

Paper Prompts

Each of the following prompts is based on the same basic format. First, you will be asked to consider a 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 the previous 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 (in your own words):

Form 1

- (a) Since an important objection to it fails, the author’s argument for their (main) conclusion likely 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 a *main* argument for your thesis. In general, it is better to make fewer points but in persuasive detail than to make many points but without the space to sufficiently develop or substantiate them.

No matter what your thesis is, you should anticipate and counter at least one objection. For example, if your paper focuses on refuting the best objections to an argument or position (Form 1), you should anticipate and counter at least one attempt to revive one of those objections. Similarly, if your paper focuses on criticizing the author’s argument or position (Form 2), you should anticipate and counter at least one attempt to defend the author’s argument or position against your criticisms.

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 way to refute that position later—by showing that the strongest argument for it fails. Or maybe the thesis you personally reject is the one that will be the most interesting to defend. Or maybe you want to use your paper as an exercise in open-mindedness.

Except in special circumstances, your paper should have a structure along the following lines:

- STEP 1:** Provide a brief introduction to the issue and clearly state your thesis.
- STEP 2:** Clarify any key terminology that you will use; carefully summarize the argument(s) or position(s) that you will defend or criticize; and, if applicable, apply the principle of charity¹ to bolster them into their strongest form(s).
- STEP 3:** Develop your own argument(s) for your thesis.
- STEP 4:** Consider and respond to objections.
- STEP 5:** Conclude by briefly summarizing what your paper has established and how.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZZ7tQnI2-M>

Pick **one** of the following prompts for your paper assignment.

1. **Metaethics** (Weeks 3–5)²

(a) In “Moral Realism,” Michael Smith summarizes G. E. Moore’s famous open question argument against naturalistic moral realism. What is naturalistic moral realism, and what is the open question argument against naturalistic moral realism? Does Moore’s open question argument succeed? If you maintain that Moore’s argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that Moore’s argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? (**Note:** feel free to draw on one of the objections that Smith discusses in “Moral Realism.” However, you’ll need to do more than simply *summarize* a preexisting objection—for example, you might anticipate and counter a response to that objection that Smith does not discuss. You may also find it helpful to read Moore’s original argument, which I will make available on Blackboard.)

(b) In “The Unbelievable Truth About Morality,” Bart Streumer lays out two arguments for moral error theory, the view that all moral judgments and statements are false. The first is the argument from queerness, which begins with the premise that if moral properties were to exist, then they would be “queer.” The second is the argument from relativity, which starts with the premise that members of different societies often make conflicting moral judgements. Pick one of these arguments. Explain how the argument is supposed to support moral error theory. Does the argument succeed? If you maintain that the argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that the argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? (**Note:** it may be helpful to consult J. L. Mackie’s chapters on these arguments in *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. I will upload these chapters to Blackboard. For an advanced discussion of the argument from relativity, you might want to read Richard Joyce’s “Arguments From Moral Disagreement to Moral Skepticism,” which I will make available on Blackboard.)

2. **Normative ethics** (Weeks 7–10)

(a) Classical utilitarians endorse hedonism about *value*; they also seem to endorse hedonism about *welfare*. Conversely, they hold that beauty, truth, knowledge, autonomy, virtue, contact with reality, etc. are only valuable (or conducive to *how well one’s life is going for them*) to the extent that they promote one’s pleasure. Robert Nozick uses the example of an “experience machine” to argue against classical (hedonistic) utilitarianism. What exactly is classical (hedonistic) utilitarianism, and how can Nozick’s example be used to argue against it? Does that argument succeed? If you maintain that the argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that the argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? Does your discussion suggest that we ought to permanently enter an experience machine if given the choice (and/or that it would be rational for us to do that), or does it suggest that we ought not to do that (and/or that it would be irrational for us to do that)? (**Note:** if you’d like to focus specifically on the *welfare* aspect of this debate, you may find it helpful to read Chris Heathwood’s “Hedonism,” which I will make available on Blackboard.)

² For many students, these topics in metaethics are very difficult. So, I would caution against choosing one of these topics for your final paper. I have included these options for those who find them especially interesting or who already have some ideas about how to approach them.

(b) Act utilitarians posit a single moral principle that is meant to explain why any possible action is morally required. John Stuart Mill calls this the “greatest happiness principle.” Explain Mill’s greatest happiness principle and discuss some reasons to accept Mill’s act utilitarianism. Is Mill’s act utilitarianism true? If you maintain that Mill’s act utilitarianism is true, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that Mill’s act utilitarianism is false, what are your reasons for maintaining that it is false? If you think that Mill’s act utilitarianism confronts a potential counterexample, can that potential counterexample be avoided by reinterpreting or tweaking the greatest happiness principle (say, by understanding it in terms of what is *reasonably expected* to have certain consequences instead of what will *in fact* have certain consequences)? Why or why not? (**Note:** you may want to consult the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s entry on utilitarianism. Ben Eggleston’s “Act Utilitarianism” is also a good resource, though it is more advanced. Chris Heathwood’s “Hedonism” may also be helpful. I’ll upload these to Blackboard.)

(c) Kantianism holds that there is a single moral principle—the categorical imperative—that explains why any possible action is morally permissible or morally wrong. Immanuel Kant provides two different formulations of the categorical imperative—the *principle of universalizability* and the *principle of humanity*—that are meant to deliver the same verdicts about specific cases. Focus on one or both formulations of the categorical imperative. Clearly explain the principle of universalizability (and/or the principle of humanity) and discuss some reasons to accept Kantianism. Is Kantianism true? If you maintain that Kantianism is true, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that Kantianism is false, what are your reasons for maintaining that it is false? If you think that the principle of universalizability (and/or the principle of humanity) confronts a potential counterexample, can that potential counterexample be avoided by reinterpreting or tweaking the principle? Why or why not? (**Note:** feel free to draw on Christine Korsgaard’s “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law” or Robert Nozick’s “The Rationality of Side Constraints” when explaining the principle of universalizability and/or the principle of humanity.)

3. Animal ethics (Week 11)

(a) In “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too),” Tristram McPherson argues for *Modest Ethical Veganism*, the view that it is typically wrong to purchase or otherwise use animal products. He argues for this thesis by laying out a main argument and then providing several sub-arguments for the premises of that main argument. As McPherson points out, “the [main] argument is valid: if the premises of the argument are true, then the conclusion must be true. This means that anyone wishing to reasonably reject my conclusion must explain which premise they wish to reject, and how my argument for that premise is flawed” (26–27). Focus on one (or two) of the premises from McPherson’s main argument and one (or two) of his sub-arguments for that premise. Do McPherson’s sub-arguments for that premise (or those premises) succeed? If you maintain that McPherson’s sub-arguments succeed, what is (in your view) the best objection to those sub-arguments, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that McPherson’s sub-arguments fail, what are your reasons for maintaining that they fail? Based on your discussion, what is the most reasonable conclusion to draw about Modest Ethical Veganism? Why?

(b) In “Consumer Ethics, Food Ethics, and Beyond,” Mark Budolfson lays out the *inefficacy argument*, which can be adapted to argue that it is typically morally permissible to purchase or otherwise use factory farmed animal products. He also considers several objections to the inefficacy argument. Focus on the inefficacy argument for the conclusion that it is morally permissible to purchase or otherwise use factory farmed animal products. Does that argument succeed? If you maintain that the argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you

maintain that the argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? Based on your discussion, is it most reasonable to conclude that it is typically morally permissible to purchase or otherwise use factory farmed animal products, or is it most reasonable to conclude that it is typically morally wrong to purchase or otherwise use factory farmed animal products? Why?

4. The ethics of abortion (Weeks 12–13)

(a) In “I Was Once a Fetus: That Is Why Abortion Is Wrong,” Alexander Pruss argues for the following conclusion: “abortion is wrong in exactly the same circumstances in which it is wrong to kill an adult” (169). 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 brain, or a process of thought; 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 would be wrong to kill him now. Finally, in the third step, he argues that his conclusions generalize to most other human fetuses. Focusing on one (or two) of these steps, critically examine Pruss’s main argument. Does Pruss’s main argument succeed? If you maintain that his argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that his main argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? (**Note:** feel free to draw on one of the optional readings for potential objections. However, you’ll need to do more than simply *summarize* a preexisting objection—for example, you might anticipate and counter a response to it.)

(b) In “A Defense of Abortion,” Judith Jarvis Thomson argues that even if the typical human 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 this situation, it follows that ordinary abortions are also morally permissible. She also argues that careful reflection on this and other thought experiments reveals several morally important distinctions that we can use to explain why this is so. Does Thomson’s main argument succeed? If you maintain that her argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that her argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? (**Note:** feel free to draw on Michael Tooley’s objection in “Abortion and Infanticide.” However, you’ll need to do more than simply *summarize* a preexisting objection—for example, you might anticipate and counter a response to Tooley’s argument that Tooley does not consider.)

5. Obligations to the needy (Week 15)

In “Famine, Affluence and Morality” and *The Life You Can Save*, Peter Singer argues that most people in affluent societies are *morally obligated* to stop spending their money on luxuries (clothes they don’t need to keep warm, cars they don’t need for transportation, houses they don’t need for shelter, etc.) and instead donate that money to effective aid agencies. He argues that this conclusion follows from plausible premises that most people find intuitive (at least until they notice that an extremely demanding conclusion follows from them!). To motivate these principles, he provides the example of a

child drowning in a pond, who can be saved at the cost of ruining one's new shoes and nice suit. Describe Singer's example, summarize how he uses it to argue for his main conclusion, and explain the implications of his main conclusion for the average U.S. citizen (e.g., approximately how much money they are morally obligated to donate per year and where they are morally obligated to donate). Does Singer's argument succeed? If you maintain that his argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that his argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails? (**Note:** feel free to draw on Travis Timmerman's "Sometimes there is nothing wrong with letting a child drown." However, you'll need to do more than simply *summarize* Timmerman's article—for example, you might anticipate and counter a response to Timmerman's argument that Timmerman does not consider.)

6. Consent (Week 16)

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 you maintain that his argument succeeds, what is (in your view) the best objection to it, and why does that objection fail? If you maintain that his argument fails, what are your reasons for maintaining that it fails?

7. Choose your own topic

Write a philosophy paper on an ethical issue of your choice, including one of the issues listed on the syllabus that is not covered by the above prompts. (For example, a past student decided to write on ethical issues pertaining to pornography, even though we didn't cover those issues in class. Their rough draft is available on Blackboard in the Sample Rough Drafts folder under Paper Prompts / Prompt Resources.) In order to pick this option, you **must** meet with me during virtual office hours to discuss your topic and the thesis for which you intend to argue. If I decide that your thesis is appropriate for the assignment, I will approve you to write the paper.