

Tracking the Dialectic

Due by e-mail: Sunday, April 20th

Goal:

Within a single paper, it is common to shift your voice frequently. We don't write things that are explicitly dialogues, but you have to recount and share, throughout the paper, positions that you may not endorse. In a paper discussing, for example, Thomas Reid's criticisms of David Hume, there are points when your job is to sympathetically present Hume's position, sympathetically present Reid's criticisms, then, shift back into Hume's perspective to sympathetically push his likely response(s). Ultimately, you need to shift to your own perspective, and take a stance on what to say about the objection.

Doing this sort of perspective-shifting well, and in a way that does not confuse your audience, is very important. But there is more to this skill than merely keeping track for yourself of when it is time to switch hats. You also need to signpost this for your audience, ideally without being clunky or awkward about it. Your discussion of the objection needs to motivate the objection, but you don't want your audience to think you are contradicting yourself.

Keeping track of the dialectic is also important for understanding what task you have on your plate at any given point in a paper or presentation (or Q&A session). Are you responsible for defending a given view as true, or just as plausible from so-and-so's perspective? Do you need to prove that there is no way to endorse X and Y at the same time, or just that some particular way of endorsing X is not compatible with endorsing Y. And so on.

For this assignment, you will need to produce a planned outline for paper that you will write for this class. The outline should break your paper down into discrete tasks that need to be accomplished in course of that paper. You will then need to note, on that outline, the different perspectives that you will have to adopt to accomplish those tasks. When I read that outline, I should be in a position to know what your paper would argue.

There is a difference between a *plan* and a *promise*. Do not get yourself too worked up about whether the outline you turn in is the exact outline of the paper you will eventually write for this class. It will be helpful to you to approach it attempting to create that outline, but you are not wedded to the outline you submit. Lastly: you don't need to know in precise detail everything you will do in the paper to accomplish this. If you understand the sort of worry you plan to pursue, or the sort of defense you want to explore, you can put them in with less specificity. It is also worthwhile to contingency plan: if you plan to show that response X addresses problem Y, and then, it turns out it doesn't, could you adjust the paper and its aims in light of this discovery?