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# BUT HOW DO I PARTICIPATE?

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## A SAMPLING OF WAYS TO CONTRIBUTE TO A PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSATION

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Before you begin to participate in an activity, it's reasonable to want to know what it involves. So: philosophical conversation. What is it? That's a surprisingly difficult question. We could try to define it in terms of institutional settings: a philosophical conversation is what happens in the philosophy classroom or in office hours. But that won't do. For one thing, those tedious discussions in which we cover things like exam scheduling aren't philosophical. And for another, you almost certainly had many philosophical conversations before you ever enrolled in a philosophy course. Trying to define philosophical conversation in terms of subject matter is equally frustrating. The subject matter of philosophy is highly diverse. We can't just say that philosophical discussions are concerned with the "big" or "deep" questions. "What are holes?" is a certified philosophical question (you can read all about it [here](#) if you like), but in the grand scheme of things it's a medium-sized question at best. In moments of frustration, we might be tempted by the thought that a philosophical conversation is just one that is concerned with an "unanswerable" question. However, that seems both overly inclusive (I bet you can think of an unanswerable question that isn't a good candidate for the label "philosophical") and unduly pessimistic.

A more promising proposal is that what makes a conversation philosophical is not (or at least, not just) settings or subject matter, but also what methods the participants are using. At the very broadest level, we could safely say that philosophical conversation is conversation where we proceed by developing and exchanging reasoned arguments for claims. But isn't that characterization so abstract as to be practically useless? When I first started participating in philosophical conversations, I knew that giving arguments had something to do with it, but I still wasn't sure exactly what kinds of things might count as a useful conversational contribution.

Skill in philosophical conversation can only be acquired through practice. You can't learn how to participate well in philosophical conversations without *actually* participating, any more than you can become a skilled violinist without once setting bow to strings. And I'm still developing my own skills in philosophical conversation. But I can give you a head start with this list of ways to contribute to a philosophical conversation. Try these moves. I think you will find that experimenting with them helps you to come to grips with what philosophical conversation actually is. And if you think of new moves to add to the list, please let me know.

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## 20 (+1) WAYS TO CONTRIBUTE TO A PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSATION

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### 1. *Restate (someone else's) claim.*

When faced with a philosophical claim, it can be helpful for your own understanding, and for the understanding of everyone involved in the discussion, to try and restate that claim in your own words. Importantly, restating is not the same thing as what we might call "thesaurizing," where we mechanically trade in each word for another that seems to mean the same thing. Think of restating as grasping the thought the author or speaker is trying to communicate, then expressing the thought in a way that will make it clearer to others who didn't get it the first time around.

2. *Restate (your own) claim.*

Sometimes, it takes multiple tries to make oneself understood; the fact that others do not immediately get what you are trying to say doesn't mean you should give up. And sometimes, restating your own claim helps *you* to understand exactly what it was that you meant.

3. *Reconstruct an argument.*

This option is the more complex cousin of (1). When faced with a difficult or complex argument, try to reformulate it in your own words. Re-presenting an argument in Premise-Conclusion Form can be especially helpful. For especially complex arguments, drawing a diagram is sometimes a good way to move forward as well. Sometimes an argument reconstruction can be the work of a single comment; often, though, argument reconstruction is a more drawn-out exercise that requires collaboration.

4. *Offer a new reason to accept someone else's claim.*

There may be more than one reason to accept some claim, including ones that the author of the claim may not have thought of. Bringing an additional supporting reason to light is almost always a very valuable move.

5. *Offer an objection.*

Objections play a very important role in philosophical conversation. They provide opportunities for clarifying and revising claims. One way of offering an objection is to give a case for which the author's/other participant's claim seems to yield a problematic verdict. Another is to highlight a logical error in the argument for a claim. When lodging an objection, it is important to be charitable. Try to be sure the objection is to the actual claim at issue, not to some less plausible cousin of that claim.

6. *Offer a response to an objection.*

Anyone can make this move, not just the person who made the objected-to claim in the first place. In fact, it can be especially useful to follow up an objection you are making with a possible response to that objection.

7. *Recap the dialectic.*

It is not always easy to track where one *\*is\** in a philosophical conversation. Attempts to summarize the state of play in a philosophical conversation can be helpful. What question are we focusing on? How do the most recent contributions relate to each other? One thing to highlight when recapping is the respects in which recently made claims are similar or different. Are people agreeing, and if so, about what? But you might also highlight more complex relations between different claims, or highlight moves that didn't involve making new claims. To aid in recapping, you may wish to jot down notes about who is saying what.

8. *Invite contributions from others.*

An often overlooked but important way of moving a philosophical inquiry forward. You can vary the scope of your invitation. Would it be most useful to get an illustrative example from someone? Or to hear what objections they have to your claim? Or to learn what question they most want to discuss next?

9. *Direct attention to relevant textual resources.*

Pointing to text passages relevant to the question at hand can help to focus discussion.

**10. Ask a clarificatory question (of the other participants).**

Not sure what an instructor/classmate meant when they made some claim/asked some question/used some term? You can ask for clarification! It can be helpful to frame this kind of question in terms of possible interpretive options: e.g. "I think you may have had either  $x$  or  $y$  in mind, but I'm not sure which."

**11. Ask a clarificatory question (of the text/author).**

Same as (7) above, except that you are extending an invitation to the other participants in the discussion to try out answers on behalf of the text/author. Again, it can be helpful to frame this kind of question in terms of possible interpretive options.

**12. Ask for a definition.**

You may encounter unfamiliar words, or familiar words being used in unfamiliar ways, or multiple participants using the same word in different ways. Don't hesitate to ask about it!

**13. Offer a case.**

It can be useful to identify specific cases against which the adequacy of an author's claims can be tested. Cases can be imagined or real, and they can be offered in (at least) three different spirits: (1) to challenge a claim ("you say  $p$ , but here's a case  $c$  where  $p$  seems not to be true") (2) to support a claim ("you say  $p$ , which does a really nice job of handling case  $c$ ") (3) to help learn more about a claim and/or the case ("you say  $p$ , I want to know what  $p$  would tell us about  $c$ ").

**14. Identify a further implication.**

Highlighting the ramifications of another's claim can be an effective way to advance a philosophical conversation: perhaps your classmate's insight can be effectively applied to another domain or can help to resolve an additional interpretive puzzle.

**15. Identify an assumption.**

Identifying a claim that seems to be hiding behind another claim or argument is often a move we make as part of assembling an objection ("You seem to be taking  $a$  for granted in arguing that  $b$ , but I'm not convinced that  $a$  is true, so  $b$  looks shaky to me"). But identifying an assumption can be useful even if we don't have a particular objection in mind.

**16. Make a distinction.**

Sometimes, we run together two concepts or claims that should actually be held apart and considered separately. If you think that is happening, flag it! And even if the discussion hasn't yet run roughshod over an important distinction, getting clear about what some claim or concept is *not* can help to firm up our grip on what it is.

**17. Identify a spurious "distinction" for what it is.**

Philosophers *love* making distinctions, so this is a much less common move, but sometimes it is the right one. Do you suspect that two apparently different arguments or claims are really just one and the same, dressed up in different vocabulary? Flag it!

**18. Ask about the big picture.**

What's the basic issue this text or this discussion is tackling? Why does this issue matter? These are critically important questions, and they point to an area where assumptions often lurk. Does everybody seem to assume that  $q$  is a really important question, but you don't get why? Are you not sure why the author has chosen to frame the issue under examination in the way that they have? Time to ask about the big picture!

**19. Relate the details to the big picture.**

Linked to (18) above. How does the success or failure of some particular part of the argument you've been considering bear on the big picture? Asking and answering this question is necessary for sorting out what is most worthy of your attention.

**20. Put one text or claim into conversation with another.**

It can be useful to link the claim(s) you are considering to other claim(s) you have encountered earlier, whether in different texts/discussions or in the very same text/conversation. You can ask what kind of relation they stand in to each other: do they support each other? If so, what is the nature of the support? Do they contradict each other, or at least sit in some tension with each other? Are they perhaps the *same* claim, put in different terms? Note: When you are making this kind of move, it's helpful to be mindful of how familiar your conversational partners are likely to be with the two or more items you are putting into conversation. Putting claim  $n$  into conversation with another claim  $m$  that your conversational partners are unfamiliar with won't be helpful unless you do the work to elucidate claim  $m$  for them!

**21. Listen carefully.**

I want to be clear. This is not in itself conversational move, and careful listening is not a substitute for voicing your thoughts. But careful listening is also required for pulling off any of the preceding moves reliably successfully, so it deserves a little trumpet blast of its own. Listening carefully means, among other things: monitoring your own understanding of what is being said; waiting to hear the full thought before you focus on mentally rehearsing your own response; being cautious with your assumptions about what the other person *must* mean; setting aside distractions, electronic or otherwise.

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