If you can't find or don't like any of your prospective partners, consult me.

A dialogue, like an essay, is a literary form. Some of the most important works in Western philosophy are in dialogue form (e.g. all of Plato's works, Bishop Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, and David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*). Essentially, a dialogue is like a play where the focus is on the theoretical content of what is said (as opposed to plot, character, action, etc.). Characters are identified, and they engage with one another in a philosophical discussion. Usually there are just two or three speakers, and I strongly suggest that you limit your cast of characters to two (or at least to no more than three). Quite often, the different characters represent different points of view, and they each present opinions, arguments, objections, and responses from a consistently held position. But it is, of course, possible for characters to concede ground, admit inadequacies in their original position, and change their views in the course of the dialogue.

A word of warning: A dialogue has to be carefully composed, just like, or perhaps even more than, an essay. **Do not simply transcribe a spontaneous discussion.** Having a conversation, like brainstorming, might be a good way to loosen up and generate ideas. But a finished dialogue should be much more coherent, organized, and philosophically sophisticated.

You can, if you wish, introduce rhetorical flourishes, jokes, irony, and other literary touches into your dialogue, but this isn't expected or necessary. And if you do, don't get carried away by letting things like dramatic context, background information, humour, etc. become a major part of the work. Have fun, by all means, but make sure the dialogue is firmly focused on the philosophical issues.

If in any doubt, keep things simple: i.e. have two speakers representing conflicting positions and have them present their arguments, objections, and counter-arguments in a clear, straightforward manner. Just makes sure that they engage with each other; two long speeches, one for and one against, doesn't make a dialogue.

Make sure that the speakers are offering arguments and justifications for their positions. It's not enough for Speaker A to say, "Well I think X" and Speaker B to say, "Well I think you're

wrong; I think Y.” To quote a famous Monty Python sketch, that’s not an argument; that’s just contradiction.

Regarding format, a dialogue looks like a play. It should be easy for the reader to follow, so use something like the following format:

JACK : How do you keep an elephant from charging?

JILL: I dunno.

JACK: Take away his charge card.

Dialogue topics

- 1.. Can moral virtue be taught? If so how, and by whom? Is there a special sort of knowledge that a teacher of moral virtue must have? If so, how does one acquire this knowledge?
2. In the *Crito* Socrates argues that it would be wrong for him to escape from prison since, as a citizen of Athens, he has entered into a contract with the state to uphold its laws. But are there times when one is justified in breaking the laws of one’s society? If so, when and why?
3. In the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro is prosecuting his father. Most Athenians would think this both strange and wrong, but Euthyphro insists that what he is doing is right. Suppose one of your siblings injured a stranger in a car accident. The next day the police ask you if they had been drinking. You know for certain that they had been drinking heavily. But you also know that if convicted of DWI they will probably go to prison. Should you tell the truth as you know it to the police, or should you try to protect you sibling from the law?

Length: approx. 1500 words

Due Date: Friday, Nov. 13th

(Note: This is the official due date. Anyone who wants an extension until Monday, Nov. 16th may have one. But the extension deadline is absolute and non-negotiable. Work turned in after Nov. 16th will not be graded. Don’t even ask. If you choose not to turn the paper in on Friday and a hurricane causes the campus to close for a week and disrupts all your plans--tough. That’s the risk you decided to take when you took the extension.)