

Philosophical Dialogue

InterQuest: PHL201

A. Read Plato dialogues: excerpts from *Republic* and *Euthypro* (see "Portraits" in the Blackboard menu).

B. Write a dialogue with these features:

- Between two or more characters
- The dialogue is on a clearly philosophical issue
- One of the characters represents your beliefs
- Make use Socrates' method of questioning
- Make use Socrates' method of definition
- Approximately 1000 words.

C. Add a separate 100 word comment reflecting on your effort in this task, how you went about preparing for and writing your dialogue, what difficulties you see in having done so, what (if anything) you gained by doing this assignment), and suggestions on how the assignment may be stronger for you.

D. Submit by the due date listed on the course schedule using the Papers submission form.

Dialogue

Plato wrote philosophy in the form of Dialogues which are presented as written versions of the discussion between individuals. Many of us are not used to this form of writing, since most writing today is done as narrative, story, or descriptive prose. The closest that we come in the 21st century to Plato's dialogues are plays or transcripts of conversations.

However, consider what happens when you do have a conversation with one or more people. Is it much more like what Plato writes than any essay or speech (unless you associate with people who dominate everyone else's input. To write a dialogue is to think through the way that we talk about an issue. This can be a challenging effort, since many of us have never really consider how it is that we converse. Writing your dialogue in an authentic voice requires listening to your own voice and that of others. I find that when people listen to themselves (really listen) they experience insight and change. This assignment has a goal of opening the opportunity for a transformation in how you communicate with others.



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How to Start

This assignment can be easy. All you need do is to start some philosophical conversations with other people. They can be people whom you know well or they may be strangers (just explain that you are doing a project that requires conversing about a philosophical issue). Just have the conversations. Keep in mind the characteristics and objectives of quality intellectual dialogue that we have considered so far in this course. Do your best to keep the conversation on the issue (you may have to repeatedly bring everyone back to the main subject, just as Socrates does in the dialogues).

As you have these conversations, keep an ear out for how they go. What do you sound like? Do you discern any patterns in what you say? How would you characterize your discussion style? Open and inquiring? Aggressive? Passive and indecisive? Directed and flexible? You need not fit into any of these styles. The point is to hear yourself as well as others. When you have a good sense of who you are as a conversant, then you have a basis to write your own dialogue.

Sometimes folks will record their conversations so that they can listen back and analyze them. That can be a very powerful experience (especially when you get over the sound of your own voice). However, it is not sufficient to produce a transcript of a recorded talk. Classical philosophical dialogues are artfully written with an agenda by the author. Plato was not merely repeating what he heard Socrates say. Plato was interpreting and building a system of ideas. His influence on the world that followed him is due to the art and genius of his writing. I ask you to take the dialogue serious as a form of expression. Use your own voice and ideas as elements of that expression.

How you set the scene and construct the characters is a creative task. It is not expected that you will appear as a player in your own dialogue. Plato used Socrates as his spokesperson, as Plato himself seldom appears in the dialogues.

Multiple Views

One challenge that dialogue writing presents to us is the need to speak for a variety of viewpoints, even those that are opposed to our own. This can be very difficult. It is tempting to portray those who have ideas other than and opposed to our own as shallow or weak. Casting our opponents as fools and villains is a cheap way out. It lacks intellectual power.



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[Though, I must admit that this very technique is extremely powerful when used by politicians in building momentum towards war.]

Treat the opponents in your dialogue as intelligent and informed. Treat their positions as the strongest versions of their positions that they can give. Note that Plato's dialogues never end with a conclusion. Plato almost never declares to have solved the issue at hand. During his dialogues, various arguments, definitions, and positions are decisively refuted. Some ideas are made stronger and shown to be the best among the alternatives. Few of the ideas presented, however, are settled on by Plato and his characters as final and certain. This is not because Plato disagreed with the notion of final and certain beliefs. On the contrary, his philosophy is majorly characterized by a commitment to seeking objective truth. It does seem that Plato, as his predecessor Socrates, does doubt the ability of individual humans to know the objective truth with certainty. None of that stops or even slows down his pursuit of truth through tightly focused dialogue. Read Plato and you will encounter a remarkable mind whose primary purpose is to always discover the hidden assumptions and commitments that lead us into error and false belief.

Being fair and genuine to alternate views is not at all the same thing as agreeing with them or refusing to decide between them. The writer of a dialogue certainly does take a position - though often more complex and sophisticated position than that of any of the characters. In writing this piece I have no expectation that you will water down your own beliefs or avoid criticizing ideas that oppose. Rather the task is to do all this in an intellectually robust fashion. Your opponents may be mistaken, but they are not stupid! Please avoid the cliché of seeming to prove them wrong by making them look stupid.

The Philosophy Talk program is a source of genuine philosophical dialogues. John Perry and Ken Taylor are quite deliberate in maintaining a distinct dialogic style. For instance, they explore different positions on an issue, and it would be tough to claim that either they or the guests are at all weak instances of the views in question.

In the Plato section of Philosopher Portraits (see "Portraits" in the Blackboard menu) study the following excerpts from dialogues by Plato: Euthyphro excerpt and Republic excerpt (see Plato in "Portraits" in the Blackboard menu. Also linked in the course schedule).



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What are "Philosophical Issues"?

Perhaps at this point you are wondering; "*But what do I write the dialogue about?*" That is an important question and makes up one of the key purposes of this activity. Learning about philosophy entails being able to identify philosophical issues, especially in everyday life.

Even this early in the term you have been exposed to several philosophical issues, a large number of philosophical ideas, and a range of philosophical thinkers. Any of these may form your springboard for discussion. Consider the Philosophical Ideas that you read about and the issues involved in them.

Perhaps the most available and productive source of philosophical issues is your own belief system. In the first week you read several Philosophical Frameworks and selected one as best associated with your own belief system. Each of those Philosophical Frameworks contains the seeds of several issues. If you have any difficulty deciding what to converse and write about, I urge you to go back to what you wrote about your own philosophical framework. Review the posts on the My Philosophy dialogue online. Issues from the existence of God, to the meaning of life, to the ethics of suicide, to the possibility of knowledge, to the character of human nature, and much more are represented there. Search! Think! Explore! I am open.