

UNITED WISDOM

How philosophical argument works

World and Consciousness

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

W06 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *I am and always have been one of those natures who must be guided by reason*

Plato, Crito, opening of Socrates’s answer about examining reasons before deciding about escape. Exact clipped sixteen-word passage from Benjamin Jowett’s English translation; no terminal punctuation added inside the excerpt. The subsequent possibility of better grounds remains in the article, and Socrates’s situation becomes no rule for conduct in danger.

What this article is about

Therefore and so promise a connection between a ground and a conclusion. Sometimes that connection is clear; sometimes confidence in the voice supplies its entire appearance. A philosophical argument lets us examine the move itself: what is claimed, why we are invited to accept it, and how far the conclusion extends. We compare limited passages by Aristotle, Descartes, Plato, Confucius, and Mill. They form no single school or universal algorithm. An imagined conversation about recommending a book helps distinguish premises, inference, hidden conditions, values, and objections. Personal experience matters without becoming a requirement for everyone on its own. The closing reflection invites voluntary reading of one short argument, without a rationality examination or an obligation to debate.

I. A claim that asks for reasons

Imagine a conversation after a reading group meets. Someone says: This philosophy book helped me, so everyone needs to read it. The first part reports personal experience; the second proposes a general requirement. So connects them grammatically, but the connection still needs explanation. What does helped mean: understanding a concept, getting through a difficult evening, or making a decision? Why does every other person need that result, and why must they seek it in this particular book? Such questions leave the reader’s gratitude intact. They identify the claim the speaker is willing to defend and the grounds actually offered for it. This is an invented example, not a way to assess a real person’s character or sincerity.

We can begin by treating a philosophical argument as an invitation to accept a conclusion for stated reasons. That is this article’s working frame, not a definition covering every philosophical genre. Dialogues, reflections, images, and aphorisms may do other work; even within reasoning, an important thought need not take the form of a proof. Our concern is a particular promised connection: if we accept these grounds, why accept that conclusion? Sometimes necessity is claimed; sometimes a modest preference or a probable explanation is

offered. Absolute certainty is no single suitable requirement for all of them. Asking the writer to name the strength of the connection helps prevent possible, usual, and required from changing places in a reader's account.

In our conversation, a narrower statement might replace the broad one: For me, the book provided a useful occasion to consider this question. Covering fewer people does not make the statement inferior. It says more about its actual grounds. If the speaker wants to recommend reading to the group, that is another step: a shared purpose, suitable difficulty, access to the text, and room to decline become relevant. Personal experience remains a reason to offer the suggestion; without further grounds it becomes no obligation for everyone. Argument begins here, in the move between statements. We examine that move without asking someone to justify the bare fact that a book matters to them or that they wished to share it.

II. Does the conclusion follow?

In Book I of Prior Analytics, Aristotle distinguishes a premise, a term, and a syllogism. A premise affirms or denies something of something else; it may be universal, particular, or indefinite. His definition of syllogism emphasizes that something different follows necessarily from what has been stated. At the beginning of I.4 he also distinguishes syllogism from demonstration. This is a limited reading of I.1 and the opening of I.4 in A. J. Jenkinson's translation. It supports a distinction between the form of an inference and more demanding knowledge, without making every philosophical argument a syllogism. Our reading-group example is the article's illustration; Aristotle discusses neither that group nor its participants' consent. Aristotle, I.1 and the opening of I.4.

To examine an inference, we can provisionally grant its premises and ask whether its conclusion could still be false. Suppose every text the group voluntarily selects for joint discussion will be read at the meeting; this book has been selected; therefore it will be read there. In that conditional construction, the conclusion is connected to the premises. Yet the first premise may be too strong for the actual group: someone may run out of time, the meeting may be cancelled, or another text substituted. Consistent conditional reasoning has not established the real future. Conversely, some participants have read the book does not support all participants have read it even when granted. Grounds and connection are distinct places where an argument can fail.

This distinction also helps locate disagreement. One reader may say: I understand how you reached the conclusion, but reject the starting requirement. Another may accept the initial observation while finding no route from it to the general demand. These responses call for different continuations. The first concerns a ground; the second concerns a missing connection. Calling every criticism illogical obscures the work: a person may dispute

plausibility, a word’s meaning, the applicability of a condition, or the purpose itself. Our example needs only two distinct checks. True premises can accompany an inadequate inference, while orderly inference does not establish its premises. Otherwise, an elegant construction may be mistaken for knowledge about people it never actually considered.

III. Words and the unstated bridge

Return to helped. If it means I found it interesting in the premise but necessary for responsible conduct in the conclusion, its meaning changes during the argument. A shared word makes two different assertions appear to rest on the same ground. Expand it in both places: Reading interested me; therefore everyone is obliged to read. The missing ground is visible without technical vocabulary. Everyone and needs also matter. Every person, or everyone wishing to attend one particular meeting? Required under the terms of a voluntarily chosen course, or desirable in one reader’s opinion? Clarifying language turns no conversation into a vocabulary examination. It identifies the respect in which the statement should hold and who decides whether to participate.

Next we can write a proposed missing premise: Everyone must do whatever benefited one participant. This accuses nobody of a secret thought. The speaker may never have formulated that principle and should have room to supply a different one. But an explicit candidate makes the inference examinable. An activity available to one person may be inaccessible to another; a book in a familiar language for one reader may not suit another; a worthwhile subject need not require one unique text. These cases challenge the general principle. They establish neither harmful reading nor universally inappropriate recommendations. A narrower offer can survive the withdrawal of a universal premise, without requiring the personal account to become false or worthless.

Some assumptions remain shared and unnoticed while conversation goes smoothly. We assume the same book is meant, the meeting has a purpose, and an invitation carries no penalty for refusal. Disagreement may require making some of this explicit. Listing every assumption of human life is unnecessary; we need those on which this conclusion depends. If a recommendation assumes free access but the text is expensive or available only in an unsuitable format, the proposal’s practical applicability changes. That is not yet a dispute about the book’s philosophical idea. Separating content from participation conditions keeps both subjects available. We might narrow the audience, offer another format, or leave a question where the required ground is missing.

IV. Divide the difficulty, retain the question

Part II of Descartes's Discourse on Method presents four rules for his inquiry: avoid accepting unclear claims as true, divide difficulties, proceed from simpler matters to complex ones, and review for completeness. We have read this passage with its criticism of earlier logic and mathematical continuation in John Veitch's translation. Clarity belongs to a historical programme seeking certain knowledge, rather than a present instruction for every dispute. Dividing a complex claim is especially relevant here. Our comparison promises no Cartesian certainty. These rules also authorize neither calling everything a reader finds unclear false nor making personal feelings of obviousness sufficient grounds for demands on others. Descartes, Part II.

The proposal about the book separates into three questions. How does the participant describe their experience? Which idea in the book do they consider true? Why is shared reading an appropriate action? The first calls for an account at the speaker's own scale; the second concerns the text's content and argument; the third concerns the group's purpose and conditions. Answering one does not automatically answer the others. An erroneous argument might still be interesting to read; a true idea may be presented with difficulty; a useful text may not suit today's meeting. Division devalues no book. It lets the speaker defend the particular thing they wish to offer, without using one favourable judgment to establish truth, convenience, and obligation together.

After dividing the difficulty, we also need to bring the question back together. If the meeting concerns justice, a list of practical clarifications should not displace that concept. We might understand reading conditions while remaining unsure whether the author's argument about justice is persuasive. Individual sentences can be examined while their connection disappears; restating conclusion and reasons restores the subject. Endless revision of every phrase is unnecessary. A limited understanding can be enough for now: a disputed premise has been identified, another question remains unexplored, and we may return later. Recording all parts neatly does not settle the problem. The record makes reasoning available for examination; it cannot take the place of examining its content.

V. Examine a reason together

In Plato’s Crito, Socrates is imprisoned while Crito proposes escape, offering reasons concerning friends, reputation, and children. In the passage read here, 46b–47a, Socrates asks whether earlier grounds still hold under present circumstances and allows the possibility of better grounds. Benjamin Jowett renders a dialogue about a specific choice before death, rather than a comfortable contemporary conversation about a book. We draw attention to reasons while preserving that difference. The opening authorizes no demand that someone endure danger, refuse help, or submit to an unjust decision. Socrates’s historical choice becomes no obligatory model for the reader’s life. Plato, Crito, Socrates’s discussion of reconsidering grounds.

In the group, examination might begin with: Have I understood that you are offering this book as one possible way into our subject? This is no technique for producing a predetermined answer. The speaker may mean the whole book, one passage, or simply an idea worth discussing. Clarification makes disagreement more specific. Instead of you always impose things, a reader can question the grounds for making the complete text a condition of participation. The other person can answer about a proposal without defending their entire character. Still, nobody owes participation in this conversation. A pause, a written comment, or declining discussion remains possible. Examining something together requires willingness on both sides, beyond well-formed questions.

Revising an opinion in response to a new reason need not mean abandoning a principle. A person can retain the value of accessible discussion and therefore change an initial recommendation. Previously unaware of a format difficulty, they now offer an excerpt or another text. In this example, that is an ordinary possibility for revision, not evidence of moral development. Conversely, a new consideration may leave an opinion unchanged because it does not bear on its grounds. Meeting convenience cannot settle the truth of the book’s argument. Naming two separate conclusions allows agreement on one point alongside disagreement on another, without turning participants into teams required either to win completely or surrender completely.

VI. What an objection shows

An objection can address a specific point. If every participant is said to be obliged to read this particular book, consider a participant for whom that obligation has no established ground: they know the idea from another text, or never agreed to that format. Such a case challenges the universal requirement, rather than the quality of the whole book. It leaves a narrower statement—several willing readers may find it interesting—untouched. The objection's scope should match the conclusion's scope. Otherwise a strong claim gets revised while we continue attacking it as though nothing changed. Fair examination notices revision. It also allows an example to remain insufficiently specified: perhaps participation rules need clarification before anyone declares victory over the other person's argument.

Now suppose the organizer offered a meeting for people who had read the chosen book, and participants voluntarily accepted that condition. Another person's refusal has a different significance here: they may decline this meeting without being excluded from all discussion. We have a different case, not an exemption from examining grounds. Clearly stated conditions may still be inaccessible to some interested people, and the group may consider an additional format. Prior agreement does not establish that revision is impossible. Difficulty with an agreement does not establish that every condition is unacceptable. Answering an objection requires retaining the circumstances supporting the conclusion. When those change, the earlier answer needs reassessment; verbal resemblance alone does not make the cases identical.

An objection need not receive an immediate answer. It may reveal missing information or identify a question the writer never considered. This reason has not yet been assessed is more accurate than an impressive comparison from elsewhere presented as a solution. In our example, a famous philosopher's authority establishes no suitable format for this particular group; an unpleasant meeting does not establish that a philosophical proposition is false. Both matters may be important, but to different questions. Inability to answer now also differs from establishing that no answer exists. Stopping leaves room for further reading, checking, or appropriate expertise. It requires neither endless dispute nor pretended agreement, nor the simultaneous abandonment of every earlier conviction.

VII. When a premise expresses a value

In the Analects, Tsze-kung asks for a word that could guide lifelong practice; Confucius responds with reciprocity, withholding from others what one would not wish for oneself. In the James Legge edition used here, this is XV.23, often designated XV.24 in current numbering. We also read the neighbouring sayings about a person's words and grounds for praise. This is moral guidance, not a formal syllogism or inference from measured preferences. Its comparison with a value premise belongs to our article; Confucius is not assigned our whole argument scheme. His historical concern with virtue and relationships remains distinct from our contemporary reading-group conditions and freedom to decline. Legge, XV.22–24 in his numbering.

The reading proposal may contain a value premise: Good discussion should leave participants able to take part meaningfully. Even if everyone accepts that, which conditions provide the opportunity remains open. One person needs the complete text, another an accessible excerpt, a third sufficient advance notice. Agreement about a value does not establish one unique realization of it. Different arrangements need not mean different fundamental values either. Naming what we defend matters. An organizer's convenience should not silently become a universal reader obligation. Depth of discussion can warrant preparation without humiliating people who do not participate. This is the article's consideration of an invented situation, not an extra sentence in the ancient text or an established model of every collaborative undertaking.

Reciprocity should not become a device for guessing another person's needs from one's own. Enjoying detailed questions about a book does not establish that someone else welcomes them after a difficult day. Our contemporary move from a moral orientation to a particular meeting needs circumstances and people's agreement. Invoking a value explains an intention; it cannot replace discussion of its application. An argument for action therefore needs more than the acceptance of an abstract principle. We must consider who receives the proposal, its cost, and other available forms. Different needs also do not establish that no shared principle can be discussed. Principle, interpretation, and a proposal here and now remain distinguishable, each requiring grounds or remaining open to dispute.

VIII. Hear the other side at its strongest

In chapter II of On Liberty, John Stuart Mill examines understanding one's grounds by encountering opposing reasons. In the passage read here, pages 66–69 of the displayed edition, hearing an opponent solely through one's own teachers is insufficient: reasons defended by actual believers matter. This belongs to his historical argument for free discussion. Our use of the passage obliges nobody to debate every interlocutor and describes no current legal rule. It supports attending to substantive opposition rather than an easily dismissed version. Our further frame—voluntary meetings, privacy, and the freedom to end a conversation—requires its own grounds and is not presented as a quotation from Mill. Mill, chapter II.

In the group, a weak account of opposition might say: They simply dislike thinking. That tells us nothing about grounds for refusal. A stronger version is: We want to discuss the same subject, but some participants cannot access the whole text, and the common condition may exclude them. Answering now concerns purpose, accessibility, and format rather than imagined laziness. The proposal also deserves a stronger statement: A shared text lets us discuss one particular argument rather than only separate impressions. We can recognize that aim without accepting one exclusive format. A contextualized passage or two meetings might follow. These are possible responses within our example, not an established recipe for resolving every disagreement. Open discussion guarantees neither agreement nor equally warranted reasons.

Representing a strong objection requires neither agreement nor unlimited time for it. We can restate it and invite a willing interlocutor to correct a substantial distortion. We may instead read an available position independently and name the limits of our understanding. An absent person owes no endorsement of our account, and private information requires permission. If conversation becomes humiliating, ending it does not depend on instantly defeating every assertion. Reading also allows analysis of a reason to continue separately from contact with a particular person. Those are different decisions. Declining a meeting does not establish an idea's falsity; a good idea authorizes no compelled meeting. Argument remains something to examine, rather than a pass into another person's time or private life.

IX. A conclusion at its actual scale

After examination, we can return to the initial statement and choose a better-grounded conclusion: The book was useful to me; I offer this passage for interested readers to discuss if the format suits them. Personal experience remains, the offer becomes specific, and universal obligation is withdrawn. The truth of every idea in the passage is still unestablished; it needs its own examination. Nor have we established that common preparation is never needed: another voluntary activity may have clear conditions. The final statement should match the route taken rather than silently restoring the original strong claim. If the reasoning supports possibility, the closing sentence should not claim necessity. Grounds concerning this group need another step before extending to everyone or every form of learning.

Philosophical reasoning can also end without a shared decision. One side accepts a common-text principle, another prefers access through different routes, and the needed comparison remains undone. Precisely identified grounds and an open question make this a substantive intermediate result. It establishes neither absent truth nor equally suitable opinions. Perhaps a particular reason was weak, context remains insufficiently read, or the conflict concerns an action’s cost rather than a concept’s meaning. These different unfinished states deserve different descriptions. Further reading then has an object: a missing premise, a more precise definition, or information about conditions. We need not restart the entire dispute with for and against one book as though only two possible positions existed.

These sources remain distinct: Aristotle concerns premises and necessary consequence; Descartes offers a historical order of inquiry; Plato’s dialogue examines grounds under changed circumstances; Confucius gives a moral orientation; Mill turns toward serious opposition. Their comparison is our construction for a limited question: making reasoning available to examination. It forms no single doctrine and guarantees no infallible decision. We can value a book without demanding universal reading, offer an idea without compulsion, question an inference without judging a person, and retain uncertainty where work remains undone. An argument succeeds only to the extent that its actual grounds support its actual conclusion. Another reader should be able to trace that path, clarify it, or locate the need for another ground, rather than merely trust a confident final sentence.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose one short argument about a book, a concept, or an ordinary low-stakes proposal. Avoid urgent decisions, another person’s private history, and judging someone’s capacity to think. The article’s invented example is also available. Participation is voluntary, and the record can end without a conversation with anyone.

Restate the conclusion in one sentence. List the offered grounds separately, without strengthening them. Identify an important word such as all, needs, or useful. What does it mean here? If another premise is needed, label your version a proposed reconstruction rather than the writer’s secret conviction. Leave a question where no suitable ground is apparent.

Examine two different matters. If the grounds are provisionally accepted, do they suffice for the conclusion as stated? Then ask why the grounds themselves should be accepted and which circumstances they concern. Offer one substantive objection in a strong form. There is no need to manufacture an equally good opposing side to every assertion or settle a question when information is inaccessible.

Close at the scale actually supported: a possibility, a conditional proposal, a narrower statement, or an open question. Name what you have not checked separately. Where future shared action is involved, the record replaces nobody’s agreement. This examines one movement of thought; it guarantees neither a correct decision nor a successful conversation.

Key quotation

> *but not every syllogism is a demonstration.*

Aristotle, Prior Analytics, opening of I.4. Exact seven-word concluding clause from A. J. Jenkinson’s English translation, retaining lowercase and final period. It concerns syllogism and demonstration, without requiring every argument to take this form.

Connections between traditions

Source	Question examined	Boundary retained
Aristotle, I.1 / opening I.4	Premises, necessary inference, demonstration	Philosophy does not reduce entirely to syllogism
Descartes, Part II	Dividing difficulty and ordering inquiry	Historical certainty programme answers no dispute automatically
Plato, Crito, opening reply	Earlier and better grounds under changed circumstances	A decision before death becomes no reader obligation
Confucius, XV.23 in Legge	Reciprocity as a moral orientation	Guidance is no formal demonstration or device for guessing another's needs
Mill, II, pages 66–69	Serious opposing reasons	No duty to enter every conversation or account of present law
UW editorial frame	Examining an imagined recommendation's inference	Reflection proves no efficacy and replaces nobody's agreement

Primary sources

1. Aristotle, Prior Analytics, I.1 and opening I.4. A. J. Jenkinson's English translation, Internet Classics Archive. Premise and syllogism definitions, syllogism/demonstration distinction; not the entire treatise. Russian excerpt translated by UW via this version.

2. Descartes, Discourse on Method, II. John Veitch's English translation, Gutenberg 59. Four rules with preceding logic discussion and mathematical continuation; historical certainty project, no universal instruction.

3. Plato, Crito, Socrates's opening reply on reconsidering grounds. Benjamin Jowett's English translation, Internet Classics Archive. Crito's proposal through the opening trainer comparison; not the entire dialogue. Russian epigraph translated by UW via this version; escape decision prescribes no reader conduct.

4. Confucius, Analects, XV.22–24 in Legge. James Legge, 1893 edition, compared with another transcription. Reciprocity is XV.23 here, commonly XV.24; neighbouring sayings provide context rather than formal argument theory.

5. Mill, On Liberty, II, pages 66–69. English original, work 1859, displayed Gutenberg 34901 transcription. Knowledge of opposing grounds; not the entire chapter or a current legal rule.

Tags

philosophy, argument, reasoning, premise, conclusion, grounds, inference, syllogism, demonstration, definition, clarity, concept, condition, context, objection, example, counterexample, value, reciprocity, dialogue, reading, book, recommendation, consent, accessibility, revision, limits, unknowns, Aristotle, Descartes, Plato, Confucius, Mill

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.