



Philosophical Essay Writing

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Philosophical Essays

- A good philosophy essay provides a defense of a philosophical claim that
 - (1) **answers the set question**
 - (2) is **well-reasoned**
 - (3) is **clear**
 - (4) is **honest and charitable**
- Appropriate level of ambition: a small but appreciable contribution to the issue

(1) ANSWER THE QUESTION

(1) Answer the question

- Make sure that you **read the question slowly and carefully**
- A great essay that is off-topic won't get great marks
- If a question has **multiple parts**, don't miss any of them out!
- Pay careful attention to the **choice of words and phrases** used

Should Pascal's Wager convince us to take steps towards believing in God?

✗ Should Pascal's Wager convince us to *believe* in God?

Outline and discuss what you take to be the most serious challenge to reliabilist accounts of justification.

✗ Outline and discuss what you take to be the most serious challenge to reliabilist accounts of *knowledge*.

(1) Answer the question (ctd)

- Pay attention to **focus**: Merely mentioning a philosophical issue, theory or puzzle isn't an invitation to write *everything* you know about the topic

What grounds, if any, are there for claiming that knowledge is more valuable than mere justified true belief?

- ✗ Why knowledge is more valuable than unjustified true belief
- ✓ The implicit assumption that knowledge is more than justified true belief

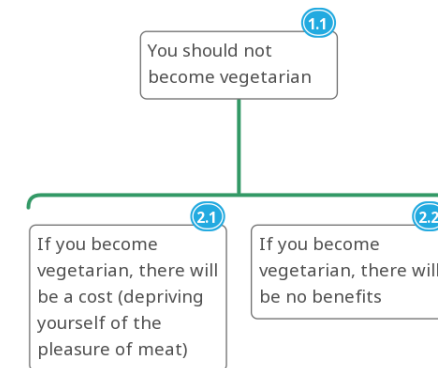
What is the ``generality'' problem for reliabilism? How might the reliabilist respond?

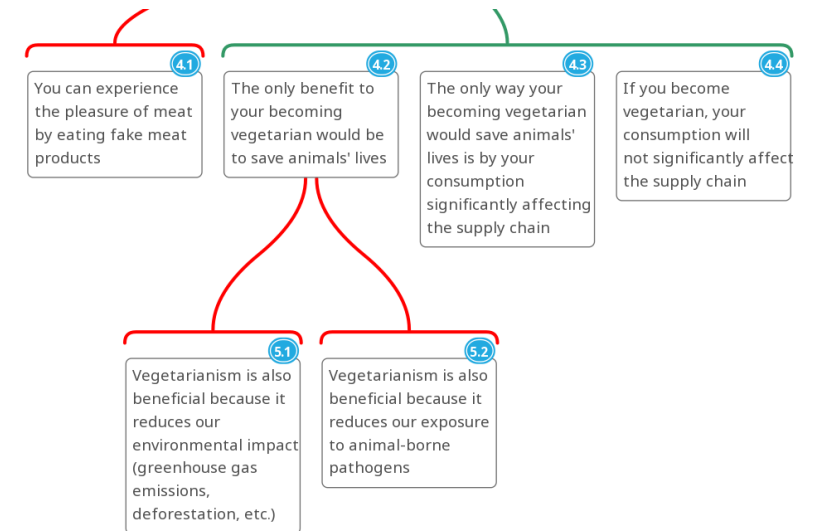
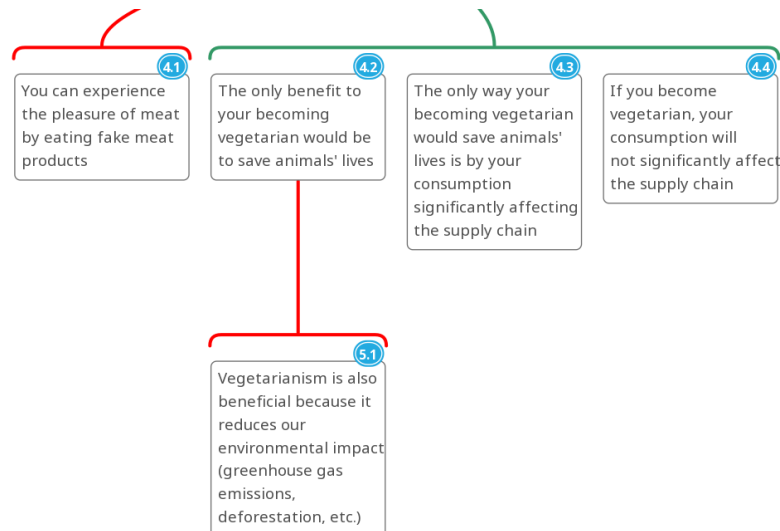
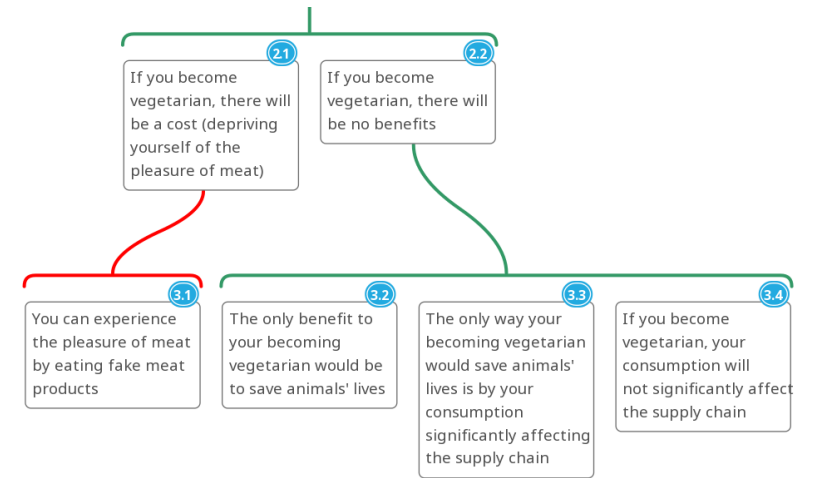
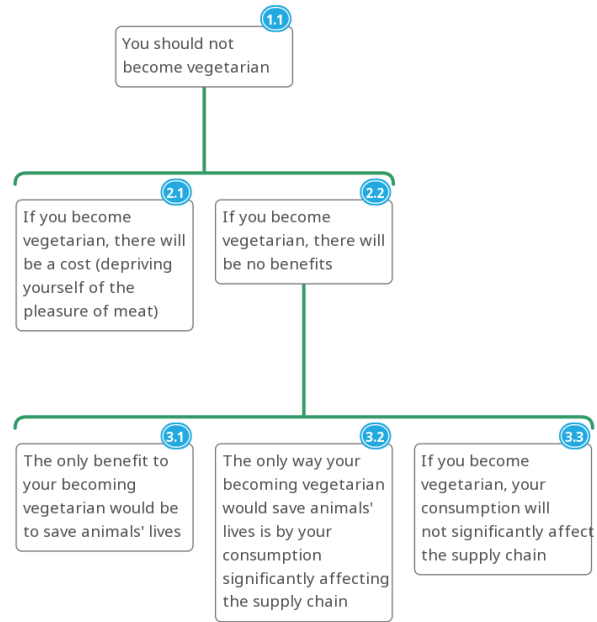
- ✗ The “accidental reliability” problem for reliabilism
- ✓ The motivations for reliabilism (how it handles Gettier)

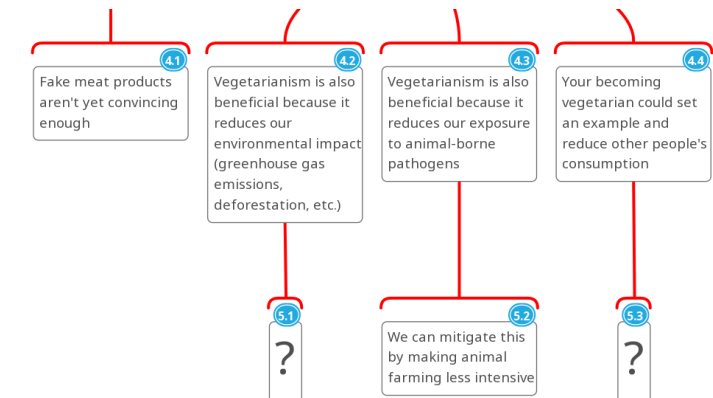
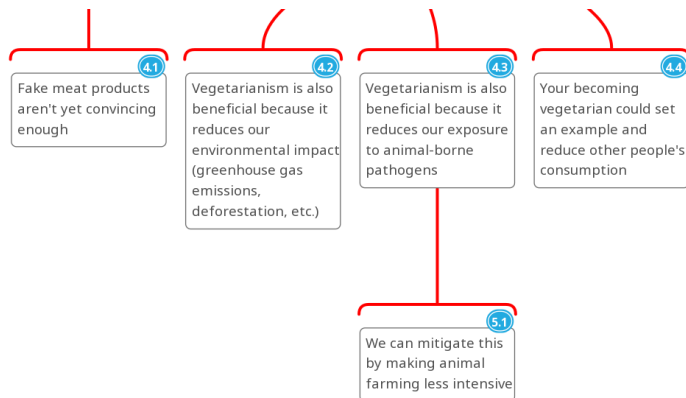
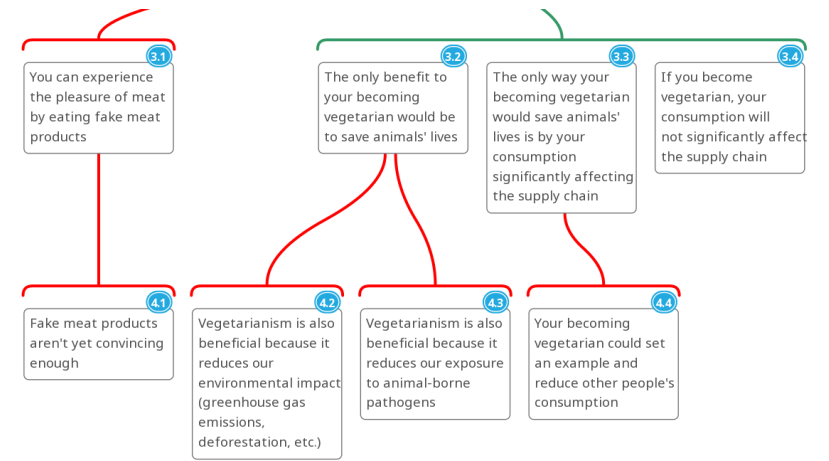
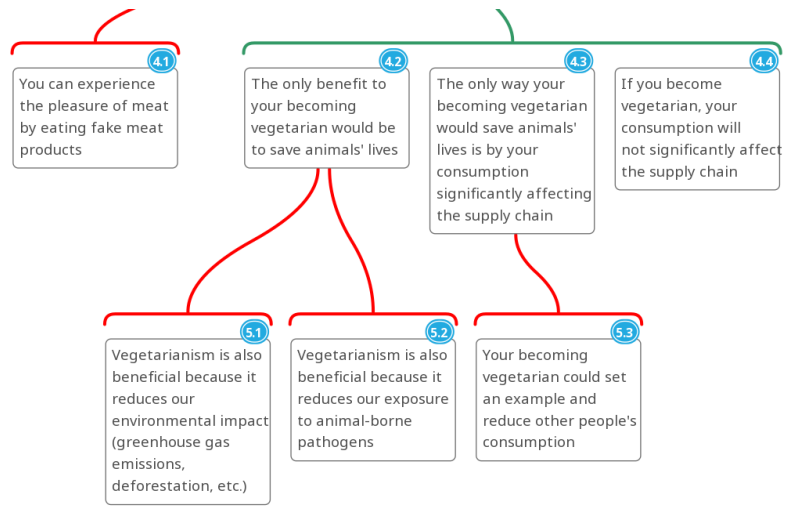
(2) REASON WELL

(2) Reason well

- You want to convince any reasonable reader
- They won't be onboard if you make objectionable claims
- If a claim you make could *reasonably be taken to be* contentious:
 - Provide sensible reasons to endorse it
 - Counter any obvious reasons there may be to reject it
- Some claims that obviously fall in this category
 - Your target claim (or else, why write about it?)
 - Any claim that is actually challenged in the literature (so if you find yourself saying “I disagree”, then you have to back this up)
- If you can't do this, you have a problem



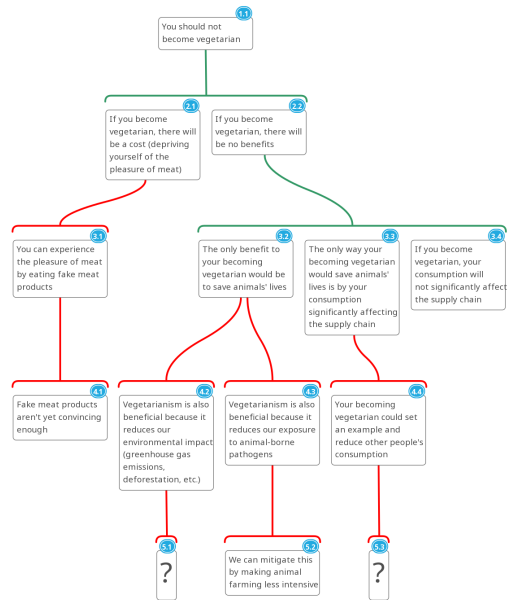




Note: Argument diagramming

- If you find the idea of argument diagramming helpful, try:

<https://www.mindmup.com/tutorials/argument-visualization.html?orig=/>



(3) Be clear

- So you have a solid argument supporting your target claim; now you want to communicate it effectively
- Pryor suggests: assume **your reader is lazy, stupid and mean**
- Key points
 - Signpost your argument structure
 - Watch your language
 - Provide examples (where appropriate)

(3) BE CLEAR

Signpost your argument structure

- Always proceed from a **detailed plan**
- Never include *any* distracting **irrelevant material**
- Make use of **sections** (and possibly subsections)
 - ✓ 1. Introduction
 - 2. Intellectualism
 - 3. Ryle's regress
 - 4. The ability hypothesis
 - 5. Objections to Ryle's regress
 - 6. Problems for the ability hypothesis
 - 7. Concluding comments

Signpost your argument structure (ctd)

- Make use of **paragraphs** within sections: one idea, one paragraph
- Within paragraphs, make generous use of **discourse markers**:
 - Premise: Because, Due to the fact that, Since,...
 - Conclusion: So, As a result, Therefore, Thus, Consequently, Hence,...
 - Enumeration: First / Firstly, Second / Secondly,..., Next, Last, Finally, In addition, Moreover, Further, Furthermore, In addition, Additionally,...
 - Contrast: However, Nevertheless, Nonetheless, Still, Although, Yet, Despite, in spite of, While, Whereas, On the other hand,...
 - Etc.

Signpost your argument structure (ctd)

- At various key points (e.g. at the beginning or end of a section), **summarise** what you are about to do or what has been achieved
 - ✓ I will begin by situating the problem in its historical context, before reviewing three classical responses, each of which will be found to either beg the question or rely on dubious premises.
 - ✓ Having shown that James hasn't provided a sufficient reason to believe that his main claim is true, I will now demonstrate that, although van Cleeve's objection to James ultimately fails, it can be modified so as to yield a successful counter.

Signpost your argument structure (ctd)

- If you can, present arguments in **standard form**, making **all premises explicit**
 - ✗ Do you think your local butcher will reduce the amount of meat she orders from the slaughterhouse if you become a vegetarian? Of course not! By becoming a vegetarian, you'll never save a single animal's life! And by becoming a vegetarian you'll deprive yourself of the pleasure of eating meat. You shouldn't become a vegetarian.

Signpost your argument structure (ctd)

- ✓ (1) The only benefit to your becoming vegetarian would be to save animals' lives
 - (2) The only way your becoming vegetarian would save animals' lives is by your consumption significantly affecting the supply chain
 - (3) If you become vegetarian, your consumption will not significantly affect the supply chain
 - (4) If you become vegetarian, there will be no benefits (from (1)--(3))
 - (5) If you become vegetarian, there will be a cost (depriving yourself of the pleasure of meat)
-
- (6) Therefore, you shouldn't become vegetarian (from (4) and (5))

Watch your language

- Be **careful and consistent** in your choice of words: Philosophers are very sensitive to small differences in meaning!
- Be **concise and to-the-point**: You don't want to tire your reader!
- Use **short and grammatically correct** sentences: Again, long sentences are hard to process, as is poor grammar!

Watch your language

- Avoid unnecessary jargon and try to stick to **plain English**: Don't intimidate or alienate your reader! (Pryor: "If you wouldn't say it [in conversation], don't write it.")
 - ✗ The ``invisible God'' is not to be understood as God invisible to the senses, but as God non-thematizable in thought and nonetheless as non-indifferent to the thought which is not thematization...
 - ✗ For ethnology to live, its object must die. But the latter revenges itself by dying for having been ``discovered'', and defies by its death the science that wants to take hold of it. Doesn't every science live on this paradoxical slope to which it is doomed by the evanescence of its object in the very process of its apprehension, and by the pitiless reversal this dead object exerts on it?

Watch your language (ctd)

- Provide **definitions** of any technical terms or ordinary terms that are being used in a non-standard way:
 - ✓ The basic idea of supervenience is that a property, A, supervenes on another property, B, if there cannot be a difference in A without a difference in B.
 - ✓ By a ``possible world'', we do not literally mean to refer to a concrete world that is possible; rather we are referring to a way that the world could have been

Provide examples (where appropriate)

- Many technical definitions and philosophical claims are complex:
Make ample use of examples to illustrate them

- ✓ For example, if the aesthetic properties of a work of art supervene on its physical properties, there cannot be a change in its aesthetic properties unless there is a change in its physical properties.
- ✓ Rawls and Harsanyi both agree that a distribution is just iff it would have been chosen by an agent behind the veil of ignorance. But for Rawls, the right rule to use here is Maximin, while for Harsanyi, it is the Principle of Indifference. So for example, Rawls would take a distribution of 10 units of wealth to each of 100 individuals to be preferable to that of 15 units of wealth to 90 individuals and 9 units to each of the remainder. For Harsanyi, that order would be reversed.

(4) BE HONEST AND CHARITABLE

(4) Be honest and charitable

- Present the views of others as **accurately** and **charitably** as possible
 - Ambiguous or unclear? Consider a few different reasonable interpretations
 - Obvious missing premise? Provide it for them
- Why so?
 - (1) it is **courteous**
 - (2) it **maximises impact**, ensuring your discussion is as effective as it could be
- **Don't plagiarise** (pass off other people's ideas as your own)

WORKFLOW

Workflow

- **Understand** exactly what is asked of you
- **Survey** the reading and try to identify and map out all (and only) the lines of argument bearing on the question
- **Scrutinise** *all* the claims you find in these lines of argument and **add** any further decent lines of support or attack you can think of
- **Weigh up** the resulting evidence and assess which answer to the question is supported by the considerations considered
- **Organise** into an essay plan the various chains of reasoning that lead to this answer
- **Write up** the plan into a 1st draft, including introduction and conclusion, that would enable a reader to follow the reasoning

Last but not least...

- **Revise** your 1st draft!!
 - Give yourself a few days of distance to view things afresh
 - Read it out loud (seriously!)
 - Run it through a spelling and grammar checker