Paper Prompts

Each of the following prompts is based on the same basic format. First, you will be asked to consider an assigned reading from the syllabus. Next, you will be asked to adopt a stance on whether the author's argument for their main conclusion succeeds. Finally, you will use your answer to this second question to develop and defend a thesis. Depending on the stance you decide to adopt, your thesis should take one of the following two forms:

> **Form 1**
> (a) Since the best objections to it fail, the author's argument for their (main) conclusion succeeds.
> (b) The author's argument (or position) suffers from an important problem, but this problem can be satisfactorily resolved.

> **Form 2**
> (a) The author's argument for their (main) conclusion fails for the following reasons…
> (b) The author's argument (or position) suffers from an important problem, namely…

While Form 1 mentions "objections" (plural), you are strongly encouraged to focus on *one* objection (or objections that suffer from a *common* problem). Similarly, while Form 2 mentions "reasons" (plural), you are strongly encouraged to develop one *main* argument for your thesis. In general, it is better to make fewer points but in significant detail than to make many points but without the space to sufficiently develop or substantiate them.

Regardless of the thesis you defend, you should anticipate and counter at least one objection. For example, if your paper focuses on refuting the best objections to an argument (Form 1), you should anticipate and counter at least one attempt to revive one or more of those objections. Similarly, if the thesis of your paper is that the author's argument fails (Form 2), you should anticipate and counter at least one objection to your thesis.

Keep in mind that you don't have to personally *accept* whatever thesis you decide to defend in your paper. There are other legitimate reasons to defend a thesis. Maybe developing a powerful argument for a problematic position is the best means to the end of refuting that position at a later time. Or maybe the thesis you personally reject is the one that will be the most interesting or fun to defend. Or maybe you want to use your paper as an exercise in open-mindedness.

Except in rare cases, your paper should more or less follow the following format:

STEP 1: Provide a brief introduction to the issue and clearly state your thesis.

STEP 2: Carefully exposit the argument(s) or position(s) that you will defend or criticize, and then bolster them by providing additional reasons to accept them.

STEP 3: Develop your own argument(s) for your thesis.

STEP 4: Consider and respond to objections.

STEP 5: Tie up any loose ends and clearly explain what you have established.

Please proceed to the next page to review the prompts.

1. **Animal ethics** (Week 5)

Pick one of the following two options.

(a) In "All Animals Are Equal," from his book, *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer argues that racism, sexism, and other comparable prejudices are morally problematic because they violate the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. Correspondingly, he suggests that if we were to abandon this principle, we would be forced to give up the best defense against these prejudices. Supplementing these claims with additional premises, Singer concludes that just as we should condemn racism and sexism, so also should we condemn *speciesism*—a "prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (6). What is Singer's argument for this conclusion, and does it succeed? If his argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

(b) In "Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too)," Tristram McPherson argues for *Modest Ethical Veganism,* the thesis that it is typically wrong to use animal products. He argues for this thesis by providing a number of sub-arguments for subsidiary conclusions. Focus on one (or more) of these sub-arguments. Does that argument fail? If so, what are your reasons for believing that it fails? If that argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? Based on your discussion, what should we conclude about Modest Ethical Veganism?

2. **The ethics of abortion** (Weeks 6–7)

Pick one of the following two options:

(a) In "I Was Once a Fetus: That Is Why Abortion Is Wrong," Alexander Pruss argues for the following conclusion: "abortion is wrong in the same circumstances in which it is wrong to kill an adult" (19). His argument has three main steps. In the first step, he argues for the subsidiary conclusions that (i) *he*—the individual named "Alexander Pruss"—is a biological organism, and (ii) the biological organism to which he is identical was once a fetus. His argument for conclusion (i) involves a process of elimination: he isn't an immaterial soul, or a functional entity, or a brain, or a being constituted by a biological organism; therefore, he must be a biological organism. In the second step, he argues that it would have been wrong to kill the fetus that he once was for the same reason(s) that it is wrong to kill him now. Finally, in the third step, he argues that his conclusions generalize to other ordinary fetuses. Does Pruss's main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

(b) In "A Defense of Abortion," Judith Jarvis Thomson concludes that even if the typical fetus is a person who has a right to life, the typical abortion is still morally permissible. In arguing for this conclusion, she provides a thought experiment in which you are captured by the Society of Music Lovers and hooked up to a famous violinist who is suffering from a fatal kidney ailment. The director of the hospital then explains to you: "To unplug you would be to kill him. But never mind, it's only for nine months. By then he will have recovered from his ailment, and can safely be unplugged from you" (49). Thomson argues that since it would be morally permissible for you to unplug yourself from the violinist in such a situation, and ordinary cases of pregnancy are relevantly similar to such a situation, it follows that ordinary abortions are also morally permissible. She also argues that careful reflection on this and other thought experiments reveals a number of morally important distinctions that we can use to explain why this is so. Does Thomson's main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If her argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

3. **Affirmative action** (Week 11)

In "The Color-Blind Principle," from his book, *Blacks and Social Justice*, Bernard Boxill opens the chapter by summarizing a landmark 1896 United States Supreme Court decision, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation under a "separate but equal" doctrine. In his lone dissenting opinion, Justice John Marshall Harlan famously declared: "Our Constitution is color-blind." Boxill uses this case to identify what he calls "the color-blind principle," which states that "no *law* or *public policy* [should] be designed to treat people differently because they are of a different color [or gender]" (10). It seems to follow from this principle that many color- or gender-conscious policies—including those that give preference to certain groups, such as African Americans, women, and Hispanics, in the competition for enrollment at universities and colleges—should be eliminated. Boxill, however, argues that the color-blind principle is false and that certain color-conscious policies should be preserved or instated. Does Boxill's main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

4. **Consent** (Week 12)

In "Sex, Lies, and Consent," Tom Dougherty defines the *Lenient Thesis* as follows: "It is only a minor wrong to deceive another person into sex by misleading her or him about certain personal features such as natural hair color, occupation, or romantic intentions " (719). As Dougherty observes, some find this thesis to be intuitively plausible. Yet, according to Dougherty, the Lenient Thesis is *false*. He concludes that it is *seriously wrong* to deceive another person into sex by misleading that person about seemingly trivial aspects of oneself when those aspects "would be a deal breaker for the victim of the deception" (717). Dougherty attempts to establish this conclusion by arguing that such "deception vitiates the victim's sexual consent, and it is seriously wrong to have sex with someone while lacking his or her consent" (717). Does Dougherty's main argument succeed? If so, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If his argument fails, what are your reasons for believing that it fails?

5. **Choose your own topic**

Write a philosophy paper on a contemporary moral problem of your choice, including those listed on the syllabus that are not represented by the above prompts, such as the ethics of having children, global justice, puzzles of charitable giving, and climate change ethics. Another option is to write on one of the topics from Prompts 1–4, but with a different approach. In order to pick one of these options, you **must** meet with me during office hours to discuss your topic and the thesis you intend to argue for. If I decide that your thesis is appropriate for the assignment, I will approve you to write the paper.