

## Preparing, Writing, and Presenting Philosophical Commentary

Kristopher Phillips, Ph.D.

What follows is some advice about how to comment on a paper at a philosophy conference. The general themes are more or less a matter of proper etiquette. I've divided the advice up into three categories. The order roughly follows the process from preparation to presentation.

Some general comments:

First, the paper is likely a work in progress. The author is thus looking for *constructive* feedback in order to make it a stronger work, with the ultimate aim of improving or publishing the paper.

Next, keep in mind that as commentator, you have tremendous power to dictate the direction of the post-presentation question and answer. If you raise a number of problems not immediately relevant to the paper, the discussion will likely focus on those issues and the author may not get much of value concerning their project.

Being a commentator is something to take seriously. You can really advance the discussion, or you can bring it to a screeching halt. You want the former, not the latter.

### Preparing:

- Read the paper you are responding to carefully. Take notes.
- If you don't understand something, talk it over with your colleagues, friends, etc. If nobody has any idea what's going on, you might reach out to the author.
  - Note: **ONLY** do this, if it a genuinely clarificatory question. If you find a claim unmotivated (or unargued), that is worth building into the commentary.
- Note the structure of the argument in the paper. You want to summarize the central argument (including the two-or-three *key* premises) very succinctly.
- Reflect on what you think the paper/argument does well.
- Reflect on where you think the paper/argument needs work.
- Re-read the paper.

### Writing:

- Keep your commentary brief.
  - If the paper is 3000 words, your commentary should not exceed 1000 at the absolute most. Try to keep it around 800.
- Begin with a *very* short summary of what you think the central argument is (include the central premises you consider of importance for your objections).
- Stay focused.
- Stay constructive—anticipate and offer possible solutions or at least directions the author might consider going in response to your objections.
- Remember that the paper is likely a work-in-progress, and not a final product. Temper your objections in light of that fact.

- It's possible that the paper has too many problems to address in such a short space. If so, focus on those problems *most central* to the project.
- If you do this right, you can develop a professional relationship and help one another well into the future.
- Be clear and precise.
- Get the commentary to the author well in advance of the conference to allow them time to think about and respond to your commentary.

**Presenting:**

- Thank the presenter for their paper.
- Keep it short. This is not *your* session. You are providing an entry point for the post-paper discussion.
- Gauge the audience's grasp of the central issues from the presentation.
  - Your commentary should contain a summary of the paper, but depending on the strengths of the presenter, you may or may not need to remind the audience of what they just heard.
  - If the presentation was clear, you might be able to skip the paper summary (they just heard it!).
  - If the presentation was difficult to follow, or did not stress what you thought was most important, it might be valuable to highlight the crucial premises.
- Be cordial.
- Leave time for audience questions.
- Step aside and allow the audience to ask their questions.
  - *ONLY* ask further questions *during* the session if there are no questions from the audience.