

Saturday Night at the Goose and Gridiron

Discussion Group Ground rules

Welcome! If this is your first time at this type of discussion group, there are a few rules you need to know. If you are a returning member, welcome back!

The following sections lists some Do's and Don't for both the participants and the facilitator. Please make yourself familiar with the rules and respect them during the discussion. Above all, participate and have fun!

Facilitator and Participant Dos and Don'ts

Do be an active and engaged listener.

Respecting the ideas of each participant is a key element of a successful discussion group. Be open to what people have to say even if you disagree. The facilitator needs to let the group know that putting down others is absolutely taboo at this discussion group.

Do encourage participants to offer specific examples that back up what they take to be a universally accepted view.

The facilitator should try to get them to support their perspectives with cogent, well-constructed, reasoned views.

Do question the perspectives offered by others and try to examine any perceived logical inconsistencies.

The collective goal is for all participants, not just the facilitator, to become a more expert questioner.

Don't allow the dialogue to become a one-on-one back-and-forth between facilitator and participant (or between one participant and another).

Remember: this is a community of philosophical inquirers. So a good facilitator should involve everyone else at every turn.

Do make sure everyone has a chance to speak.

Invite but do not pressure quieter participants to contribute to the dialogue.

Do be receptive to unexpected and unfamiliar responses.

Facilitators should avoid steering the dialogue in a preconceived direction, as if they know better than others what the answers, or questions, should be.

Don't browbeat a participant or put him on the spot in a way that makes him uncomfortable. You should nudge participants into articulating their perspectives as clearly as possible, but if someone doesn't have a response to your further prodding, move on to other participants.

Don't strive for consensus.

In the version of Socratic inquiry practiced at this discussion group, it doesn't matter if everyone begins and ends a dialogue with disparate perspectives. There's never any need to try to force any sort of agreement.

Do remember that this is just one version of philosophical discourse, and it might not work for everybody.

Don't try to bring the discussion to any sort of artificial closure.

Most dialogues last about two hours. (If held at a coffeehouse or any venue that sells food and drinks, it is of immense benefit to the owner if you take a ten-minute "pause for the cause" after an hour or so of discourse.) A discussion group is considered a success when participants leave a discussion with many more questions than they had at the beginning.

Don't ever use readings to start a group discussion.

This is not supposed to be a group based on didactic directiveness. One of the ways we steer away from the traditional "philosophy club" model is that there is no teacher or guide or guru to lead the discussion, but rather a facilitator who simply makes sure that the group as a whole picks a question among those proposed by the group and then makes sure that the dialogue is well-distributed among participants, so that everyone who cares to can take part.

While AFTER the dialogue, it is quite appropriate for anyone who took part to suggest to others that there's certain books they may want to take a look at that relate to the topic discussed, so participants can get a more keen sense that they are part of a wonderful questioning tradition that includes great thinkers across the ages and disciplines, this should never be done as a way to jump start the dialogue itself.