



# Do You Have to Reply to This Paper?

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## Abstract

I explore the question of whether one has to reply to a paper such as this, and consider what a positive answer (in any respect) would teach us. I argue for a qualified Yes. By “reply” I refer to an attempt to write a paper responding to the original one, which addresses (some of) the major claims made in it. I first ask what philosophical papers are for, and note the important role played by replies to them. I consider special obligations to reply to philosophical papers; and the weaker pro tanto obligations that might exist for most professional philosophers. Finally, I consider objections to my claims; and the broader implications if my case is plausible.

**Keywords** Philosophical replies · Progress in philosophy · Professional responsibility · Norms of assertion

I explore the question of whether one has to reply to a paper such as this, and consider what a positive answer (in any respect) would teach us. I argue for a qualified Yes, which will be explicated below.

By “paper” I refer to a scholarly or scientific publication, although in principle this could be understood even more broadly. Papers are typically published in professional journals, and the definition may be broadened to include papers in collections of articles, and books, although I shall focus on journal articles. For the sake of simplicity, I focus on philosophy, but my arguments and claim here could apply widely throughout the scholarly and scientific worlds; albeit perhaps with some adjustments. By “reply” I refer to an attempt to write a paper responding to the original one, which addresses (some of) the major claims made in it. What makes for a good reply is a topic that I shall set aside here. The questions of who “you” are and the nature of the “have” will require further consideration and refinement, not just stipulation.

Before I turn to those questions, it would be helpful to ask what academic papers are *for*. There is some variety here. Mostly I shall consider the “straight” paper putting

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forward claims, considering arguments, mapping a conceptual field and the like. General survey papers, book review essays and so on might also come under this heading, but usually will not. Academic papers in philosophy serve various narrowly professional functions, such as enabling publication-based recruitment of faculty, granting of tenure, evaluation of academics for advancement, and the establishment of academic reputations. Their main function, however, is more strictly academic – they are the primary way in which philosophy does its business. Papers are the main avenue for staking research claims, and presenting them for the evaluation of the philosophical community. They are, therefore, a primary means for getting nearer to the truth, and deepening our knowledge and understanding of ourselves and reality.

Replies to philosophical papers play a major role in the evaluation of the claims made by philosophers in those papers. There is informal discussion outside of philosophical journals, such as in private conversations and classroom discussions. Without dismissing the important role of oral conversations, surely they cannot replace printed, highly accessible “conversations” in original papers and replies to them. Talks in philosophical conferences are also significant, but they often serve as a preliminary way of raising proto-papers, to be examined by one’s peers before being sent for possible publication. So at the end of the day, philosophical papers, and the debates they raise, are in effect the written record of professional philosophical discussions. This means that replies are crucial. Significant claims not taken up will usually be neglected. Erroneous claims read but not corrected may confirm or help spread error. Breakthrough papers – ones that raise new questions, make genuinely original responses to older questions, build significant argumentative moves, contribute methodological innovations – that are not noted as important, and receive no published responses, will remain ineffective and not enter the blood-stream of philosophical life; or do so only with considerable delay, after finally being noted and receiving published responses. Of course even discussions will not guarantee that philosophical understanding is advanced, for a reply can sidetrack the discussion, or mislead in various ways. But then the natural correction will also come in the form of a reply, such as the response of the author of the original article, or further replies by others.

For example, for those who disagree with me, and think that there is no obligation to reply to papers, or that it would be harmful if any such obligation, however tentative, were thought to exist, there would seem to be no better way of advancing the discussion than to write a reply to the present piece.

These are essential functions in the progress of philosophical research; in the growth of our understanding and enhancement of critical sophistication. Yet as far as I know, no discussion of the question of this paper, nor any systematic claim about the need to reply to philosophical papers, has appeared.

One may acknowledge the importance of the function of replies to philosophical papers, and yet deny that *he* or *she* themselves have to reply to this (or any other) philosophical paper. Here I indeed need to take up the central question, and try to focus its target on you, the reader.

We can begin to make progress by looking at the margins, or poles. First, clearly, here ignorance *is* an excuse. If one knows next to nothing about Berkley’s metaphysical writings, the Repugnant Conclusion, or the logic of counterfactuals, replying to a paper in a philosophical journal on those topics is not required. ‘Ought implies Can’. Most probably, such a reply would, in fact, be unprofessional and unhelpful. It would be

unlikely to be accepted, but there is no need to take the risk and, in any case, one should not waste one's time on writing such a reply. However, even here the issue needs to be taken in context; and will often not be conclusive. If one is and has always been simply terrible in formal logic, then taking up a discussion in the field can serve little purpose. If, however, one knows Derek Parfit's relevant work quite well, has thought deeply on population ethics, and merely has a lacuna concerning the Repugnant Conclusion, then perhaps one needs to address the lacuna, and think about writing a reply. It would also depend on other factors. For example, on whether, when one reads the original paper, one thinks that it makes claims that are definitely erroneous and may well be influential, and believes others are quite unlikely to take up the discussion and correct them. Admittedly, a reply might raise awareness of an otherwise ignored erroneous paper, and benign neglect may be optimal; yet trusting that this ignorance continue might not be the best tactic. This would be a matter for contextual evaluation. My argument of course does not depend on an obligation to reply to every paper.

Many cases lie at the opposite pole, and in such cases one's prima facie duty to reply seems quite salient. Surely if a paper concerns one's own work then this prima facie matters. It is not only that one is likely to be more familiar with one's work than nearly anyone else, have the inside track on the correct way to interpret it, and hence be in a better position to reply to a paper discussing it. Putting forth philosophical claims seems as it were to be accompanied by *responsibility* for one's work and one's claims; it generates norms of assertion. This does not mean that one is obligated to reply to any silly paper considering one's own work, which has somehow managed to make its way into publication in some journal; but replying to more substantial work does seem to be prima facie a quite reasonable expectation. Being perhaps the only person who really understands the writings of a historical philosophical figure carries with it some obligation in a case where, say, novel but erroneous views are being influentially made concerning this figure. Being uniquely positioned to criticize dangerous moral, legal or political views being put forth on an important topic also seems to create some substantial obligation to take up the matter.

Outside of those opposing marginal cases where one has either no obligation to reply (or even an obligation not to try to reply), or some real individual obligation to reply, will be the more vague, grey areas. If one were the only competent philosopher available (or, even, if other competent ones are unlikely to reply), and the paper were of great importance, either theoretical or practical, then prima facie one might have a firm obligation to reply. This is not trivial, as it shows that in principle we all, or nearly all, have such a potential obligation and are, as it were, saved by the existence of numerous other colleagues. But since such colleagues are around, we are dealing here, almost always, with obligations that – even if they exist – are no more than imperfect duties. One, of course, cannot normally be expected to reply to more than a few papers in a given period. Yet when multiplied by the number of philosophers, such an imperfect duty is still highly significant. How and when to exercise it will depend on various factors, such as one's inclinations, whether doing so would harm one's own work at this point in time, the nature of the papers to which one could reply, what one could contribute were one to write a reply, and the field. So, you probably do not have to reply to *this* paper, unless you have something very interesting to say. But if you are a professional philosopher, almost certainly you should be replying to more philosophical papers than you are doing.

There is some room for disagreement here: for example, what are the risks involved in not correcting substantial errors, and how seriously should we take them? Is merely “setting the record straight” a normatively salient consideration, when substantial errors are thought not to have severe repercussions?

The target of the *prima facie* duties to reply will not be taken up in detail here. There is no reason to think that it will be uniform. The obligation might be to one’s scholarly integrity, to the community of researchers in the field, to some philosophical figure, to the profession, to the broader community of researchers, to society or, indeed, to the world. This would depend on the particular case.

The *prima facie* duty to reply is clearly affected by the *journal* in which the original paper appeared. The duty applies more with the better general philosophical journals, and the major journals in the particular fields. The point of our claim is, after all, related to the importance of philosophical discussion, and that is likely to be enhanced in the more prominent journals, first because those journals are much more likely to be highly *read*. There is some fluidity here: new journals are established, some online free-access journals are more widely read than limited-access ones, some journals have surprising Impact Factors outside their field, and so on. Secondly, the better journals are also more likely to include philosophical work that is philosophically *better*. The best philosophers are more likely to publish there, and nearly everyone will send their best philosophical work to those journals first. This will typically make it more philosophically worthwhile to reply to papers in these better journals, if the pursuit of truth is our goal here.

Journals that are not very good are more likely to accept more papers that have gross errors in them. This will presumably make room for more frequent and more severe criticism, in possible replies. Nevertheless, the errors in these journals are most likely not to be as worth taking up as those in the better and more widely read journals. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that nearly all the claims in this and the previous paragraph are rough generalizations. Influential and philosophically worthwhile papers appear also in more mediocre journals, and some papers that appear in the best journals should not really be there, and are not worth replying to. But in a broad way, our claim concerning a duty to reply to philosophical papers applies most strongly to those papers, such as the present one, that appear in good journals.

If there is some *prima facie* duty to reply to papers in philosophical journals, is there, then, an obligation to try to *read* them all, or at least a great many of them? Surely that would be too oppressive. However, my case can relate to the papers that one already reads. Perhaps one would need to read a bit more. Common sense would apply here. If reading would stop you from working on your own original research, then that would be a central consideration, but it is unlikely to be so. Reading the work of others, at least in your field, should – at least up to a point – be good for your research.

But what of our academic freedom, surely a supreme value in academia? And just plain freedom, to make the sort of use of our time that we wish to make? Why should the fact that someone *else* has written his or her own paper imply anything about how *I* should now make use of my time? These are, indeed, countervailing considerations. But in my view, they would not be so strong as to obviate my case. As academics, we should care about the intellectual thriving of our academic areas. We have some commitment to advance them. Standing and abilities may generate some obligations, just as among non-academics and in non-academic

contexts. As we saw, obligations in a more strict sense are much more likely to exist only at the margins, with special people (e.g. original contributors or experts), exceptional (e.g. narrow) fields, or particular situations (e.g. morally or politically dangerous ideas). The sense of freedom should not be greatly affected, even if one embraces my claims. Moreover, we are, after all, usually talking about not much more than writing an occasional reply; and in general paying more attention to the writings of others. Even if there is some obligation, it will usually be one that carries with it much leeway, and decreases considerably once one has written the occasional reply. Since most philosophers today hardly ever do so, we are starting here from a very low baseline, and satisfactory progress should not significantly limit academic or any other type of freedom.

There is, admittedly, some disturbing irony in the idea that those very people who have made contributions or acquired particular expertise would then be under an enhanced *prima facie* obligation to reply to *other* people's work. It seems that we should be particularly grateful to such original contributors, happy that they exist, and leave them alone. Moreover, those people who have been particularly creative can be expected to continue to be so, and burdening them with the need to reply to others should harm their ability to produce more imaginative things of value. Likewise, those who have made themselves great acknowledged experts also deserve to be appreciated but left unburdened, free to enhance their expertise and not be bothered with correcting the errors of others.

In response, I wish, first, to acknowledge that there is a real issue here. The idea of special burdens following from one's creative contributions, or from one's expertise, is potentially problematic and can be pragmatically harmful. Yet it is also hard to escape the case for such heightened obligations in examples such as those we saw above. I certainly call for such special people to then correspondingly receive support as well as gratitude. The expert taking time to publish a reply to others should not be taken for granted but, on the contrary, should be appreciated and thanked. If he or she are psychologically nearly incapable of writing such replies, or would pay a particularly heavy price, then there can be no obligation at all involved (except, perhaps, in the rarest of circumstances). It would also be good if such people received further assistance, such as a reduction in teaching hours or a research assistantship.

It may be interesting to consider whether a person who has replied often has a greater right to be replied to more frequently, and whether those who never reply are less entitled to have their papers replied to. The primary considerations here are surely academic, and in this way conscientious replying would not be consistently rewarded by attention to one's own work (except for one's replies), unless one's work was thought to merit it. Yet some measure of priority in having one's work noticed might, not unreasonably, be related to one's conscientious performance as a good citizen of the Republics of Letters and Sciences, in the capacity of responder. In any case, writing papers in response to others should increase one's professional visibility.

Some people are particularly good at seeing the faults in the arguments or in the scholarship of others, or like to engage in such work and critically reply to papers. Some among them might even not be particularly creative themselves, and hence the loss of time for their own work might not be too great. Such people are valuable, and furthermore reduce the obligations of others to reply. Their merits and contributions need to be recognized.

Some papers are perfect or nearly perfect, and hence, paradoxically, it would become more difficult for them to receive the attention of a critical reply. The *prima facie* duty to reply, in such cases, will be reduced to the less demanding need to cite and positively note these papers in one's routine work, if pertinent. Relating utterly convincing and, as it were, uncriticizable papers to other philosophical work, and exploring their implications, might be further ways of dealing with the predicament here. Thus there could be a need to reply to a paper that has no philosophical faults.

There are interesting questions concerning other players, such as the philosophical journals themselves. Most journals allow replies to papers, but some do not. Nearly all journals only allow replies to papers that have appeared within them, and not to papers in other journals. This creates a strong disincentive to write replies, because you know you only have one shot to publish it. It is high-risk, low payoff. Nearly all journals also severely limit the number of replies they allow, even to papers in their own journals. They will typically curtail further discussion even if there are further excellent replies that could be accepted. These limitations all work in the same problematic direction. If some journals do not allow replies, and other journals discourage replies except to their own papers, then, first, replies to papers published in the reply-less journals are effectively blocked. Second, the severe limitations of publishing such replies in other journals, and on the number of replies to a given paper in a typical journal, greatly limit philosophical discussion.

If my claims are convincing, there is a case for extending them beyond the need to reply, and into journal policy. Journals that do not allow replies should reconsider that policy; more leeway in responding to papers published elsewhere should be permitted, and the encouragement of multiple replies, replies even after some years, and so on, ought to become the norm. Such changes should not significantly come at the expense of the number of original papers published. Replies are usually quite short, and even a more severe limitation on the length of replies than that prevailing at present would not, as a rule, hinder their positive function. Perhaps a journal focussing on replies to papers might even be established.

More replies would also require further reviewing and editorial efforts, and that would put an even heavier burden on people whose work is already typically unrewarded. Yet if my claim stands, this is a necessary corollary. It is the case, however, that replies, being much shorter and much more focussed than typical papers, also require considerably less effort to review. No journal should be criticized, for example, for publishing replies that have been reviewed only "in house" and not sent out for external review.

Here we might consider the issue of philosophers who are asked to review a paper that discusses their own work. If my stance becomes prevalent, this should become only more common; particularly, of course, in the form of distinct reply papers. For I have argued that replies (and counter-replies) are to be encouraged. One then hopes that such referees will not be quick to decline reviewing replies to their own work, and it does not seem to me as a rule unethical to serve as a referee under such circumstances. Concerning the content of such reviews, we would need to draw a distinction between clarifying one's views when they are misrepresented in the reply paper under review, and discussing the philosophical points made by the author when no misrepresentation is involved. The first should not typically raise difficulties, while concerning the second some care would need to be taken.

A second matter is the interest of such referees in accepting or rejecting papers replying to their own work; which would then allow for the referees to reply back. Editors may need to take such issues into consideration when evaluating reviews, perhaps not relying only on the evaluation of the purported targets of the reply. This would be commonsensical even today, on a smaller scale. In any case, the benefits of an enhanced “reply culture”, which I have argued for, should in general be greater than the ensuing ethical risks.

The prevailing form of reply might also be treated more flexibly. The point is, after all, not to reply to other papers merely for the sake of the reply, but as a way of *engaging* with the original papers. This means that papers considering in a *detailed* way a number of other papers will also help in the desired direction, even if they are not strict replies. Increasing the frequency of “recent work on X” type of surveys, and a special genre of deep survey papers focussing on papers that raise new questions or problems, or on highly unusual topics or positions, could also make an important difference. Another direction will take us further away from the familiar academic reply-paper, and involve the use of new media or academically unusual efforts; usually without peer review. Some examples: an emphasis on innovative philosophical papers in blogs, the use of podcasts for the sake of calling attention to outstanding work, or the publication of attractive long abstracts.

Other suggestions might be for the profession to provide greater encouragement and professional recognition to those who reply to others. We might have, for example, prizes awarded not only to the best original papers, but to the best replies. And the more the profession takes into account and gives credit to writers of replies in recruitment and promotion, the more we will see an intense culture of critical philosophical discussion. Efforts by the APA and other philosophical societies in these directions would be most welcome.

Not everyone likes the culture of philosophical disputation and critical scrutiny, and such people might well dread a swell, caused by an increase in replies, and more broadly the very idea of talk about a possible duty to reply (or at least a duty to think whether one ought to). Note also that the *prima facie* duty to reply also generates *prima facie* duties to reply to replies. By publishing the present paper I, for example, have created for myself a *prima facie* obligation to reply to those of you who will publish a philosophical paper in reply to it (if I will have anything significant to say). It is hard to see, however, a serious alternative. Surely informal conversation and much-delayed discussion in some future books cannot plausibly replace the give and take of philosophical papers, replies and counter-replies. Replies consistently improve the impact of articles, the main vehicle of philosophical progress. They also help in pinpointing the more important work. Moreover, if the case I am making is followed, we will probably see a rise in the level of most replies, for many more people will enter the fold, and their papers may find stiffer competition being accepted.

It might also be claimed that the profession as it is suffers from an over-emphasis on rigour, at the expense of intellectual courage, creativity and originality; and enhancing the reply component might be stifling. This is a worry worth considering. The advancement of understanding depends on critical assessment, and hence in a broad way the function of replies is, surely, indispensable. But it seems to me that, if we have more replies, this would also do much good *even in these very respects which this point raises as a concern*. First, papers that are not replied to are frequently neglected, and

often these might be the more outlying papers, that are farther away from the fashions of the day and the prevailing modes of engagement. So replies here should do a lot of good. Moreover, the increase in the number of replies should be reassuring. The belief that one can put forth some speculative ideas, while others will be there to offer criticism if there are mistakes, can also be liberating. The scholarly and scientific project is a communal one. Perhaps a culture of reply writing would also take some pressure off peer-reviewers, who often tend to be over-conservative. If one knew that the weaknesses in a paper are likely to generate replies, one might feel less inclined to reject papers as often; and might see them as the beginning of a constructive process. And replies themselves are also places where philosophical courage, creativity and originality can be expressed, and should often help to move the debates in such directions.

Finally, a large increase in replies to philosophical papers should have, overall, a beneficial *psychological* effect on philosophers. Admittedly, some people are simply too sensitive and liable to be upset by the attention, and some might be professionally harmed if their philosophical work receives closer critical scrutiny. Yet more replies to our philosophical papers should be gratifying to most of us. The pro tanto obligation to consider whether one ought to reply to papers in one's field can be seen as part of a larger consideration, that of *engaging* with other human beings. Academia, perhaps particularly in the humanities, is a lonely business. One typically sits by oneself, in front of an empty screen, and writes philosophical papers. This follows many difficult years of preparation, in lengthy studies and after great efforts to acquire expertise, hone one's talents, increase one's sophistication, open one's mind, search one's imagination, and follow unbeaten tracks. In such and many other ways one goes against the grain of natural human life, which is typically uncritical, complacent, and unimaginative in the ways relevant to philosophy. Papers produced after all these efforts will then usually have a difficult path till they are accepted; with reduced acceptance rates in recent years making this only more pronounced. Yet even when one's papers finally come out, they will very often receive no or hardly any attention; falling, as David Hume put it, dead-born from the press.

I await your reply.

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