

Essay Assignment #2—Conceptual Analysis

Introduction

Philosophers do the work of analyzing arguments and concepts. When they engage in conceptual analysis, they seek to obtain a general definition of some phenomenon that not only applies to all instances of the phenomenon, but expresses the essence of the phenomenon. An adequate definition of justice, for example, will not only enable one to identify any instance of justice, but also express what makes something just—in other words, the *essence* of justice. To obtain such general definitions, philosophers often work through specific examples to help illustrate, complicate, and precisely delimit the concept. This philosophically rigorous process of definition differs from the more common forms of definition that you encounter in most writing contexts. Yet, your engagement in the philosophical work of conceptual analysis asks you to reflect upon the ways that conceptual analysis as a method might be applied to your everyday uses of definition.

Not all of the texts assigned for this section of the course—*The Art of War*, *The Prince*, and *Just and Unjust Wars*—are canonical texts in the history of philosophy; but all employ conceptual analysis. That is, they propose a definition of a concept, then test that definition against imagined, historical, or real-life examples. Machiavelli, for example, examines the specific characteristics and actions that are required of a political sovereign, such as virtue, prudence, and cruelty. Then, he offers hypothetical and historical examples of rulers throughout history who exemplify, or fail to exemplify, these characteristics. Through this method—conceptual analysis—he takes himself to arrive at a more comprehensive and adequate definition.

Assignment

Your section leader will choose a concept and a passage with an example from Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Begin by articulating Machiavelli's definition of the concept your section leader has chosen. Then, after carefully re-reading the passage, argue how the example illustrates, supplements, refines, or complicates Machiavelli's definition of the concept.

While your rough draft must be between 5-6 pages, your final draft will be between 3-4 pages. This decrease in page length will require you to reduce and refine as you revise your essay to achieve enhanced precision. Your final paper should include only your most persuasive evidence and your most concise prose.

This paper will be worth 35% of your writing grade.

The Writing Process

This prompt requires that you understand the distinction between general definitions and specific examples. Part of that work entails that you identify an argument's stated and unstated premises, and that you distinguish between the premises and conclusions of an argument. Re-read your *Writer's Handbook* chapter "Analyzing Philosophical Texts" to make sure that you understand these terms. In turning to *The Prince*, begin by outlining how Machiavelli defines the concept that your instructor has assigned (you may turn to any part of the text to support this initial definition). What are the premises (both stated and unstated) that underpin his definition of the concept? What arguments about maintaining power lead Machiavelli to define the concept in this way?

Once you have a preliminary sense of the concept and its purpose in Machiavelli's argument, re-read the passage assigned by your section leader and ask yourself: Which parts seem to reinforce, extend, revise or challenge his initial definition? What is the effect of this additional context? How does the example

force the reader to reconsider Machiavelli's premises, or perhaps expose some of the unstated premises that were less evident without the example? How, if at all, does the example alter his initial definition? Consider what purposes Machiavelli might have for retaining a certain distance (or lack thereof) between his immediate definition and his example. You may find that Machiavelli's example is entirely in keeping with his definition of the concept. If so, how does the example function to further his argument—other than merely repeating his initial claim? Remember: Machiavelli introduces specific cases to refine his tentative definitions. The challenge of the essay is to clearly explain the reasoning that leads Machiavelli to refine his definitions.

Student Learning Goals

- Reinforce skills learned in Essay Assignment 1: making specific, clear, arguable claims; producing cohesive paragraphs; presenting well-selected and well-contextualized evidence; developing strong warrants; refining close reading skills.
- Understand and explain the logic of Machiavelli's argument
- Participate in the assumptions and methods of conceptual analysis, including: analyzing and performing definition; distinguishing between concept and example; identifying premises (both stated and unstated) and conclusions; first developing, then condensing, arguments.
- Develop detailed transitions that explicitly outline your shift in argument
- Write compelling conclusions that elicit thoughtful responses from your audience
- Engage in active revision (whereby the final submitted draft of your paper exhibits a careful reflection, and working through, of numerous drafts).