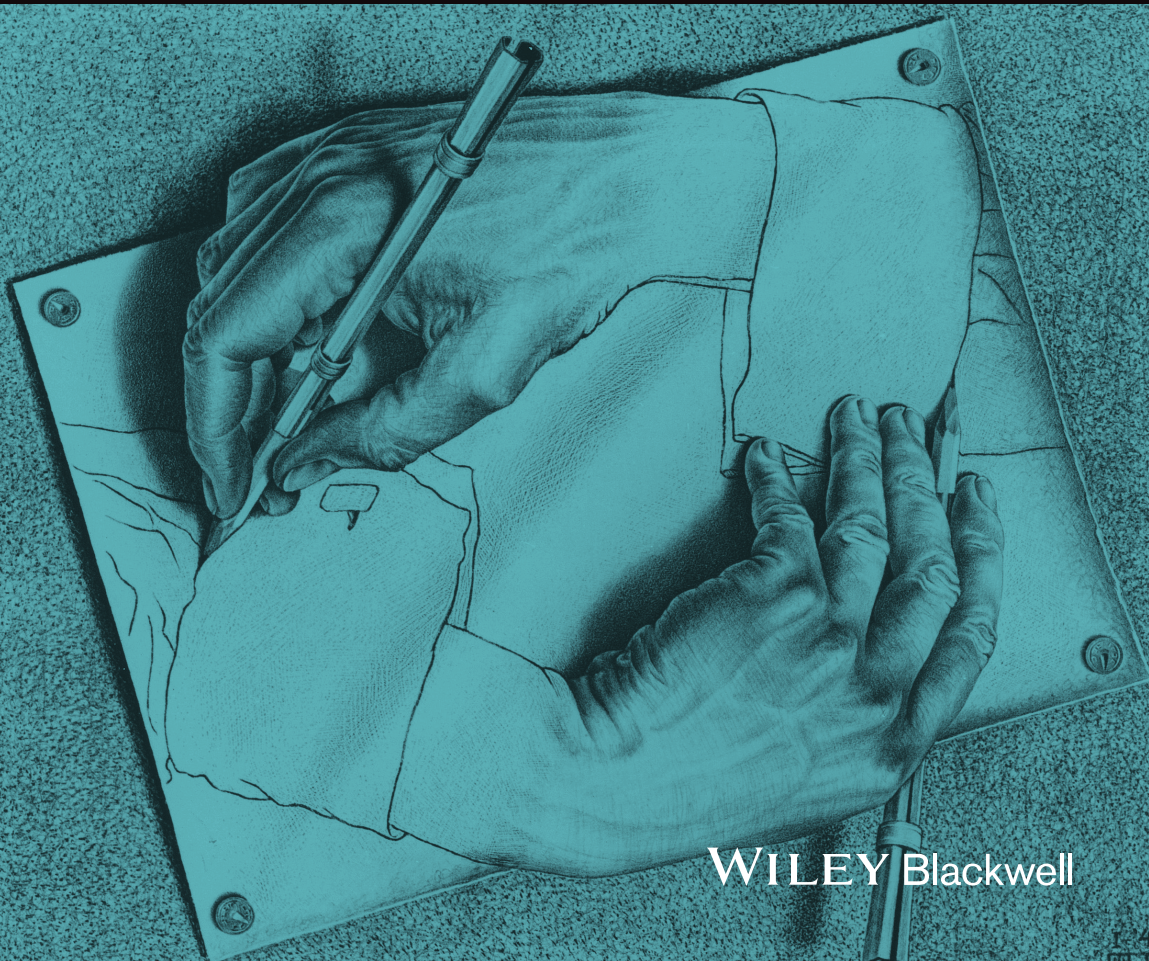
A. P. MARTINICH

Philosophical Writing

AN INTRODUCTION

FOURTH EDITION



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In memory of
my mother and father

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Note to the Fourth Edition

This edition contains several new sections, such as one on how to read a philosophical essay, one on quantification and modality, and one on rhetoric in philosophical writing. It also includes new and more examples. Another feature of this edition is a website that complements the material in the book. The website contains four kinds of material: (1) some additional explanation of some topics treated in the book; (2) some additional examples of topics discussed in the book; (3) some additional exercises, which I think of as being primarily for the benefit of the student; (4) a few additional topics that were not essential to the purpose of the book but will still be helpful to many students. The website can be found at www.wiley.com/go/Martinich.

I want to thank Leslie Martinich, who helped enormously with editing, as always, Neil Sinhababu, who updated the appendix on using internet sources, and J. P. Andrew, who commented on the section on quantification. My editor at Wiley-Blackwell, Deirdre Ilkson, has been helpful and supportive on this and other projects; and Sarah Dancy and Allison Kostka have ably shepherded this edition through the publication process.

Note to the Third Edition

This edition contains a number of changes. In general, I have tried to improve the sample essays and other examples, correct errors of fact, and make the prose more straightforward. Some of the most important changes are several new appendices, such as the one about the use of the internet by Neil Sinhababu. I want to thank Jo Ann Carson and Charles Hornbeck for several suggestions and, as usual, I want to thank my wife Leslie for her versatile help.

Note to the Second Edition

Writing to a friend, Voltaire apologized for the length of his letter: "If I had had more time, this letter would have been shorter." In revising the sections that appeared in the first edition of this book, I often found ways to make them shorter, and, I think, better. But I also had ideas about how I could add other topics to the book in order to make it better. Primarily these are sections on definition, contraries and contradictories, distinctions, and a glossary of terms that may be helpful in your philosophical writing.

In preparing the second edition, I have happily acquired debts to some of my current and former students who commented on the text: Stephen Brown, Sarah Cunningham, Nathan Jennings, and Lisa Maddry. My wife Leslie, as usual, read the entire manuscript. Also I want to thank my very helpful editor Steve Smith.

Finally, a large part of my thinking and reading about philosophy has been done in Miami Subs and Grill on the Drag. I want to thank the owners, Michael and Lisa Mermelstein, for their hospitality.

Introduction

Those who know that they are profound strive for clarity. Those who would like to seem profound strive for obscurity.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Philosophical essays may have many different structures. For experienced writers, the choice of a structure is often neither difficult nor even conscious. The essay seems to write itself. For inexperienced writers, the choice is often tortured or seemingly impossible. I offer this book to the latter group of people, of which I was a member for more than three decades. And rather than survey many possible structures, I have concentrated on what I think is the simplest, most straightforward structure that a philosophical essay might have. My purpose is to help students write something valuable so that they might begin to develop their own styles. The project is similar to teaching art students to draw the human hand. The first goal is accuracy, not elegance.

Elegance in writing is not learned. It is the product of a kind of genius; and genius begins where rules leave off. The topic of this book is something that can be learned: how to write clear, concise and precise philosophical prose. Elegance is desirable, but so is simplicity. And that is what I aim for.

The philosopher Avrum Stroll (1921–2013) once said, "Half of good philosophy is good grammar." This remark is witty and profound, and, like any good aphorism, difficult to explain. Before I try to explain at least part of what it means, let me forestall a possible misunderstanding. Although good philosophical writing is grammatical, there is virtually

nothing about grammar in this book in the sense in which your fifth grade teacher, Mrs Grundy, discussed it. Virtually all students know the rules of grammar, and yet these rules are often flagrantly violated in their philosophical prose. Why does this happen?

One reason is that philosophers often try to assign things to their proper categories, and those philosophically contrived categories are not clear, or at least they are initially hard to understand. Philosophers have sometimes divided reality into the things that are mental and the things that are material. Sometimes they have divided reality into things that are substances (things that exist on their own) and things that are accidents (things that are properties or depend upon other things for their existence). There is even a grammatical correlation between these categories. Nouns correlate with substances (*man* with man), and adjectives correlate with accidents (*rectangular* with rectangular). When philosophers argue that things that seem to belong to one category really belong to another, grammar is strained. Most theists maintain that *God is just*. But some (theistic) philosophers have maintained that this cannot be true. The reason is that if *God is just*, then God has the property of being just, and if God has a property, then he is not absolutely simple or one and might therefore be corruptible. So, these philosophers have said that *God is (identical with) the just* or that *God is (identical with) justice*, even though these latter claims stretch the grammatical limits of most natural languages.

Sometimes the attempt to say something new and correct about the limits of reality causes the grammar to break down completely, as when Martin Heidegger says, "Nothing nothings." The noun *nothing* cannot be a verb, so the pseudo-verb *nothings* is unintelligible. Further, Heidegger seems to be construing the word *nothing* as a noun, as if *nothing* named something, when obviously it cannot. (Of course, Heidegger would disagree with my grammatical remarks; and that is just one more reason why philosophy is difficult: it is hard to get philosophers to agree even about grammar.)

Thomas Hobbes was one of the first to discuss the propensity of philosophers to mistakenly combine words that belong to one category with words that belong to a different and incompatible category. This is known as a category mistake. Roughly, a category mistake is the logical equivalent of mixing apples and oranges. The sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" involves several category mistakes. Colorless things cannot be green or any other color; ideas cannot sleep or be awake; and nothing can sleep furiously. Objects belonging to one of these categories don't fit with objects that belong to some of the others. One of his examples is: "The intellect understands." According to Hobbes, *the intellect* is the name of an accident or property of bodies, which is one category, while *understands*, even though it is grammatically a verb, is the name of a body (humans),

which is another category. And thus he holds that the sentence "The intellect understands" is literally absurd. What Hobbes thinks is literally true is the sentence "Man understands by his intelligence." In a related way, John Locke thought it was a serious mistake to say "The will wills (or chooses)." What is true is "A human being wills (or chooses)."

It is quite possible for someone to disagree with Hobbes about whether the sentence "The intellect understands" makes sense or not, and to criticize the philosophico-grammatical view that underlies his grammatical judgment. Philosophers often disagree about what is absurd and what is not. Consider the sentence "Beliefs are brain states." Does this sentence express a category mistake or a brilliant insight into the nature of the mental? Philosophers disagree. So it is not always easy to say whether some philosophical thesis constitutes a great philosophical insight or a laughable grammatical blunder. Thus, added to the inherent difficulty of philosophy is the difficulty of philosophical writing, which often groans under the burden placed on syntax and semantics.

Another reason that students often write patently ungrammatical sentences is that the philosophy that they have read seems that way to them. And it seems that way because the thought being expressed is radically unfamiliar. Since philosophers often invent categories or concepts that are unfamiliar to students, or revise familiar categories, there is no place for the category in the student's initial system of thoughts, and it is hard to adjust one's concepts to make room for the new or revised category. Often the category will be initially situated in an inappropriate place or the wrong things will be placed in it. In a word, the category is strange. As a consequence, when students come to explain, criticize, or even endorse propositions using that category, they may produce incoherent and ungrammatical sentences. Their writing, though muddled, is an accurate representation of their understanding. This is nothing to be ashamed of; it's nothing to be proud of either. It's just part of the process of learning to think philosophically.

If you find yourself writing a sentence or paragraph that is grammatically out of control, then your thought is probably out of control. Consequently, you can use your own prose as a measure of the degree to which you understand the issue you are writing about and as an index to the parts of your essay that need more consideration. (I owe the ideas in this paragraph to Charles Young.)

This explanation of why half of good philosophy is good grammar inspires a partial criterion: good philosophical writing is grammatical. If a person can write a series of consistently grammatical sentences about some philosophical subject, then that person probably has a coherent idea of what he is discussing.

Another related criterion of good philosophical writing is precision. Contrary to the conventional wisdom prevalent among students, vague and verbose language is not a sign of profundity and astuteness but of confusion. Teachers of philosophy who are dedicated to the above criteria in effect issue a challenge to students: write grammatically, clearly, and precisely. Since language is the expression of thought, clear language is the expression of clear thought. Writing style should facilitate the comprehension of philosophy. Style should enhance clarity.

If half of good philosophy is good grammar, then the other half is good thinking. Good thinking takes many forms. The form that we will concentrate on is often called *analysis*. The word *analysis* has many meanings in philosophy, one of which is a method of reasoning (discussed in chapter 5). Another meaning refers to a method or school of philosophy that reigned largely unchallenged for most of the last century. Many people think that this method is passé in our postanalytic era. I am not taking a stand on that issue in this book. I use 'analysis' in a very broad sense that includes both analytic (in a narrower sense) and postanalytic philosophy. The goal of analytic philosophy, as it is understood here, is the truth, presented in a clear, orderly, well-structured way. I take a strong stand for clarity, order, and structure. The goal of analysis, in its broad sense, is to make philosophy less difficult than it otherwise would be. This is just a corollary of a more general principle: anyone can make a subject difficult; it takes an accomplished thinker to make a subject simple.

Philosophical writing has taken many forms, including dialogue (Plato, Berkeley, Hume), drama (Camus, Marcel, Sartre), poetry (Lucretius), and fiction (Camus, George Eliot, Sartre). I will discuss only the essay form. There are three reasons for this decision. First, it is the form in which you are most likely to be asked to write. Second, it is the easiest form to write in. Third, it is currently the standard form for professional philosophers. Although the dialogue form is attractive to many students, it is an extremely difficult one to execute well. It tempts one to cuteness, needless metaphor, and imprecision.

It is often advisable to preview a book. That advice holds here. Skim the entire book before reading it more carefully. Depending on your philosophical background, some parts will be more informative than others. Chapter 1 discusses the concepts of author and audience as they apply to a student's philosophical prose. Both students and their professors are in an artificial literary situation. Unlike typical authors, students know less about their subject than their audience, although they are not supposed to let on that they do. Chapter 2 is a crash course on the basic concepts of logic. It contains background information required for understanding subsequent chapters. Those who are familiar with logic will breeze

through it, while those with no familiarity with it will need to read slowly, carefully, and at least twice. Chapter 3 discusses the structure of a philosophical essay and forms the heart of the book. The well-worn but sound advice that an essay should have a beginning, a middle, and an end applies to philosophical essays too. Chapter 4 deals with a number of matters related to composing drafts of an essay. Various techniques for composing are discussed. Anyone who knows how to outline, take notes, revise, do research and so on might be able to skip this chapter. Chapter 5 explains several types of arguments used in philosophical reasoning, such as dilemmas, counterexamples and *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. Chapter 6 discusses some basic requirements that the content of an essay must satisfy. Chapter 7 discusses goals for the form of your writing: coherence, clarity, conciseness, and rigor. Chapter 8 discusses some standard problems students have with the first few pages of an essay. Chapter 9, new to this edition, makes suggestions about how to read a philosophical essay. Numerous appendices cover such topics as research, how to study for a test, what sources on the internet are appropriate for student to use, and a glossary.

Like essays, most books have conclusions that either summarize or tie together the main strands of the work. However, it would have been artificial to do so in this case, since the book as a whole does not develop one main argument but consists of a number of different topics that should be helpful to the student. Appendix A, "It's Sunday Night and I Have an Essay Due Monday Morning," is included for those who bought this book but never got around to reading much of it, and can serve as a conclusion. Several of my students who used one of the first three editions let me know that this was the first part of the book they read, on a Sunday night about six weeks into the semester.

In order to serve the needs of a wide range of students, the level of difficulty varies from elementary to moderately advanced. Even within individual chapters, the level of difficulty can vary significantly, although each section begins with the simplest material and progresses to the most difficult. Thus, a chapter on a new topic might revert from complex material in the previous chapter to a simple level. I believe that intelligent, hard-working students can move rather quickly from philosophical innocence to moderate sophistication.

At various points, I have presented fragments of essays to illustrate a stylistic point. The topics of these essay fragments are sometimes controversial and the argumentation provocative. These passages are meant to keep the reader's interest and do not always represent my view. It would be a mistake to focus on the content of these essay fragments when it is their style that is important. Also, it is quite likely that the reader will disagree

with a few or even many of the stylistic claims I make. If this leads readers to at least think about why they disagree, and to discover what they prefer and why, then a large part of my goal will have been achieved.

Chapter 4 contains a section, "The Rhetoric of Philosophical Writing." Going back as far as Socrates, rhetoric has often had a bad name in philosophy. No negative attitude toward rhetoric is implied in this book. "Rhetoric," as I use it, contrasts with logic and refers to style, that is, to those elements of writing that facilitate communication. The right kind of rhetoric in writing is not antithetical to logic. Rather, the right rhetorical elements are important. After all, like any essay, a philosophical essay that fails to communicate fails in one of its central purposes.

Philosophical Writing is intended to be practical. It is supposed to help you write better and thereby improve your ability to present your thoughts. Since almost any class may require you to write an essay that analyzes some kind of concept, the skills gained in learning to write about philosophical concepts may prove useful in writing other types of essays.

A problem faced by English speakers who wanted to avoid language that favored male human beings is less severe now than it was 40 years ago because many clear-headed writers have suggested various ways to avoid the problem. Here are four excellent ways:

(1) Delete the pronoun: "A professor should prepare [omit: his] lectures well before they are to be given."
(2) Change the pronoun to an article: "A professor should read the essays of the [instead of: his] students soon after they are submitted."
(3) Use plural nouns and pronouns: Instead of "A professor should prepare his lectures well before they are scheduled to be given," write "Professors should prepare their lectures well before they are scheduled to be given."
(4) Paraphrase the pronoun away: Instead of "If a student does not study, he cannot expect to do well on the tests," write "A student who does not study cannot expect to do well on the tests."

A controversial suggestion is to use "they" with "anyone," "someone," and "no one." That is, these sentences would be counted fully grammatical:

Anyone who fails *their* exam will be permitted to take a make-up exam.
If *someone* is tortured for a long time *they* will eventually suffer a breakdown.
Since *no one* studied hard, *those* who failed the test will not be permitted to take a make up exam.

The objection to this practice is that it is illogical. Since "anyone," "someone," and "no one" are singular, they should not be paired with a plural pronoun. I once argued this way myself. I have given it up because (a) I think eventually plural pronouns will be used with singular universal pronouns; (b) excellent writers in the past have used plural pronouns in this way; and (c) language is a matter of convention. (My view was influenced by a marvelous book: Bryan Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*, 3rd edn. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).)

When for one reason or another, I have found it convenient to use generic pronouns that are grammatically male or female, I have used the following conventions. Male gender pronouns will be used for references to the professor. Female gender pronouns will be used for references to the student. Since this book is about students, I believe the female gender pronouns predominate. In any case, no hierarchical order is implied by these uses. Professors and students simply have different roles and responsibilities.

1
Author and Audience

It might seem obvious who the author and audience of a student's essay are. The student is the author and the professor is the audience. Of course that is true. But a student is not a normal author, and a student's professor is not a normal audience. I want to expand on these two points in this chapter. I will begin with the conceptually simpler topic: the abnormality of a teacher as audience.

1 The Professor as Audience

It's indispensable for an author to know who the audience is. Depending upon the audience, an author might take one or another tack in explaining her position. (See also section 3.)

A student is not in the typical position of an author for many reasons. While an author usually chooses her intended audience, the student's audience is imposed on her. (The student's predicament, however, is not unique. An audience usually chooses his author. In contrast, the professor's author is imposed on him: his students. Both should make the best of necessity.) Unless the student is exceptional, she is not writing to inform or convince her audience of the truth of the position she expostulates. So her purpose is not persuasion. Further, unless the topic is exceptional or the professor relatively ignorant, the student's purpose is not straightforwardly expositive or explanatory either. Presumably, the professor already understands the material that the student is struggling to present clearly and correctly. Nonetheless, the student cannot presuppose that the professor is knowledgeable about the topic being discussed because the professor, in his role as judge, cannot assume that the student is knowledgeable. It is the student's

job to show her professor that she understands what the professor already knows. A student may find this not merely paradoxical but perverse. But this is the existential situation into which the student as author is thrown.

The structure and style of a student's essay should be the same as an essay of straightforward exposition and explanation. As mentioned above, the student's goal is to show the professor that she knows some philosophical doctrine by giving an accurate rendering of it; further, the student must show that she knows, not simply what propositions have been espoused by certain philosophers, but why they hold them. That is, the student must show that she knows the structure of the arguments used to prove a philosophical position, the meaning of the technical terms used and the evidence for the premises. (One difference between the history of philosophy and the history of ideas is that the former cares about the structure and cogency of the arguments.) The student needs to assume (for the sake of adopting an appropriate authorial stance) that the audience is (a) intelligent but (b) uninformed. The student must state her thesis and then explain what she means. She must prove her thesis or at least provide good evidence for it.

All technical terms have to be explained as if the audience knew little or no philosophy. This means that the student ought to explain them by using ordinary words in their ordinary senses. If the meaning of a technical term is not introduced or explained by using ordinary words in their ordinary meanings, then there is no way for the audience to know what the author means. For example, consider this essay fragment:

> The purpose of this essay is to prove that human beings never perceive material objects but rather semi-ideators, by which I mean the interface of the phenomenal object and its conceptual content.

This passage should sound profound for no more than a nano-second. In theory, there is nothing objectionable to introducing the term *semi-ideator*, but anyone with the gall to invent such a neologism owes the reader a better explanation of its meaning than "the interface of the phenomenal object and its conceptual content." In addition to neologisms, words with ordinary meanings often have technical meanings in philosophy, e.g.:

determined
matter
ego
universal
reflection
pragmatic

When an author uses a word with an ordinary meaning in an unfamiliar technical sense, the word is rendered ambiguous, and the audience will be misled or confused if that technical meaning is not noted and explained in terms intelligible to the audience.

It is no good to protest that your professor should permit you to use technical terms without explanation on the grounds that the professor knows or ought to know their meaning. To repeat, it is not the professor's knowledge that is at issue, but the student's. It is her responsibility to show the professor that she knows the meaning of those terms. Do not think that the professor will think that you think that the professor does not understand a term if you define it. If you use a technical term, then it is your term and you are responsible for defining it. Further, a technical term is successfully introduced only if the explanation does not depend on the assumption that the audience already knows the meaning of the technical term! For that is precisely what the student has to show.

There is an exception. For advanced courses, the professor may allow the student to assume that the audience knows what a beginning student might know about philosophy, perhaps some logic or parts of Plato's *Republic* or Descartes's *Meditations*, or something similar. For graduate students, the professor may allow the student to assume a bit more logic, and quite a bit of the history of philosophy. It would be nice if the professor were to articulate exactly what a student is entitled to assume and what not, but he may forget to do this, and, even if he remembers, it is virtually impossible to specify all and only what may be assumed. There is just too much human knowledge and ignorance and not enough time to articulate it all. If you are in doubt about what you may assume, you should ask. Your professor will probably be happy to tell you. If he is not, then the fault lies with him; and you can rest content with the knowledge that, in asking, you did the right thing. That is the least that acting on principle gives us; and sometimes, alack, the most.

While I have talked about who your audience is and about how much or how little you should attribute to him, I have not said anything about what attitude you should take toward the audience. The attitude is respect. If you are writing for someone, then you should consider that person worthy of the truth; and if that person is worthy of the truth, then you should try to make that truth as intelligible and accessible to him as possible. Further, if you write for an audience, you are putting demands on that person's time. You are expecting him to spend time and to expend effort to understand what you have written; if you have done a slipshod job, then you have wasted his time and treated him unfairly. A trivial or sloppy essay is an insult to the audience in addition to reflecting badly on you. If