Strategies for Arguing against a Philosophical View

Premise 1: If A, then B
Premise 2: A

Conclusion: B

Questioning the truth of the premises: There are various ways of doing this. An argument goes nowhere if its premises are false so if you show that a premise is false then you have seriously undermined the argument.

Questioning the validity of the argument: You could find a logical flaw in the argument. This is usually a lot less obvious and harder to find. Some ways to go about it:

1. Equivocation: when something (a word, an idea, a phrase) is being used in two different ways. For instance in the above argument Premise 1 is true if you read A in one way and Premise 2 is true if you read A in a different way but there is no reading under which both are true.
2. Finding a contradiction: the author needs you to accept A and accept not-A in order for his argument to work.

Finding a questionable hidden premise: You point out that in order for the argument to work you have to assume that C. Then you try to argue against C.

Finding an alternative: Sometimes arguments depend on their being two alternatives. The philosopher argues that either A or B must be true and then argues for something that follows from either of them. A good way to respond to this argument is to find an alternative that the philosopher had not considered and show how it would defeat his argument.

Finding a straw man argument: The philosopher is attacking a view but not giving it enough credit and making it seem highly implausible. A good way to argue against this kind of argument is to defend the view the philosopher is attacking by making it robust enough to withhold her criticisms.

Reductio Ad Absurdum: Showing that a claim an author is making leads to an absurd conclusion.

(a) You accept that the argument is valid (i.e. the conclusion follows from the premises). But you go on to show that if you accept B, then you have to accept C, and C is something that no one would want to accept or that the author wouldn't want to accept.

(b) You could also show an absurdity that results from accepting one of the premises. For instance, you show that if A is true then C must follow and C is something absurd.

(c) You can also show that even though the conclusion the author wants follows from the two premises, another conclusion also follows from the premises which is undesirable or absurd.

Presenting a counter-example: To show that premise 1 is false you could describe an instance where it is true that A but not true that B. To show that premise 2 is false, you could find an example of not-A.

Finding circularity (or begging the question): An argument depends on finding independent reasons to believe the premises and then arguing for a conclusion that follows from those premises. An argument is circular when it no longer offers independent grounds for accepting it. The author assumes his conclusion is true, for example. Most cases aren't that obvious though. Sometimes the philosopher wants you to accept a premise which is very close to her conclusion or would necessarily lead to her conclusion. If that premise is not argued for, it amounts to begging the question.

Arguing that an argument is Ad Hominem: Ad Hominem means that a philosopher is attacking the person presenting the argument instead of the actual view. For instance, she ridicules and attacks the philosopher's other views instead of engaging with the argument. This one is hard to find. Most philosophers know better than that.

Finding that the argument affirms the consequent: This is an argumentative fallacy that can often go unnoticed. The philosopher argues that:

If Mary is a Marxist, then she doesn't believe in capitalism. (If A, then B)
Mary doesn't believe in capitalism. (B)
So, Mary is a Marxist. (A)

If you have taken any logic you know that this doesn't follow and leads to highly fallacious arguments.

Finding a slippery slope argument: The philosopher argues that if A then it's highly likely that B and if B it's highly likely that C and if C then it's highly likely that D, where D is something that nobody thinks is true so we shouldn't believe A. If the connections between A, B, C, and D necessarily follow then there isn't a problem but if the argument depends on it just being *likely* that they follow then it's a problem. One way of arguing against this strategy is to show that there are cases of B that don't follow from A, or cases of C that don't follow from B, etc.