Excerpts from Jay Rosenberg, chs. 5 and 6 of The Practice of Philosophy*, 3rd edition. Prentice Hall, 1996*

Challenging Premises: Beyond Mere Disagreement

If an argumentation leads to an uncomfortable or unacceptable conclusion, then, it will be necessary to engage…the *content.* You will, in short, need to go after one or more of the argument's premises, that is, to challenge the truth of the philosopher's starting points.[1]

As in the case of conclusions, however, mere disagreement with a premise is not enough. Like the mere denial of a conclusion, the mere denial of a premise indicates no more than a difference of opinion. That is, it is never sufficient just to *say* that some premise is false and should be abandoned. It is always necessary to *show* that it is. But how does one do that?

… There is one primary technique—and if you properly appreciate it, you will be on the high road to grasping everything that's special about the practice of philosophy. The technique is to provide an *internal* criticism. You meet your philosophical opponent, not in the archives or in the laboratory, but on his or her home court. You try to show that the premise in question is one which that philosopher cannot *consistently* believe to be true. That is, you try to show that, in the context of other *accepted* beliefs, the philosopher's regarding that premise as true lands him or her in trouble….

The *way* in which you do this, not surprisingly, is by constructing an argument of your own—ideally, an argument whose premises are a bunch of views, theses,claims, or positions *all* of which (including, of course, the disputed premise) are *accepted* by the philosopher whose argument you are challenging, but whose conclusion is a thesis that he clearly and explicitly *rejects.*

I want to go over this business very slowly and carefully, for if you grasp it you will have overcome what is probably the major obstacle to understanding how philosophers operate. So suppose that philosopher l offers an argument that proceeds from some premises—say, A, B, and C—to a conclusion, T, which philosopher 2 believes to be mistaken:

Philosopher 1: A
(lst argument) B
C
_____
So, T

Since philosopher 2 is convinced that T is false…philosopher 2 must now challenge the argument that has been offered by philosopher l. Otherwise there is merely a disagreement, but no evident possibility of progress. That argument, let us suppose, is formally in good order. So 2 focuses on one of l's premises; she believes, say, that premise A is false. In other words, she concludes that the way philosopher 1, although reasoning validly, was nevertheless able to reach a false conclusion, namely T, was by including in his argument a false premise, namely A.

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[1] Don't read too much into Rosenberg's talk of "philosophers." He could equally well use the term 'debater' or 'critical thinker'.

On the other hand, philosopher 1, since he did take it as a premise, evidently believes that A is true. So the disagreement has now spread; it has been transferred from T to A. But the object of the game is to get beyond mere disagreement. What philosopher 2 must now do is attempt to supply 1 with some reason for giving up A. In the most straightforward case, what she does is this: Philosopher 1 will be explicitly on record as accepting, in addition to A, B, C, and T, various other theses—say D, E, and F…Philosopher 2 tries to select from the collection of additional theses that philosopher l accepts (D, E, F) a group which, when combined with A, will imply the truth of one of the theses that he rejects, such as X. In other words, she constructs an argument which proceeds from the premises D, E, …, A to the conclusion X.

Philosopher 2:
(2nd argument,
abbreviated)

D
E
·
·
·
A
So, X

And, if this argument is a good one, philosopher 1 is stuck. He must give up something. Philosopher 2, of course, promptly suggests that A is what must go, thereby undermining l's original case for T—which, you will recall, is where all this started.

But philosopher 1 has a variety of options at this point. He may, for instance, indeed give up A—but then go on to offer another argument for the disputed original thesis T. Or he may hang on to A and abandon D, E, or F instead. Or he can change his mind about X, and make appropriate modifications in his other views. And there is still another possibility…philosopher 1 may criticize the new argument that has just been offered by 2.

For, of course, things are never really as tidy as I've made them out to be. In the usual case, 2 won't have been able to construct her rebuttal argument using only premises D, E, …, A that 1 is explicitly on record as accepting. Typically, 2 will have made use of some additional, auxiliary premises—say, U, V, and W—about which 1 has so far expressed no opinions:

Philosopher 2:
(2nd argument,
abbreviated)

U
V
D
E
F
A
So, X

and philosopher 1 may decide to take issue with one of those premises. And, of course, to do that, he will need to construct yet another argument…and so it goes.

Several important points emerge from an examination of this pattern of challenge and response:

1. The original disagreement between philosophers 1 and 2 is over the truth or falsehood of some conclusion T which perhaps expresses an important and major thesis. But

> [the] requirement that criticism engage the arguments quickly causes T to drop out as a *visible* theme of the ongoing discussion. The actual battles will be fought at some remove from T—for instance, over A and E.

2. Furthermore, as the discussion develops, it rapidly emerges that the actual clash operates not simply over the isolated thesis T, but between two whole *systematic structures* of beliefs within which T or its denial is embedded. For a dispute of this sort comes to an end only when one of the disputants cannot, by appropriate challenges and adjustments, get his or her whole position—*all* the claims that he or she is committed to accepting or rejecting—to hang together coherently.

3. But the most important observation is this: The discussion always proceeds by answering argument with argument. And from the very first step, what the challenge arguments are *about* is always some aspect—the form or the content—of *another* argument.

…Beginning students in philosophy frequently complain that philosophers waste their time discussing inconsequential puzzles rather than important issues. Instead of directly facing the question "Is there an immortal soul?" they debate the question "Can I consistently imagine myself witnessing my own funeral?" Instead of taking on "What are the limits of perceptual knowledge?" they discuss "Can I tell whether I'm awake or dreaming?" Instead of offering an answer to "Are a person's acts free or determined?" philosophers consider "Does 'He could have done otherwise' imply 'He would have done otherwise if he had chosen'?" And so on.

Frustrating as all this frequently is to a beginning student, we can now see it as a consequence of the character of philosophical problems and philosophical method. For the big questions, the major theses, are sufficiently general and fundamental that they cannot be engaged directly. Indeed, it is difficult to see what engaging them directly might consist in. Rather, they must be explored carefully and gradually, through an examination of their presuppositions and their consequences. A philosophical encounter, like a military campaign, is fought on many fronts simultaneously; overall victory depends upon an extended series of tactical skirmishes and flanking maneuvers which inevitably and necessarily precede and lay the groundwork for any big push through the center. And not infrequently, when all these preparatory battles have been fought and won, the war is over…

Philosophers seem stubbornly unwilling to settle down and talk about the issues, to recognize, admit, and make use of the facts. They just keep talking about one another's arguments. From outside the discipline, this looks like nothing so much as pointless domestic bickering. But you should now be in a position to appreciate that philosophical methodology demands this technique of confronting argument with argument precisely to *avoid* pointless bickering…[T]he requirement that criticism engage the argument is exactly a response to the need for a method that is at least potentially *resolutive,* a method that can press beyond mere disagreement and apply the leverage of reasoning in a way which affords the possibility of rationally dislodging an entrenched philosophical thesis or view. The meeting of argument with argument is the essence of the matter. Unless criticism proceeded in this way, we would not yet have an activity of reason at all, but mere yea-saying and nay-saying-and that would be pointless bickering with a vengeance.

The Joys and Perils of Dialectic

The points we've most recently been examining are sufficiently important to deserve a still more extensive discussion. We have seen that even in the most straightforward sort of case, where the acceptability of some claim is at issue, the methodology of philosophy already demands an elaborate sequential structure of competing arguments. A disagreement is transferred from conclusions to premises and from premises to presuppositions, ultimately pulling in whole complex families of beliefs and commitments…Ultimately, any challenge is addressed not to this or that individual thesis but to the consistency and coherence of a whole family of beliefs in which the thesis is embedded.

What is genuinely at issue in a philosophical dispute, then, is not a particular statement or claim but rather a rich, more or less systematic *world view.* A philosophical encounter is like the collision of two icebergs. What lies beneath the surface is larger than, and gives shape and force to, what is visible above the waters. These philosophical world views have a special sort of comprehensiveness and elasticity. They shape our whole way of seeing the world…

Whatever the specific *thesis,* the ultimate aim of the enterprise remains the same: to assemble from pieces rooted in the preferred picture a consistent, coherent, articulate, and systematic whole that can stand the test of critical challenge, to build a synthesis that hangs together under analysis.

From time to time, the center shifts. A thesis is reformulated. To the beginner this looks like yet another step in an endless and inconclusive process of regeneration of arguments. But, oddly enough, it is progress. With each such reformulation, more of what is at issue comes to light, more of the iceberg emerges from the water. Often the trick is to ask the right questions. Each shift of the center gives us more good questions to ask…

The dialectical process of philosophy proceeds by meeting argument with argument. Each criticism is a probe directed at a world view from within, a challenge to its *internal* coherence and consistency, framed by one who stands himself outside it. And each response embodies the mutual adjustment of manifold beliefs, presuppositions, commitments, and convictions, an attempt to fine-tune the larger conceptual substructure which supports the visible thesis.

By now you may be despairing of ever entering into the practice of philosophy in a significant way. How can one so much as *begin* a process of argumentation which draws in these ways upon such complicated systematic philosophical world views? Well…You yourself already have at least the beginnings of such a complicated systematic philosophical world view. It's what you sometimes think of as "common sense."

Now a word of caution is immediately in order. Common sense of course includes a good bit of common nonsense as well, and one person's common sense is sometimes another's insanity. Nevertheless, there remains considerable shared territory under the banner of common sense, and this in particular is what I have in mind. Within this shared territory fall such beliefs as these: that the world contains a variety of things—objects, plants, animals, and people; that the things in the world have various properties—shapes, sizes, and colors, for example—and exhibit various behaviors—some grow and some move, for instance; that these things act on and interact with one another; that we know about many of these things and about their interactions—we have encountered some of them, seen or heard or tasted them, and figured out that there must be others we haven't met; and that we ourselves think and speak and act in this world, and that our words and actions often have consequences, some of which are desirable and some undesirable.

All these beliefs, and many others, are what I think of as "common sense." Common sense of this kind is everybody's starting place, and so it will be yours. But the fundamental rules of the philosophical enterprise still apply. The fact that some philosophical thesis runs counter to such common sense is just one of those disagreements that serves as a beginning from which the dialectical process of meeting argument with argument must then proceed. Common sense is not inviolate. It is not a final court of appeals. Even at its best, it *is* only one philosophical standpoint among the many that are possible. Indeed, *every one* of the "common-sense" beliefs that I listed above has, in fact, been challenged—and for compelling reasons—by some philosopher of the past.

And common sense has its liabilities. One typically does not have the experience of putting its contents to the test of critical scrutiny. Since the loose but interconnected set of concepts, beliefs, theories, and principles that constitute such common sense are shared operative presuppositions of our everyday life, they are not often challenged in the ordinary course of that everyday life. Indeed, part of what students often find *so* infuriating about philosophical inquiry is just the philosopher's refusal to defer to and be content with common sense. It, too, must be put to the test of argument. And again, precisely because it is *not* commonly put to that test, one typically does not know how to fully articulate, much less systematically organize, its complex implicit structure of presuppositions and conceptual connections. Nor is one entirely sure of how much confidence to place in its ultimate internal coherence.

But as a starting place, such common sense has its assets, too. For one thing, you're at home in it. You can usually recognize common sense when you hear it. For another, it has something very important going for it—it works. The conceptual scheme of common sense is generally a useful, practical framework within which to conduct our everyday lives and carry out our activities, and this surely creates at least the presumption that there is *something* right about it…

Philosophical Essays: Critical Examination of a View

The primary medium for working through a philosophical dialectic is the philosophical Essay…Philosophical essays come in a variety of *species,* each of which has its own characteristic structure. Perhaps the most basic of these, mastery of which serves as a point of entry to all the others, is the critical examination of a view.

The critical examination of a view, of course, presupposes a view to be critically examined. That is, you are confronted at the beginning with something that *itself* has fundamentally the form of a philosophical essay—a piece of writing within which some claim or thesis is advanced and considerations are offered in favor of accepting or adopting that claim. Correspondingly, a critical examination of a view may be broadly divided into two parts: the **exposition** and the **critique**. Exposition consists in setting out for study and discussion the view, position, claim, or thesis at issue together with the structure of argumentation offered in support of it. Critique is the assessment or evaluation of that view through an examination of the structure and content of the supporting reasoning. One useful way to approach the writing of such a philosophical essay, then, is with something like the following checklist of questions…

Introduction:

Does my essay have an introductory paragraph?

In my introductory paragraph, do I give a brief description of what the essay is about?

- state what I plan to accomplish in the essay?
- summarize how I plan to go about accomplishing it?

The Exposition:

When reconstructing an argument, have I clearly explained

- what conclusion the philosopher is working toward?
- what reasons, both implicit and explicit, the philosopher offers to support that conclusion?
- why and how the philosopher thinks those reasons support the conclusion?

The Critique:

When raising an objection, have I

- made it clear what aspect of the argument I object to?
- explained the reasons why I object to that aspect of the argument?
- assessed the severity of my objection?
- thought about and discussed how the philosopher might respond to my objection?
- discussed one objection thoroughly rather than many objections superficially?

General Concerns:

Throughout my paper, do I periodically tell the reader

- what I've just done?
- what remains to be done?
- what the reader should expect to happen next?
- whether what I am saying is an interpretation or a criticism?

Does my essay have a clear and articulate structure?

- Does each paragraph work to support my thesis?
- Do I have transitions between paragraphs that make it clear why one paragraph follows the one which precedes it?
- Does each sentence within a paragraph work to support or explain the topic of that paragraph?

Have I satisfactorily explained

- any important special terminology that the author employs?
- the interpretation of any passages that I quote?
- the nature and point of any examples that I offer?