Find-a-Flaw Assignment

Tentative due date: Monday, November 26 at 10:50 AM[1]

Prompts

OPTION #1

As we will discuss during the first three weeks of class, there are only two ways to rationally undermine an argument: point to some flaw in the reasoning, or provide reasons to reject one or more of the premises. For this assignment, you will apply the first of these skills to your everyday life by summarizing an argument for a position on a contemporary moral problem that you've encountered outside of class and explaining why the reasoning is flawed.

It is largely up to you to decide what you consider to be a contemporary moral problem. It can be anything relatively recent that raises moral questions (e.g., about what we *should* or *shouldn't* do), such as a type of action, inaction, or activity; a law, court decision, or public policy; an institution; a worldview; or a recent event.

Your **target argument**—that is, the argument that you will evaluate—can be extracted from the news, social media, political commentary, a public debate, a drunken party conversation, a Thanksgiving feud, or whatever, so long as (a) the argument is for a position on a contemporary moral problem and (b) you encountered the argument on your own time while enrolled in this course. The argument can be related to one of the topics we will discuss in class (e.g., animal ethics), but your target argument can't come from any of the readings uploaded to Canvas. This is meant to be a fun opportunity for you to apply the concepts and skills from this course outside of the classroom.

Some acceptable examples include (but are not limited to):

- You read an opinion piece in which the author argues that everyone has a right to health care. While the author's premises are clearly intended to logically entail their conclusion, their argument is logically invalid.
- You posted an article on Facebook about pejoratives, and someone objected to it in the comments on your wall, but the reasons she cited for her conclusion have no real bearing on the issue.
- A friend attempted to persuade you that you should adopt a vegan lifestyle, but he appealed to a moral principle that doesn't have the implications that he believes it does.
- You attended a public debate on whether universities should refrain from inviting controversial figures (whose views may be harmful) to speak on college campuses. One of the speakers argues by analogy, but the analogy is too weak to support her conclusion.

Your written piece should be **700–1,000 words** (roughly 1.5–2 single-spaced pages). The goal of the assignment is to explain why the **reasoning** behind your target argument is flawed, **not** to argue that the *premises* or *conclusion* of that argument are *false*. In other words, in your written piece, you should remain completely agnostic on whether the premises or conclusion of your target argument are true. Instead, you should attempt to persuade your reader that **even on the assumption that the premises are true**, they do not give us a **good reason** to accept that conclusion.

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[1] While you must submit your assignment by this deadline, it is **highly recommended** that you keep a lookout for a target argument from now until November and write your assignment as soon as you find something good. **Don't wait until the last minute!**

Let's suppose your interlocutor's name is Bob. Before you begin writing, you should ask yourself questions like the following:

- Is Bob most charitably interpreted as giving a single argument or instead a number of arguments to support the premises of a main argument? If the latter, what are those arguments?
- Is Bob most charitably interpreted as intending his conclusion to *logically follow* from his premises, or is Bob instead most charitably interpreted as merely intending his premises to *significantly raise the probability* that his conclusion is true? If the former, is his argument logically valid? If the latter, is his argument inductively strong?
- Does Bob commit any logical fallacies?
- Is Bob assuming that a moral principle applies to a case he is discussing when in fact it doesn't?

OPTION #2 (ALTERNATIVE MEDIA)

With **special permission** from the instructor, you may complete this assignment through alternative media instead of prose. For example, you might make a short documentary or podcast. This should **not** be a substitute for rigorously engaging the assignment, but rather a different way of doing so.

Grading Information/Submission Instructions

You should treat this as an extended reading response assignment and hold yourself to the standard of the reading response rubric. However, you can also use the following breakdown as a rough guide to getting the full 10 points:

1 point: Shows proficiency with the relevant empirical, logical, philosophical, and ethical concepts.

1 point: Provides a concise introduction to the contemporary moral problem along with the necessary context for the reader to understand the dialectic (e.g., clearly explains the when/why/where of the target argument).

2 points: Describes a contemporary moral problem in sufficient detail and explains why it is a moral problem.

2 points: Presents the target argument in a precise, methodical, and charitable way.

2 points: Clearly explains why the reasoning of the target argument is flawed and fails to establish the conclusion (even if the premises are true).

2 points: Meets the word-count and contains no grammatical, spelling, or style errors.

= 10 points

NOTE ON GROUP WORK: Your writing **must** be entirely your own. Co-authorship is **not** permitted. See p. 4 of the syllabus for more information on academic dishonesty.

SUBMITTING YOUR ASSIGNMENT: To submit your assignment, please attach it as a **PDF** (**not** pages, doc, etc.) through Canvas.