Example inquiry

Asking questions

Let's use the following question as an exemplar for this step:

What would happen if there were no laws?

This question is a favourite of political philosophers, but perhaps on closer inspection it is a little too open. For instance, does the question mean that there were never any laws? Or does it ask what would happen if the current laws ceased to exist? As currently stated, it would be very hard to tell which meaning is intended. Without specifying, the investigation required may be much larger than necessary. Both interpretations are philosophically interesting and worthy of inquiry, but it is useful to try to be as specific as possible so you can focus your philosophical investigation as best as possible. So, let's focus our question a little bit and ask: *What would happen if the current laws ceased to exist?*

Gathering information

The first step in gathering information is to make a plan. Will you rely on your own experience, observe others, or rely on secondary sources?

At this stage of the inquiry process, it is best to try to gather as many opinions and ideas as possible.

Experience. Your own experience of people and how they interact with laws is a great place to start gathering information. Here is some information you might gather on the question:

- Most people like to follow laws.

- Some people don't like to follow laws.

- Laws seem to keep things orderly.

- Laws seem to contribute to moral designations of good and bad.

Observation. To gather information, you might want to directly observe the actions of people when you take away a law. Although it is difficult to imagine a safe way to remove a law in practice, you could simulate such a scenario. One way to do that would be to play a game with friends where you take away a rule to see what happens. In most card games, players are not allowed to touch or see the cards in another player's hand. What if that rule were eliminated? You could then gather information by observing the actions and reactions of the players.

Secondary sources. Another way to gather information on this question is to research other people's opinions on the matter. Secondary sources might reveal opinions you hadn't considered, such as these:

- Laws are impossible to totally eliminate

- Laws are a means of control by the strong

- Laws don't exist

Reasoning

The next step in the process of philosophical inquiry is to begin reasoning about the information gathered. For instance, from your own experience, it was determined that most people like to follow laws. When we reason about this information, we might get something that looks like this:

*Most people like to follow laws **because** most people like order. Order is predictable and most people like predictability **because** they are afraid of the unknown.*

Or take the statement "Laws don't exist," which you (hypothetically) found in a

secondary source; its reasoning might look something like this:

*Laws don't exist **because** they are only ideas and ideas don't exist because they are immaterial.*

The reasoning process helps determine the most reliable or compelling answer to your question. To determine which conclusion is the most convincing for the above examples, you would need to complete a more rigorous analysis.

You would need to seek confirmation of each statement and test its reliability or believability. For example, if we look at the first example of reasoning we might analyze it as follows:

*Most people like to follow laws **because** most people like order. Order is predictable and most people like predictability **because** they are afraid of the unknown.*

You could analyze the first supporting reason for its reliability or accuracy:

How do we know most people like order?

Some answers:

- Because they follow laws.
- Because orderliness is observed in many aspects of peoples' lives.

If it is because they follow laws (one possible reason or source of evidence) then our reasoning is rather circular (people follow laws because they like order and people like order because they follow laws) and as such isn't very convincing.

If it is because we can find numerous examples of orderliness in most people's lives outside of following laws (orderly rooms, objects, routines, and so on), then it seems plausible that most people like order.

Reasoning about each aspect of supporting evidence allows you to form a compelling conclusion. In this example, the orderliness observed in most people's lives is a much more compelling reason to believe most people like order than the observation that people like order because they follow laws. Of course, as a budding philosopher, you would try to analyze all aspects of your reasoning to uncover any possible problems that would take away from the compelling nature of your conclusion.

Forming and defending a conclusion

After a long reasoning process, you might determine that if all laws ceased to exist tomorrow there would be a brief period of chaos that would give way to the creation of new laws because people like order. If asked, you would be able to go into great and compelling detail as to why you have concluded this using all your supporting evidence from the reasoning stage.