

# Explaining How Others Use Terms – Introduction to Moral Philosophy

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# The two tips I'll be talking about

I'll focus on two sets of tips for explaining how someone else uses a term. The first set concerns when to quote the person and when to use your own words. The second concerns being accurate and charitable in how you interpret the person.

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First, if you're talking about the author's use of a key term, you should use the same word that they use. For example, if you're explaining what J.S. Mill means by "utility", you should keep using the word "utility", as opposed to another related word, like "usefulness".

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Second, if an author writes a sentence that is super clear, so clear that it's totally obvious what they're saying, it's fine to just quote it. I recommend using this somewhat sparingly; typically in philosophy papers most of the writing should be your own.

# When to quote

Third, sometimes an author will be so unclear that it's useful to first quote them, so that the reader can have the quote in front of them, then try to explain what their quote means.

For example, you could write: "Kant says that a hypothetical imperative is something that 'represent[s] the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to attain something else which one wills.' By this Kant means that ..."

# Being accurate and charitable in how one interprets the person.

In addition, you want to be accurate and charitable in how you interpret someone.

By being “accurate”, I mean that what you say the authors says should be consistent with what they actually say in the passage you’re talking about.

By being “charitable”, I mean that if you can interpret them in multiple ways, you should aim to interpret them in such a way that what they’re saying is plausible and reasonable, if at all possible.

# Practice

For each explanation, say what can be done to improve it.

1. Kant says the “categorical imperative” is something “which represent[s] an action as objectively necessary for itself, without any reference to another end”.
2. Bentham writes: “By the principle of utility is meant that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency it has to ... promote or oppose ... happiness ”. By this, Bentham means that the principle of utility says the following: an action is morally acceptable if it decreases happiness and morally unacceptable if it increases happiness.
3. Bentham writes, “By utility is meant that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness.” By this he means that he is using the word “utility” so that it means the same thing as satisfaction, well-being, joy, and other similar terms.



Try to explain what Aristotle means by “human good” from the following quote: “the human good turns out to be activity of soul in accordance with excellence (and if there are more excellences than one, in accordance with the best and most complete).”