

# How to Ask Philosophy Questions

Elise Woodard, adapted from Zoë Johnson King

There are going to be so many opportunities for you to ask questions in this course – both in class and in your discussion posts. Sometimes it can be hard to know which question to ask! Here's a guide.

## 1 Clarificatory questions

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It's totally fine to ask a clarificatory question, if you've done your best to understand an author's argument, but there's part of it that's just not "clicking." You might, for instance, be unsure how a philosopher is using a particular term, or unsure which of two ways of understanding one of their claims was the one they had in mind.

So you could say something like this:

*On p.xx, X says "...". What does she mean by this? One natural reading is to think that ... . But I'm not sure that that's right, because ... . So how should we understand X's claim here?*

## 2 Objections

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You can ask a question that raises a problem or objection for part of the author's argument, or a counterexample to one of their claims. Be sure to keep this brief, though – and be sure to keep it friendly!

You could say something like this:

*On p.xx, X says "...". But this seems wrong to me, because ... . How might X respond to this point?*

## 3 Compare and Contrast

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We're going to be reading the work of lots of different philosophers, often on related topics. You can ask a question about how two or more of the readings relate to one another, how similar one philosopher's claim is to another's, or how one philosopher would respond to another's argument (even if they're not from the same set of readings – it's great to connect new readings up with something we have already studied!).

So you could say something like this:

*On p.xx of YY, X says "...". This reminds me of Z's idea that ... . Are these claims related? Though they use different terms, I think that these philosophers might be making similar points, because ... .*

## 4 A question that is all your own!

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You might find that the reading gets you thinking about a certain topic, and that you end up wondering about a question of your own that is inspired by the reading. Go for it!

## 5 Bonus: What if I can't think of a question?!

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- Spend 5 minutes 'free journaling' to reflect on the article or talking to a friend about the material. Something may come up! (This can also help reveal gaps in understanding.)
- Summarize the main thesis of an article, and try to think of examples that support it or disconfirm it
- Try to relate the reading to other papers you've read recently
- Look back at your annotations. Are there any question marks, or parts you flagged for further thinking?
- Try to think about why you don't have a question. Is it because the article was especially clear or compelling, or because it was too difficult? What made it so?