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# THE PHILOSOPHER'S



A COMPENDIUM OF PHILOSOPHICAL  
CONCEPTS AND METHODS

THIRD EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

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*'The Philosopher's Toolkit* provides a welcome and useful addition to the introductory philosophy books available. It takes the beginner through most of the core conceptual tools and distinctions used by philosophers, explaining them simply and with abundant examples. Newcomers to philosophy will find much in here that will help them to understand the subject.'

*David S. Oderberg,  
University of Reading*

'... the average person who is interested in arguments and logic but who doesn't have much background in philosophy would certainly find this book useful, as would anyone teaching a course on arguments, logic, and reasoning. Even introductory courses on philosophy in general might benefit because the book lays out so many of the conceptual "tools" which will prove necessary over students' careers.'

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'Its choice of tools for basic argument . . . is sound, while further tools for argument . . . move through topics and examples concisely and wittily . . . Sources are well chosen and indicated step by step. Sections are cross-referenced (making it better than the Teach Yourself "100 philosophical concepts") and supported by a useful index.'

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*"The Philosopher's Toolkit* is a very good book. It could be highly useful for both introductory courses in philosophy, or philosophical methodology, as well as independent study for anyone interested in the methods of argument, assessment and criticism . . . It is unique in approach, and written in a pleasant and considerate tone. This book will help one to get going to do philosophy, but more advanced students might find this text helpful too. I wish I had had access to this book as an undergraduate."

### *Teaching Philosophy*

PETER S. FOSL and JULIAN BAGGINI

# **THE PHILOSOPHER'S**



## **A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods**

THIRD EDITION

**WILEY** Blackwell

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*For Rick O'Neil, colleague and friend, in memoriam*

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# Preface

Philosophy can be an extremely technical and complex affair, one whose terminology and procedures are often intimidating to the beginner and demanding even for the professional. Like that of surgery, the art of philosophy requires mastering a body of knowledge as well as acquiring precision and skill with a set of instruments or tools. *The Philosopher's Toolkit* may be thought of as a collection of just such tools. Unlike those of a surgeon or a master woodworker, however, the instruments presented by this text are conceptual – tools that can be used to enter, analyse, criticise, and evaluate philosophical concepts, arguments, visions, and theories.

The *Toolkit* can be used in a variety of ways. It can be read cover to cover by those looking for instruction on the essentials of philosophical reflection. Or it can be used as a course book on basic philosophical method or critical thinking. It can also be used as a reference book to which general readers and more advanced philosophers can turn in order to find quick and clear accounts of the key concepts and methods of philosophy. The book is assembled so that there is a natural, logical order from start to finish, but one can also start wherever one likes, just as one might play any song on a record album first. The aim of the book, in other words, is to act as a conceptual toolbox from which all those from neophytes to master artisans can draw instruments that would otherwise be distributed over a diverse set of texts and require long periods of study to acquire.

For this third edition, we have expanded the book with sixteen new entries, and we've reviewed and revised most of the others. The book's sections still progress from the



basic tools of argumentation to more sophisticated philosophical concepts and principles. The text circulates through various instruments for assessment, essential laws, fundamental principles, and important conceptual distinctions. It concludes with a discussion of the limits of philosophical thinking. Through every chapter, the text opens entry points into complex topics of contemporary philosophical interest.

The *Toolkit's* composition is intentionally pluralistic. By that we mean that we try to honour both the Continental and Anglo-American traditions in philosophy. These two streams of Western philosophical thought have often been at odds, each regarding the other with critical suspicion and disdain. Though they have never been wholly distinct, the last major figure clearly rooting both is, arguably, eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). After Kant, the Continental tradition pursued lines of thinking charted through German and British idealism, phenomenology, existentialism, semiotics, structuralism, and various flavours of post-structuralism, at times blending with literary criticism. Anglo-American philosophy, in contrast, followed a course at first through empiricism, utilitarianism, and positivism, after which it then turned into pragmatism and analytic philosophy. This book is committed to the proposition that there is value in each tradition and that the richest and truest approach to philosophy draws from both.

The seven sections or chapters assembled here are composed of compact entries, each containing an explanation of the tool it addresses, examples of the tool in use, and guidance about the tool's scope and limits. Each entry is cross-referenced to other related entries – often in obvious ways but also sometimes in ways we think will be both novel and enlightening. Readers can chart their own path through the volume by following the cross-references

and recommended readings that interest them from one entry to the another. Recommended readings marked with an asterisk will be more accessible to readers and relatively less technical. There is also a list of Internet resources at the front of the book.

The readings we recommend are important recent and historical texts about which advanced readers ought to know. Recommended readings, however, also include introductory texts that will provide beginners with more extensive accounts of the relevant topic. Other recommended texts simply offer readers some indication of the range of import the topic has had.

Becoming a master sculptor requires more than the ability to pick up and use the tools of the trade: it requires talent, imagination, practice, persistence, and sometimes courage, too. In the same way, learning how to use these philosophical tools will not turn a beginner into a master of the art of philosophy overnight. What it will do is equip readers with skills, capacities, and techniques that will, we hope, help them philosophise better.

# 1

## Basic Tools for Argument

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## 1.1 Arguments, premises, and conclusions

Philosophy is for nit-pickers. That's not to say it is a trivial pursuit. Far from it. Philosophy addresses some of the most important questions human beings ask themselves. The reason philosophers are nit-pickers is that they are commonly concerned with the ways in which the claims and beliefs people hold about the world either are or are not

rationally supported, usually by rational argument. Because their concern is serious, it is important for philosophers to demand attention to detail. People reason in a variety of ways using a number of techniques, some legitimate and some not. Often one can discern the difference between good and bad reasoning only if one scrutinises the content and structure of arguments with supreme and uncompromising diligence.

## **Argument and inference**

What, then, is an 'argument' proper? For many people, an argument is a contest or conflict between two or more people who disagree about something. An argument in this sense might involve shouting, name-calling, and even a bit of shoving. It might also – but need not – include reasoning.

Philosophers, in contrast, use the term 'argument' in a very precise and narrow sense. For them, an argument is the most basic complete unit of reasoning – an atom of reasoning. An 'argument' understood this way is an *inference* from one or more starting points (truth claims called a 'premise' or 'premises') to an end point (a truth claim called a 'conclusion'). All arguments require an inferential movement of this sort. For this reason, arguments are called *discursive*.

## **Argument vs explanation**

'Arguments' are to be distinguished from 'explanations'. A general rule to keep in mind is that arguments attempt to demonstrate *that* something is true, while explanations attempt to show *how* something is true. For example, consider encountering an apparently dead woman. An explanation of the woman's death would undertake to show *how* it happened. ('The existence of water in her lungs explains the death of this woman.') An argument would

undertake to demonstrate *that* the person is in fact dead ('Since her heart has stopped beating and there are no other vital signs, we can conclude that she is in fact dead.') or that one explanation is better than another ('The absence of bleeding from the laceration on her head combined with water in the lungs indicates that this woman died from drowning and not from bleeding.')

## **The place of reason in philosophy**

It's not universally realised that reasoning comprises a great deal of what philosophy is about. Many people have the idea that philosophy is essentially about ideas or theories about the nature of the world and our place in it that amount just to *opinions*. Philosophers do indeed advance such ideas and theories, but in most cases their power, their scope, and the characteristics that distinguish them from mere opinion stem from their having been derived through rational argument from acceptable premises. Of course, many other regions of human life also commonly involve reasoning, and it may sometimes be impossible to draw clean lines demarcating philosophy from them. (In fact, whether or not it is possible to demarcate philosophy from non-philosophy is itself a matter of heated philosophical debate!)

The natural and social sciences are, for example, fields of rational inquiry that often bump up against the borders of philosophy (especially in inquiries into the mind and brain, theoretical physics, and anthropology). But theories composing these sciences are generally determined through certain formal procedures of experimentation and reflection to which philosophy has little to add. Religious thinking sometimes also enlists rationality and shares an often-disputed border with philosophy. But while religious thought is intrinsically related to the divine, sacred, or transcendent – perhaps through some kind of revelation,

article of faith, or ritualistic practice – philosophy, by contrast, in general is not.

Of course, the work of certain prominent figures in the Western philosophical tradition presents decidedly non-rational and even anti-rational dimensions (for example, that of Heraclitus, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida). We will examine the non-argumentative philosophical methods of these authors in what follows of this book. Furthermore, many include the work of Asian (Confucian, Taoist, Shinto), African, Aboriginal, and Native American thinkers under the rubric of philosophy, even though they seem to make little use of argument and have generally not identified their work as philosophical.

But, perhaps despite the intentions of its authors, even the work of non-standard thinkers involves rationally justified claims and subtle forms of argumentation too often missed. And in many cases, reasoning remains on the scene at least as a force with which thinkers must reckon.

Philosophy, then, is not the only field of thought for which rationality is important. And not all that goes by the name of philosophy is argumentative. But it is certainly safe to say that one cannot even begin to master the expanse of philosophical thought without learning how to use the tools of reason. There is, therefore, no better place to begin stocking our philosophical toolkit than with rationality's most basic components, the subatomic particles of reasoning – 'premises' and 'conclusions'.

## **Premises and conclusions**

For most of us, the idea of a 'conclusion' is as straightforward as a philosophical concept gets. A conclusion is just that with which an argument concludes, the product and result of an inference or a chain of inferences, that which the reasoning claims to justify and



support. What about 'premises', though? Premises are defined in relation to the conclusion. They are, of course, what do the justifying. There is, however, a distinctive and a bit less obvious property that all premises and conclusions must possess.

In order for a sentence to serve either as a premise or as a conclusion, it must exhibit this essential property: it must make a claim that is either true or false. A sentence that does that is in logical terms called a *statement* or *proposition*.

Sentences do many things in our languages, and not all of them possess that property and thence not all of them are statements. Sentences that issue commands, for example ('Forward march, soldier!'), or ask questions ('Is this the road to Edinburgh?'), or register exclamations ('Wow!'), are neither true nor false. Hence, it's not possible for sentences of those kinds to serve as premises or as conclusions.

This much is pretty easy, but things can get sticky in a number of ways. One of the most vexing issues concerning arguments is the problem of implicit claims. That is, in many arguments, key premises or even the conclusion remain unstated, implied or masked inside other sentences. Take, for example, the following argument: 'Socrates is a man, so Socrates is mortal.' What's left implicit is the claim that 'all men are mortal'. Arguments with unstated premises like this are often called *enthymemes* or *enthymematic*.

It's also the case that sometimes arguments nest inside one another so that in the course of advancing one, main conclusion several ancillary conclusions are proven along the way. Untangling arguments nested in others can get complicated, especially as those nests can pile on top of one another and interconnect. It often takes a patient,

analytical mind to sort it all out (just the sort of mind you'll encounter among philosophers).

In working out precisely what the premises are in a given argument, then, ask yourself first what the principal claim is that the argument is trying to demonstrate. Then ask yourself what other claims the argument relies upon (implicitly or explicitly) in order to advance that demonstration. Sometimes certain words and phrases will explicitly indicate premises and conclusions. Phrases like 'therefore', 'in conclusion', 'it follows that', 'we must conclude that', and 'from this we can see that' often indicate conclusions. ('The DNA, the fingerprints, and the eyewitness accounts all point to Smithers. It follows that she must be the killer.') Words like 'because' and 'since', and phrases like 'for this reason' and 'on the basis of this', on the other hand, often indicate premises. (For example, 'Since the DNA, the fingerprints, and the eyewitness accounts all implicate Smithers, she must be the killer.')

Premises of an argument, then, compose the set of claims from which the conclusion is drawn. In other sections, the question of precisely how we can justify the move from premises to conclusion will be addressed in more in more detail (see 1.4 and 4.7). But before we get that far, we must first ask, 'What justifies a reasoner in entering a premise in the first place?'

## **Grounds for premises and Agrippa's trilemma?**

There are several important accounts about how a premise can be acceptable. One is that the premise is itself the conclusion of a different, solid argument (perhaps a nested argument). As such, the truth of the premise has been demonstrated elsewhere. But it is clear that if this were the only kind of justification for the inclusion of a premise, we would face an infinite regress. That is to say, each premise

would have to be justified by a different argument, the premises of which would have to be justified by yet another argument, the premises of which ... *ad infinitum*.

Now, there are philosophers called *infinetists* for whom regresses of this sort are not problematic. Unless, however, one wishes to live with the infinite regress, one must find another way of determining sentences acceptable to serve as premises.

A compelling option for many has been to conceive of truths not as a hierarchy but rather as a network so that it's the case that justifications ultimately just circle back around to compose a coherent, mutually supporting but ultimately anchor-less web. The objective of philosophers and other theorists, from this point of view, becomes a project of conceptual weaving and embroidery, stitching together concepts and arguments in consistent and meaningful ways to construct a coherent conceptual fabric. Philosophers who conceive of truths, theories, and reasoning in this way are called *coherentists*.

Philosophers who object to infinite regresses of justification and who find in the coherentist vision just vicious circularity often look for something fundamental or foundational, a stopping point or bedrock for reasons and justification. Philosophers of this sort are often called *foundationalists*. There must be for foundationalists premises that stand in need of no further justification through other arguments. Let's call them 'basic premises'.

There's been a lot of ink spilled about what are to count as basic premises and why they are basic. By some accounts (called *contextualist*), the local context in which one is reasoning determines what's basic. For example, a basic premise might be, 'I exist'. In most contexts, this premise does not stand in need of justification. But if, of course, the argument is trying to demonstrate that I exist, my

existence cannot be used as a premise. One cannot assume what one is trying to argue for.

Other kinds of philosophers have held that certain sentences are more or less basic for other reasons: because they are based upon self-evident or 'cataleptic' perceptions (*stoics*), because they are directly rooted in sense data (*positivists*), because they are grasped by a power called intuition or insight (*Platonists*), because they make up the framework of any possible inquiry and therefore cannot themselves be the objects of inquiry (*Kantians*, *Wittgensteinians*), because they are revealed to us by God (*theologians*), or because we grasp them using cognitive faculties certified by God (*Cartesians*).

Other philosophers, principally sceptics, have challenged the idea that an ultimate ground can be given at all for reasoning. Appeals to neither (1) regresses, nor (2) circles, nor (3) foundations ultimately work. The problem is an old one and has been popularly described as 'Agrippa's trilemma'. See Graeco-Roman Diogenes Laërtius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (9.88–89) and Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH 1.15.164) for the details.

Formally, then, the distinction between premises and conclusions is clear. But it is not enough to grasp this difference. In order to use these philosophical tools, one has to be able both to spot the explicit premises and to make explicit the unstated ones. The philosophical issues behind that distinction, however, are deep. Aside from the question of whether or not the conclusion follows from the premises, one must come to terms with the thornier questions related to what justifies the use of premises in the first place. Premises are the starting points of philosophical argument. One of the most important philosophical issues, therefore, must be the question of where and how one begins.