PHIL 20101
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Asynchronous debate: assignment description

1. <u>**Description**</u>

In the first weeks of class, you will vote (in a ranked choice manner) on which general subject matters you would like to debate. The instructor will assign students to teams of 3 students. Once students have been assigned to individual topics, they will be assigned **two** theses that will form the starting point for research and debate. Each side of the debate will argue in favor of one thesis and against another. Over the next few weeks, students will produce three artifacts:

- A position statement (laying out their approach to both theses). This written presentation should be about 600-700 words long. It must be very clear and well-structured. It can be written either in short paper form (see example below) or in more of an outline format.
- A short slide presentation or video rebuttal of opposing position statement.
- A response to the opposing team's rebuttal (this can take the form of a written statement or an audiovisual presentation).

The debate will conclude with an in-class Q&A session, in which the two teams will be asked to prepare and pose questions to the other team, and then the instructor/classmates will have the opportunity to ask questions.

Each member of your team needs to work together to produce all three artifacts. Students will be graded as a group based upon the strength of the three artifacts produced. However, to split the work fairly, it is expected that one student will take "lead authorship" for one of each of the artifacts (e.g., while all students will contribute to the research cited in the position statement, one student in particular should take responsibility for writing the statement up, while another student could narrate the rebuttal video and a third could write the response). Therefore, a portion of the student grade for artifact production will depend on their performance on their individual artifact, alongside the overall performance of the group.

2. <u>**Tips for doing well in debate**</u>

In analyzing the theses that will form the basis for debate, students will need to determine:

- What are the interesting ethical questions that one might ask about this thesis?
- How would you answer those questions?
- **How would you defend or argue for your answer?**

The last question is bolded because it is the most important. The primary skill we are trying to build in this assignment is your ability to clearly present reasons for the views you hold.

Each team should focus primarily on their *positive* thesis in their position statement and response, and on their *negative* thesis in their rebuttal. Do not spend time in your position statement or response attacking your opponent's thesis.

In the position statement, focus first on presenting a clear thesis statement and then on presenting clear deductive and/or inductive arguments in favor of your thesis. You should anticipate any obvious objections to your position, and respond to these objections, again with deductive and/or inductive arguments.

Every good position statement will begin with research. The nature of this research will depend on the debate in question, but in general, it will involve investigating the previous writings of able thinkers on the subject.

- It is a good idea to incorporate the philosophical ideas we have talked about in class, but you should avoid simply appealing to authority. (The fact that Mill thought alleviating suffering was important is not good enough reason to believe that it is. But *you* can claim that alleviating suffering is important and then use Mill's arguments as a kind of support.)
- It should be very clear how the reasons you provide support your conclusion. If it helps, you can think of these as *premises,* and the answer to your question as the *conclusion.*
- Your premises should be things that are obviously true (or for which you can offer strong support). You shouldn't be relying on stats you got from some obscure source, or any empirical claims that other people in the class might doubt. Good philosophical debate consists of arguments made from well-established evidence, not the dramatic foisting of new evidence into the mix, as in a bad courtroom drama.

In your rebuttal statements, focus on laying out clear arguments against the thesis you oppose. Avoid rhetorical tricks: the goal here is not to belittle or flatter your opponent into dropping their position, but to try to draw closer to the truth through rational clarification, honing in on key points of disagreement, and providing good reasons to consider a variety of alternative viewpoints.

- It should be really clear which part of the argument the objections target. Do they purport to show that one of the premises in the argument is false? Or do they purport to show that the argument's premises don't support its conclusion?
- Don't simply state your objection -- *motivate* it. A reader should be able to understand why someone would find the objection compelling.
- You will be graded on the *quality* of your objection(s) and response(s), not on how many you include. Focus on developing objections — and responses to objections — that are maximally challenging.

In your reply, focus on using the arguments presented by the opposing team as a means toward developing better and stronger arguments for your position. Of course, some of the challenges presented may not be very strong, and you should point out their weaknesses. However, the ultimate goal of the reply is not to invalidate the truly strong challenges, but rather to develop a better point of view. If you cannot completely refute a challenge, consider whether or not you can and should moderate your position in response to it, and consider to what extent you can moderate your position without giving up its core claims. Or, use the challenge as an inspiration to do further research that will bolster your claims.

In the Q&A, your prepared questions should be short — it should not take you more than a minute or two to express them. They should also be answerable in a reasonable amount of time; do not ask questions that hinge on obscure data points that would require 3 hours of library research to answer. The best questions challenge the opposing team to defend or clarify specific points in an argument: for example, they might challenge the warrant used to justify an inductive inference, or reveal a lapse in validity in a purportedly airtight syllogism.

In questions and responses during Q&A, students should avoid just restating arguments made in their artifacts. Their live arguments can build on written/audiovisual work, but should carry the debate forward (this is a sign of a good philosophical argument — it continues to advance, rather than merely reiterating earlier-made points). Each member should participate in Q&A, and each should make a distinct contribution that does not simply restate something another team member has already said. It is okay if there is some overlap: for example, one team member's point can be supported by some of the same considerations as another's, or one team member can build on another team member's point. But each team member's main point should be unique.

3. **Peer Review Assignment**

After the Q&A session, the other students in class will complete their peer review form. Students will be graded based on their evaluation of the argumentative skill of the two teams. Philosophical debate is not about "beating" an opponent or demonstrating rhetorical skill, nor are philosophical truths decided by the will of the people or appeal to majority. Therefore, the point of the peer review process is not to say which side of the debate you found more convincing. Rather, you are asked primarily to show evidence bearing on the *clarity* of the teams' statements and the *strength* of their arguments.

Peer review will be used to grade the strength of the artifacts and performance in Q&A, but students will also be graded based on the strength of their peer review form. They can earn a total of 12 points for their performance on the form (the section on which they perform most poorly will be dropped). Performance is evaluated based on accuracy in identifying and evaluating the positions and arguments raised in the different artifacts and in the Q&A.

Peer evaluation guide:

Statement of a Philosophical Position
- ❏ Restate in your own words the primary positive position argued for by each team
- ❏ Were these positions well-articulated and adhered to in each team's position statement, defense, and Q&A?

Arguments propounded
- ❏ Outline the strongest deductive or inductive argument advanced in the position statement, rebuttal, or response paper.
  - ❏ Identify it as deductive or inductive.
  - ❏ Outline it in a way that makes it obvious how each premise supports the conclusion. You may need to make unstated premises explicit.
  - ❏ If the argument is deductive,
    - ❏ Identify whether or not the argument is valid, and if it is invalid, identify the fallacy or fallacies.
    - ❏ If the argument is valid, identify whether or not the argument is sound, and if it is unsound, identify the false premise(s).
  - ❏ If the argument is inductive,
    - ❏ Identify whether or not the argument is strong, and if it is not strong, identify its weakness(es)
    - ❏ If the argument is strong, identify whether or not the argument is cogent, and if it is not cogent, identify the false premise(s).

Position statements

- ❏ Did the position statements anticipate any objections? If so, which objections did they anticipate?

Rebuttal statements
- ❏ Do these rebuttals adequately address the position statement? Identify a claim or claims in the rebuttal that directly address the position statement.
- ❏ Did the arguments of the rebuttals successfully undermine the position statements of the opposing team?

Replies
- ❏ Does this reply adequately respond to the rebuttal? Identify a claim or claims in the reply that directly address the rebuttal.
- ❏ Did the arguments in the replies successfully defend the team's position?

Q&A
- ❏ Do the challenges that the teams raised in Q&A address weaknesses in the other team's arguments? Give an example, if there was any, of an effective challenge raised by each team, and show how it brought some weakness to light.
- ❏ Do the replies adequately address the effective challenges? Give an example, if there was any, of an effective response from each team, and show how it parried the challenge raised.

4. Example position statement (lifted from GGL's Ethics Bowl assignment description):

1. **Question:** Is it morally better to pursue work that directly "makes the world a better place," or pursue just any high-earning career and with the intention of giving large sums of money to charity.

2. **Argument:**
   Our team will argue that it is morally better to pursue work that will directly make the world a better place. *(Tip: It's a good idea to start with the statement of your position.)*

   The question here is one of comparison. Which career aims are morally *better?* So, to support the claim that it is morally better to pursue work that directly makes the world better, we do not need to argue that there's *nothing* morally admirable about individuals who pursue a high earning career. Instead we will make the case that (i) pursuing a high earning career is morally dubious, or that there are problems with this approach, and (ii) trying to make a direct impact avoids those problems. *(Tip: Sometimes it's good to give your reader a summary or outline of how you're going to argue, making it clear how your points support your main claim.)*

   The first moral problem with pursuing a high earning career for charitable purposes is that it is not universalizable. If every smart, capable young person pursued a job on Wall Street, there would be no one left to run the charitable organizations to actually do the work of helping people in need. There are many jobs that need doing in order for the world to function well, including many jobs that require education and intelligence. And if we all pursue jobs on Wall Street, many of those jobs would be neglected. This point

echoes Kant's categorical imperative, but of course one needn't be a Kantian in order to see that there would be *more* suffering and need if every capable young person pursued a high-earning career on Wall Street. (A separate problem is that there would not be enough high-earning jobs to go around.) Pursuing a high-earning career cannot be a moral recommendation or requirement for *every* capable young person.

The second moral problem with simply pursuing high earnings is that it is in tension with true flourishing and the cultivation of virtue. Arguably, the ideal moral agent is not just someone who does things that alleviate others' suffering. Aristotle and Jesus both thought the ideal moral agent was someone who had certain emotions toward others and instinctive, loving responses toward their needs. A truly moral person has cultivated capacities for love, generosity, etc., and such capacities are good not only for society but for the person who has them. Now, one might pursue a career on Wall Street with altruistic motivations in the background. But in practice, such pursuits would involve working 80 hours/week with limited time for loving human contact, as well as cultivating a ruthlessly competitive personality. This environment is one that discourages, rather than supports, the cultivation of virtue and true flourishing.

Finally, notice that pursuing a career with the intention of making a direct impact avoids these two problems. If everyone tried to find work that made the world a better place, in some way suited to their environment and capabilities, arguably the world would *become* a better place. And integrating one's values into one's daily work by finding a career that is directly beneficial to society would create an environment that would support the cultivation of virtue.

The major objection to our argument would be that there are also moral problems with pursuing work that directly makes the world a better place. In particular, such work fails to achieve the real moral results that the investment banker can achieve by giving to charities such as Against Malaria. In response, we'd like to make two points. First, it is dubious that "results" are all that matter morally. The Trolley Problem and the Repugnant Conclusion both raise significant issues for this sort of utilitarian thought. Second, as we suggested in making our first point, there are many "results" besides the saving of lives that are morally valuable. Yes, there are lots of people who need malaria nets. But there is also a need for those who will work for social justice, plan sewer systems, raise families, create works of art, etc.

In conclusion, we maintain that - while there may be something morally admirable about the investment banker who gives money to charity, and while there may be a moral imperative for those who find themselves in high-earning careers to give to effective charities - it is morally better in choosing a career to pursue work that directly makes the world a better place.

5. Grading breakdown:
Lead paper authorship: 60% of final debate grade: (180 points)
Group performance (same for all team members): 30% of final debate grade (90 points)
Q&A: 10% of final debate grade (30 points)
Peer review assignment: up to 12 extra points