6

WRITING FOR EVALUATION

The **evaluative essay** (or as it is sometimes called, the **argumentative essay**) is probably the most common essay required of philosophy students. In an evaluative essay, you are asked criticize or defend something you've read, usually an argument, theory, or essay. You are asked to make a judgment about whether the argument is a good or bad argument, whether the author is right or wrong, and whether you agree or disagree with him. However, if you just say that the author is right, that he has a good argument, and that you agree with him, all you have done is express your opinion. In an evaluative essay, your opinion must be supported by reliable evidence and strong reasoning. That is, you must provide an argument for why your interpretation of the author's argument or idea is the correct one.

Being critical of an argument does not mean being hostile to or intolerant of it. What it does mean is that you carefully consider the author's premises and conclusion and make a judgment about whether those premises are true, whether they provide relevant support for her conclusion, whether her examples and analogies are appropriate, whether she commits any fallacies, and so on. If you have not read Chapter 5, go back and do so now. You cannot write an evaluative essay without first being able to analyze the argument you are evaluating.

CHOOSING/DEVELOPING A THESIS

If your instructor allows you to choose your own topic (that is, what theory or essay you want to evaluate), think small. Trying to cover "What's wrong with Hume's theory of knowledge" in three to five pages is impossible. Of course, the longer the paper is supposed to be, the broader your thesis should be. At the introductory level, theses are generally broader than in more advanced classes. The less you know, the less you have to say about a

subject, and the more you know, the more you can say. It is, of course, possible to think *too* small. If you find that you have said everything you know in one page, you need to broaden your thesis. However, if the topic was assigned by your instructor, then the fact that you can only write one page is an indication that you aren't thinking deeply or thoroughly enough.

As we saw in Chapter 5, there are two general ways to criticize an argument. The first is to *assess the structure of the argument*—is it valid or invalid, strong or weak? Do the premises provide relevant and sufficient evidence for thinking the conclusion is true? In fact, many arguments that you read in the history of philosophy probably will not be deductively invalid or inductively weak. Thus, the second way to criticize an argument is to *criticize the content of the argument.* Are the premises true? Does the author equivocate about the meaning of his terms? Does he commit any informal fallacies? Once you have answered these questions to your own satisfaction, you need to formulate your thesis—your opinion regarding what is wrong (or right) with the argument.

THE EVALUATIVE ESSAY

The evaluative essay usually follows a particular pattern. The beginning of the essay, the introduction, should include not only a full statement of whether you agree or disagree with the author, but also a preliminary statement of your reasons for why you agree or disagree. Of course, until you analyze the argument, you won't know whether (and why) you agree or disagree. Thus, writing your introduction will be one of the last things you do.

In the body of the essay, you will need to state the author's argument precisely, completely, and in a detailed way. You need to analyze the argument, as we did in Chapter 5, by carefully identifying both the premises and the structure of the argument. Then you should critically evaluate the argument. In doing so, you need to make it clear what you object to, give your reasons for why you object, show that you have thought about how the author might respond to your objection, and consider how seriously your objection damages the argument.

Finally, in your conclusion, you should provide a brief summary and review of your argument, and perhaps give an indication of any further implications it might have. Typically, your conclusion will be fairly brief and should not be too repetitive.

EXAMPLE: WILLIAM PALEY'S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Say you have been assigned or have chosen to argue against William Paley's design argument, in which he claims to prove God's existence. First, consider the following passage from Paley:

In crossing the heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a *stone,* and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that, for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever; nor would it, perhaps, be very easy to show the absurdity of this answer. But suppose I found a *watch* upon the ground, and it should be inquired how the watch happened to be in that place, I should hardly think of the answer which I had before given—that for anything I knew, the watch might have always been there. Yet why should not this answer serve for the watch as well as for the stone? Why is it not as admissible in the second case as in the first? For this reason, and for no other, viz., that, when we come to inspect the watch, we perceive . . . that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, for example, that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day; that, if the different parts had been differently shaped from what they are, if a different size from what they are, or placed after any other manner, or in any other order than that in which they are placed, either no motion would have been carried on in the machine, or none which would have answered the use that is now served by it. . . . This mechanism being observed . . . the inference, we think, is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some place or other, an artificer or artificers [creators] who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.

I. Nor would it, I apprehend, weaken the conclusion that we had never seen a watch made; that we had never known an artist capable of making one; that we were altogether incapable of executing such a workmanship ourselves, or of understanding in what manner it was performed. . . . Ignorance of this kind exalts our opinion of the unseen and unknown artist's skill, if he be unseen and unknown, but raises no doubt in our minds of the existence and agency of such an artist, at some former time, and in some place or other. . . .

II. Neither, secondly, would it invalidate our conclusion, that the watch sometimes went wrong, or that it seldom went exactly right. . . . It is not necessary that a machine be perfect in order to show with what design it was made. . . .

III. Nor, thirdly, would it bring any uncertainty into the argument if there were a few parts of the watch concerning which we could not discover, or had not yet discovered, in what manner they conduced to the general effect; or even some parts concerning which we could not ascertain whether they conducted to that effect in any manner whatever. . . .

VII. And [a person would be] not less surprised to be informed, that the watch in his hand was nothing more than the result of the laws of *metallic* nature. It is a perversion of language to assign any law as the efficient, operative cause of anything. A law presupposes as an agent, for it is only the mode according to which an agent proceeds; it implies

a power; for it is the order according to which that power acts. Without this agent, without this power, which are both distinct from itself the *law* does nothing, is nothing. . . .

Every indication of contrivance, every manifestation of design, which existed in the watch, exists in the works of nature; with the difference, on the side of nature, of being greater and more, and that in a degree which exceeds all computation. . . .[1]

Summarize Paley's Argument

An ideal way to start your evaluative essay on Paley's design argument would be to write a brief summary (see Chapter 3) of his argument. Notice that in the summary below, I also provide examples and specifics to make the various points clear.

According to Paley, if I found a watch while I was out walking, I wouldn't think that it, like a stone, had just been there forever. Because the watch is very complex and clearly has a purpose (telling time), it is obvious that it had a designer, a creator, someone who made it. Even if I had never seen a watch made, or known a watchmaker, or could make a watch myself, I would still know that someone made it. Also, just because the watch is broken doesn't mean no one designed it. The fact that it doesn't fulfill its intended purpose means that it *has* an intended purpose. If there are parts of the watch that I don't understand, or that don't seem to do anything (like a person's appendix?), that just makes me respect the designer more. If someone told me that the watch was the way it was because of the coming together of the "laws of metallic nature" I'd think they were nuts. Thus, it seems clear that the watch must have had a designer, who designed it to tell time, and a creator, who put all the pieces together so that they do tell time. Now, Paley says, consider the universe. Everything about the complexity and the purpose of the watch is even more true about the universe. By analogy then, if the watch must have had a designer/creator, then so must the universe.

Analyze the Argument

The next thing you need to do is analyze that argument, as you learned to do in Chapter 5. First, outline Paley's premises and conclusions:

Part One:

(P1): A watch is a complex object which contains wheels and glass and hands, all of which have been put together so that they work together to tell time.

[1]William Paley, *Natural Theology* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1838), pp. 211–16.

(P2): This is not the kind of thing that could happen by chance or by accident.

(C): Thus, we think the watch must have had a designer/maker.

Part Two:

(P1): But look at how complex the universe is—or even any small part of the universe.

(P2): By analogy, if a watch must have had a maker, then something even more complex (like the universe) must also have had a maker.

(C): Thus, the universe must have had a maker—God.

This is the main structure of Paley's argument. I left out some of his points (numbered I–VII in his essay) because they are actually replies to objections rather than premises in the main argument. Notice that Paley's argument takes the form of what is called an "argument from analogy." He is saying: Object A (the watch) has qualities x, y, and z. Object B (the universe) also has qualities x, y, and z. Since object B is very like object A, and since object A has quality w (having a designer), then object B probably does too. This is the general form of any analogy. The claim is that since the two objects are similar in a number of ways, they are probably also similar in the one important way. Notice that an argument from analogy is an *inductive argument.* That is, it only proves that object B *probably* also has quality w.

Describe Your Position

The next step is to write a description of your own position, summarizing your own argument briefly. For example:

> I intend to argue that Paley's argument does not work, because although it provides an explanation for where the universe came from, it is ultimately unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.

Once you have analyzed the argument, you will have discovered any weak points—false or doubtful premises, informal fallacies, premises that don't support the conclusion, and so on. Now is the time to do some hard thinking about how successful you find the argument. Does it work? Are there problems? Has the author claimed to prove more than he has proved? What do you agree or disagree with and why? Must his conclusion be rejected completely or can his premises provide support for a different, perhaps more restricted, conclusion?

There are several things to keep in mind as you prepare your evaluation. A bad argument for a conclusion does not prove that the conclusion is false. All it proves is that it's a bad argument—that is, that *these* premises do not provide good evidence for the conclusion. So be sure you don't conclude that since Paley's argument doesn't work, that proves that God doesn't exist.

Keep in mind also that your instructor is not as interested in *what* you think about Paley's argument, but in the reasons and arguments that you provide for *why* you think it. Now flesh out your earlier statement of your position:

> I think Paley is wrong that his design argument proves that God exists. In the first place, a watch isn't very much like the universe. There are no laws of "metallic nature" that could explain it. However, there are laws of physics, chemistry, and evolution that can explain how the universe came to be the way it is. My second objection is that many objects (like watches) have more than one maker or designer—doesn't this imply that there might be more than one God? Also, once the designer or creator makes a watch, he goes on to something else, and doesn't pay attention to it any more. So God might not care about us, or might not still be involved with us (by causing miracles, etc.). In addition, a watchmaker is not all-powerful or all-knowing, so that may show that God isn't either. Finally, even if God (or gods) explain why the universe is the way it is, it still leaves us with something unexplained—who designed/created God? God must have had a creator (call him God2). But then God2 must have had a creator also—God3, etc. Does this actually solve anything?

Outline Your Essay

Now, put everything together into an outline. An outline provides structure for your essay, helping you to organize your thoughts and to spot any weak points in your argument. It also insures that you don't get side-tracked from the main issue. The outline can help you recognize problems with the structure of your argument, as well as any possible weak points. When you begin with an outline, you establish control over your essay. Of course, it is entirely possible that as you write you will begin to deviate from the original outline. This is perfectly natural and sometimes useful. I began each chapter of this book with a *very* rough outline, but very few chapters ended up exactly following the outline. Your outline isn't written in stone. It is not supposed to restrict and confine you in any way. It is simply a tool to make your writing easier and to improve the final product. It insures that when you begin writing, you already have a clear idea of where you want to go. Here is a sample outline for an argument written in response to the Paley essay:

I. Introduction:
   A. Paley's argument from design is inadequate to prove the existence of God.
   B. While it may explain where the universe came from, it is ultimately unsatisfactory for a number of reasons.
II. Paley's argument:
   A. Part one:
      1. A watch is a complex object which contains wheels and glass and hands, all of which have been put together so that they work together to tell time.

2. This is not the kind of thing that could happen by chance or by accident.
3. Thus, we think the watch must have had a designer/maker.

B. Part two:
1. But look at how complex the universe is—or even any small part of the universe.
2. By analogy, if a watch must have had a maker, then something even more complex (like the universe) must also have had a maker.
3. Thus, the universe must have had a maker—God.

C. Paley's best responses to objections:
1. Never seen a watch made or known a watchmaker or know how to make a watch ourselves.
2. Watch sometimes doesn't work right.
3. Some parts of the watch that I don't understand how or whether they help it keep time.
4. The laws of metallic nature just came together in such a way to produce the watch.

III. Critique of Paley's argument:

A. Paley's design argument relies on an analogy between a watch and the universe (or some specific part of the universe). This is not a good analogy because while a watch cannot be explained by "laws of metallic nature," the universe can be explained by laws of physics, chemistry, evolution, etc.

B. Even if his analogy worked, it still wouldn't prove what he claims it does.
1. If Paley's argument works, all it shows is that someone created the world—it doesn't show that the creator is God: all-knowing, all-powerful, etc.
2. Many (most) complex things have one or more people who have designed them (like the architects who design a house) as well as one or more people who have created them (like the carpenters, etc., who build the house). The more complex something is, the more likely it is that it has had more than one designer/creator. This implies that there are probably many designers/creators of the universe.
3. Even if Paley's argument works, it doesn't explain where God came from. If the universe is complex and has a purpose, then God must be at least as complex as the universe (or probably more—think how much more complex the watchmaker is than the watch), so someone must have designed/created him, too.

V. How Paley might reply:

The only response that I can see that Paley can make is to weaken his argument so that he only claims to prove that someone (or ones) designed/created the universe; that he or they may not be all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, etc.; that maybe he or they created the laws of physics, etc.; and that he or they are somehow "self-creating" (but that would require an argument to prove and he doesn't offer one).

V. Conclusion
Paley's argument can *at most* show that something designed/created the universe, but it not only can't show that that "something" is *one* God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing and who cares about us and causes miracles, but it also doesn't really solve the problem of creation—it only pushes it back one more level. If Paley's argument works, then we no longer have to ask where the universe came from and why it is the way it is, but we do have to ask where God (or gods) came from and why he (they) is the way that he (they) is. Since this is obviously *not* what Paley thinks he proves, his argument is ultimately unsatisfying and unsound.

Notice that I wrote this outline with complete sentences (mostly) and I made it as comprehensive as possible. The outline runs to several pages all by itself. Writing an essay from it should prove relatively easy. I've already made most of my points in the outline. To write the essay, all I have to do is put these ideas into coherent sentences and paragraphs with the appropriate connecting words and thoughts. In fact, most of the hard work has been done by the time I finish the outline.

Write the Essay

Just because I wrote a very complete and comprehensive outline doesn't mean that I won't change my mind as I begin to write the paper. I have to flesh out my ideas and objections to the argument, and as I do so, I may realize that some of my points aren't as strong as I thought, that I have misinterpreted something Paley said or that there is a more sympathetic way to interpret what he said, or that there are other, better objections to his argument than the ones I initially came up with. Your outline is not sacred—change it at will. Just be sure that you wind up with an organized essay. If you change your outline, then when you finish writing your essay, re-outline it to be sure that the structure is still clear. If the essay wanders off on tangents, re-outlining will help you recognize the problems.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Don't forget the principle of charity mentioned in Chapter 2. The author found his argument particularly compelling—or else he wouldn't have written it. Put yourself into his shoes and try to figure out why a rational, well-meaning person would accept the premises and conclusion. Your evaluation should be appropriate and fair, your tone should be respectful throughout the essay, and you should avoid committing fallacies or using emotive language. Despite the fact that you disagree with the author's conclusion and/or his argument, you should not be intolerant, abusive, or malicious in your criticism.

Evaluating someone else's argument is good practice before you try to create your own arguments, which we will discuss in the next chapter. In discovering and criticizing common mistakes, you can give yourself a jump start on avoiding them in your own writing. It is much easier to criticize someone else's argument than it is to come up with a new and original argument of your own. As you may already have discovered in your philosophical reading, much of the history of philosophy consists of one philosopher discussing and evaluating the arguments of an earlier philosopher. Any philosophical idea, argument, or theory is fair game. A theory worth holding is a theory worth criticizing. If it can't stand up to critical evaluation, then it isn't worth believing in the first place.

SAMPLE ESSAY

This essay was written by a junior mathematics major in an upper-division course on "Ethics and Feminism." It is not perfect, of course. Notice for example, the extensive use of quotations. While this use *may* be excessive, the student may have quoted the original essay so thoroughly in order to prove that the author of the essay really said what she is accusing him of saying. This essay might also have been improved by an introductory paragraph explaining what the student intended to say about the essay she is criticizing. Her thesis statement is never fully articulated until the last line of her essay. However, she does a reasonably good job of analyzing and evaluating the original essay and there is some subtle use of irony.

Sex and Sports

In his essay "Sex and Sports,"[2] George Gilder states that athletics for men "is an ideal of purity and truth" (231) and that the presence of women destroys the illusion of the ideal. According to Gilder, sports "embody for men a moral universe" (230). Team sports teach men to cooperate and to learn the importance of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and toughness in "pursuing a noble ideal" (230). Male competitions are "gravely compromised" (232) by participation by women, for women reduce the game from a "religious male rite" (232) to mere physical exercise. He goes on to say that sports are perhaps the single most important rite in male socialization.

Gilder "supports" his argument by claiming that no matter how hard a woman athlete trains, or how good she might be, she will never be more than a "somewhat distorted and inferior reflection" (231) of her male counterpart. A woman succeeds in "male" sports despite her physique, but her

[2]George Gilder, "Sex and Sports," in *Sexual Suicide* (New York: Bantam, 1973).

performance is "flawed" because it is not a "natural and beautiful fulfillment" of her body (231). Female participation in sports is, according to Gilder, an exhibition of "physical repression and distortion" (231). This "feminist threat" weakens and destroys the "ritual nature . . . moral purpose . . . [and] symbolic aspirations" (232) of sports, especially for boys.

Gilder's largest worry seems to be that female participation in sports somehow destroys the lessons of "group morality" that boys learn from them. Gilder obviously does not believe in what one could call the "basic equality" of the sexes. What is important for the social growth of a boy should, in turn, be important for the social growth of a girl. Gilder says that boys need to learn cooperation, the importance of loyalty and self-sacrifice, and the "indispensable sensation of competition in solidarity" (230). However, apparently it is not important that girls learn these things too.

Paradoxically, what seems rather evident from his essay, is that Gilder's real complaint lies in the fact that he feels girls somehow subvert the masculinity of boys when playing games with them. He states that a certain female Olympic runner can run "almost as fast as a male adolescent" (231), yet when junior high girls play against their male peers it is "disastrous" for some of the boys—those same adolescents to whom he compared Bragina, the "Olympic Marvel" (231). However, it is not only young boys who risk the chance of being out-done by a woman. Gilder feels that when men compete with women, they always keep something in reserve so that they can "rationalize" their defeat. If a man is necessarily superior to a woman in sports (which is what Gilder would have one believe) there should be no reason for rationalization of defeat—because there should be no defeat.

Gilder advocates a "separate but equal" status for female athletes. As long as she retains the grace, agility, and beauty of her body—that "perfection of sensuous form and movement" (235)—then that sport is an acceptable one. Gilder's claim is that women should and can never compete on an equal basis with men. A woman can bring grace and style to "recreational sports," and even, perhaps, be "better" than her male counterpart, aesthetically. But this should take place only outside of "serious competition" where the activities seem "unfeminine" when carried to the "extremes of international competition" (235). Gilder seems to want to exclude women from public attention for no better reason than that he feels such prominence in athletics is "unfeminine" and not aesthetically pleasing. He appears to drop his argument about "group morality," which clearly would not apply in this case, and has decided to appeal to women's vanity. One wouldn't want to be pointed out as a distortion or a deformation—surely every woman has more pride than that.

These premises are questionable at best; when one reads more closely, it seems clear that Gilder wants to exclude women from male-dominated sports just because they are women, and perhaps because they might surpass male achievement. When women distort sports thus, he claims that there is some "treacherous danger of psychic damage" (232). Apparently those delicate male psyches are not a hindrance to their superior performances—that

is, as long as there are no women present. For women "destroy the illusion of the ideal" (232)—the ideal that men are naturally physically superior, and, if one listens to Gilder, somehow morally superior. He seems to feel, however, that men won't achieve that moral superiority if, at age 15, they are forced to play baseball with their female peers.

One would have to question that statement. There are, presumably, two explanations—neither of which is acceptable to all. Either women already possess that superior morality and thus it is unnecessary for them to learn it through sports, or else women don't need to learn that morality; for whatever reason, it is not important that women learn cooperation, loyalty, etc. Gilder would certainly disagree with the former, and many would disagree with the latter. If this socialization is so important for young boys—assuming that boys are at least morally equal and not inferior to girls—then it follows that perhaps this "male socialization" should be extended to women.

Even if one accepts his conclusion that the presence of girls in sports during the formative years is detrimental to the boys, one would still have to question his statement that women should not be in "serious competition." Or could it be that if an adult woman is competing against one of her contemporaries, she will still damage his fragile male psyche? If his all-male athletic experience in his youth had nurtured his psychic well-being as Gilder claims, then the presence of a woman in competition with him at that late date would be nothing more than an irritant. Gilder says that if we allow this old form of male socialization to continue, boys will develop to their fullest potential, which naturally makes them athletically superior to girls. Yet, once again, Gilder has contradicted himself. It brings one back to the tennis player who kept a little in reserve so that he could rationalize his defeat by his girlfriend. This inconsistency in Gilder's argument occurs again and again so that one wonders how Gilder rationalizes these discrepancies.

To accept Gilder's conclusion—which is essentially that women should stay out of male-dominated sports—one would have to accept his premises, which seem shaky at best. Women are not the physical equals of men and thus cannot play games as well, and therefore shouldn't play at all; yet, at the same time, women shouldn't play games because there is a reasonably good chance that they will win and thus damage fragile male egos. One wonders how Gilder reconciles this fragile, easily damaged psyche with the natural superiority, both physical and moral, that he attributes to men. The inconsistencies in his argument force one to conclude that, although some of his premises may in fact be correct, but not proven, his premises do not support his conclusion, and thus his argument is invalid, and can, essentially, be disregarded.