

Guidelines for Being a Good Discussion Peer in Philosophy

A Guide for Students¹

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Philosophy, perhaps more so than other disciplines, revolves around dialogue. Philosophers talk a lot. One of our favorite things to do is to give arguments. Arguments give rise to objections. Objections give rise to responses, which are often just objections to the objections. It doesn't take a philosopher to see that a regress is coming.

So philosophers, perhaps more so than other academics, need to think carefully about how we talk to each other. How *should* we talk philosophy, especially in the classroom?

Part A. How to Interact with Others

1. Adopt a general attitude that you and your classmates are involved in the common pursuit of the truth.
2. Everyone has a presumptive seat at the philosophy table. Respect everyone's place and cultivate an expectation to learn from everyone.
3. Make eye contact when listening to other students and show them they have your full attention. Wait until the speaker has fully finished before responding.
4. Name other students when you're responding to their idea. This shows that you've been listening to them and gives them credit for their contributions. Even when you are making an opposing point, mentioning them communicates that you think their comment is worthy of discussion.

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5. Unless the class is very small (and probably even then), raise your hand before making a contribution. If the instructor is doing their job, this helps them to distribute talking time fairly and to facilitate discussion.
6. Recognize that you, like everyone else, are subject to implicit biases—that is, attitudes or stereotypes about social groups that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner—and work actively to counter them. Do you (for example) tend to zone out when someone with a particular accent is speaking? Then make it a special goal to make note of what that student says during discussions.
7. Be sensitive in the examples that you choose to illustrate your points: don't use gratuitously traumatic examples when others will suffice. Be reasonably mindful of how the words you use may be experienced by others.
8. Interpret other students' contributions charitably. If a classmate says something that sounds obviously wrongheaded, there's a good chance that you've misunderstood what they are trying to say. Consider the possibility that they meant something else or are sensitive to a concern or argument that you aren't.

Even if it turns out that the other student has just made a silly mistake (after all, we all do this from time to time), you'll never lose points with your classmates (or instructor) for taking someone's words seriously. This is one way of expressing your expectation to learn from everyone.

9. Be charitable toward the philosophers we read in class too, even though they aren't here. Otherwise, your peers won't think you can be charitable toward them.
10. Accept responsibility when (inevitably) you aren't the best discussion peer you could be. Sometimes the implicit biases win, or you find that you've interrupted someone in your enthusiasm to make your point heard, or you've forgotten a fellow student's name well into the course. It has happened before and it will happen again. Take responsibility, make amends if appropriate, and then move on. We'll try to treat you as generously as we hope you'll treat us when we err.
11. Make friends with your classmates. It's meaningful to share ideas with people. It's one of the ingredients out of which friendship is made. Of course, you're not obligated to befriend or even like any of your classmates: respect is

sufficient. But what is better than a good philosophical discussion if not a good philosophical discussion among friends?

Part B. What Kinds of Contributions to Make

12. One of the greatest philosophical tools is thinking slowly. Make small points in clear steps.
13. Ask clarificatory questions frequently. One of the goals of philosophy is to clarify concepts. If you're asking a clarificatory question, you're doing philosophy right! There's an art to asking clarificatory questions well: when you can, be specific about what *exactly* is confusing and *why* it is confusing. Is it confusing because there is an unfamiliar word or because a familiar word is being used in an unfamiliar way? Is the argument confusing because you aren't sure what the structure is or because you aren't sure what the motivation is for believing one of the premises?
14. Explain references to papers or authors that we haven't read together in this class. It's wonderful to make connections to readings from past philosophy classes or other disciplines—the ability to make those connections is one of the goals of a good philosophical education! *But* make sure that you allow your peers to understand those connections too. When you draw a connection to something we haven't read in our course, assume that someone in the class would benefit from a succinct explanation: don't name drop.
15. Objections are gifts, not attacks. Be generous and give objections.
16. Objections are gifts, not attacks. So give them *as* gifts. That is, present them as opportunities to sharpen each others' viewpoints, not as a way of scoring points against an opponent.
17. Graciously receive objections. If someone objects to what you say, that means that they thought your argument was worth engaging seriously.
18. Be willing to change your mind. If you rarely change your mind in response to another student's contribution, you probably aren't listening closely enough. Appropriately changing your view is much more likely to gain you the respect of your peers (and instructor) than winning an argument.

19. Sometimes the objection becomes the main kind of comment in a discussion. That's ok, but remember that there are other kinds of equally (perhaps more) valuable comments to make. In addition to providing counterexamples, you can provide examples that *illustrate* someone's point. In addition to developing an objection, you can develop a *supporting* argument or a *response* to a potential objection. Sometimes it's just a matter of framing: nitpicky objections, though useful, are often better framed as motivating an *amendment* to a view rather than outright rejection. Some philosophers have made whole careers out of making *distinctions*. And there are all sorts of questions: clarifiers, refreshers, and comprehension-checkers; detail-seekers, explanation-seekers, and motivation-seekers; big picture, small picture, and nitpick-ture. All of these are good questions.
20. Practice identifying what kind of contribution you are making (using the categories above or your own). Learning to do this will help you to *frame* your contributions: "This is just a *nitpicky* point..." "Maybe you could *amend* your view to get around it by doing this..." "Would the proposed change *preserve the motivation* behind your original idea?" "I think there's a *big-picture concern* regarding premise 2..."
21. Philosophers often use *just-so stories* (sometimes called *test cases* or *thought experiments*) to try to understand a concept. Here's a famous example from Bertrand Russell meant to show that knowledge is different from (mere) true belief:

Stopped Clock: There is the man who looks at a clock which is not going, though he thinks it is, and who happens to look at it at the moment when it is right; this man acquires a true belief as to the time of day, but cannot be said to have knowledge. (Russell, [2009](#): 91)

Russell's story is short and simple. There aren't any fancy words, and it is easy to imagine the story being true. Most of us find that it persuasively illustrates how knowledge differs from (mere) true belief.

The simplicity is important. When introducing your own *just-so stories* to evoke a philosophical intuition, start by eliminating as many variables as possible. In this (limited) way, think of it as a laboratory experiment. For instance, if you're trying to think about the moral difference (if there is one) between the act of *lying* and the act of *withholding the truth*, think about cases in which the consequences of the two acts are the same. Otherwise, our reactions to the cases might track what we think about consequences and not what we think about the distinction between lying and withholding the truth.

22. But then also proceed to talk about applications to the complicated, social, lived-in world. Such applications in philosophy are often messier than the sanitized cases that philosophers generally focus on. But wading through the mess is well worth it. Philosophy should, after all, tell us something about the messy world we live in.