

Philosophy 1100: Introduction to Ethics

The First Essay-Writing Exercise

Your two essay-writing exercises involve two parts, which are described below, along with the due dates for the first of the two essay-writing exercises.

Part 1: An outline of your basic thesis, the structure of your essay, the general line or lines along which you'll be arguing in support of your thesis, the central objection (or objections) that you'll be considering, and how you will be responding to the objection (or objections). (5%)

Due Date: Friday, October 23

Part 2: The completed essay, of about 1200-1500 words in length. (15%)

Due Date: Friday, November 6

Choosing a Topic

The first thing that you need to do is to settle on a topic for your essay. At the end of this handout, I've listed a number of possibilities.

Some of the topic descriptions are very brief. Others contain a number of questions. In the latter case, the questions are intended merely to suggest some things on which you might focus, so you should not feel that you must address all of the specific questions that are listed.

A Non-Religious, Philosophical Approach

Many people defend ethical views by appealing either to religious or theological assumptions, or to moral principles that are religiously based. Such assumptions or principles are often of a highly controversial sort, and exercises 1, 2, and 3 were intended to illustrate how problematic an appeal either to religious and theological premises, or to moral principles that are religiously based, can be.

It is possible of course, that there are religious claims that, although controversial, can be shown to be reasonable. Any such defense, however, is a major undertaking, and in an essay of this length, the chances of success in doing that are not good.

In addition, however, any discussion of religious claims that is likely to be intellectually satisfactory requires a serious background in philosophy of religion. The Philosophy Department has a number of philosophers who are experts in the area of philosophy of religion, and if you are interested in exploring religious issues, you may well want to consider taking one of the philosophy of religion courses that the Department offers. This, however, is a course in ethics, and here you need to confine yourself to non-religious, philosophical arguments: religious assumptions, and moral claims based on a religious point of view, are almost always going to be very controversial, and virtually impossible to defend successfully in an essay of the length you are writing here. Any such claims, then, are to be avoided.

Instructions for Part 1: A Detailed Outline of Your Essay

This first part involves writing a detailed outline for your essay as a whole. This should consist of the following sections:

Section 1: Your Basic Thesis

In this first section, you should state the basic thesis that you will be defending. This should require only a sentence or two.

Section 2: The Structure of Your Essay

In this section, you should describe, in a single, short paragraph, how your essay will be divided up into sections.

Section 3: Your Main Supporting Argument or Arguments

You may be offering a single argument in support of your basic thesis, or more than one argument. If you do decide to offer more than one argument, this section should be divided into clearly labeled sub-sections, one for each of the arguments that you will be offering.

Your objective in this section will be to set out your argument (or arguments) in as clear a way as possible. Try to make all of your assumptions completely explicit, and try to show exactly how your argument supports the conclusion you wish to establish, by setting your argument out in a clear, step-by-step fashion, so that the reader does not have to read between the lines, or guess as to how exactly your argument goes.

I shall then be able to determine whether what you are going to offer in support of your thesis seems like a generally promising line of argument, or whether, on the other hand, there are possible difficulties in your argument, so that your argument will need to be strengthened and improved

Section 4: Important Objections to Your Arguments or to Your Thesis

A crucial part of any essay discussing a moral issue involves considering objections, either to the argument (or arguments) that you have offered in support of your basic thesis, or to the thesis itself, or to both. The quality of an essay depends in large measure upon whether one has addressed the strongest and most important objections to one's own arguments and views, and whether one has dealt with those objections in a convincing fashion.

Depending upon what the topic is, it may be sufficient to consider only one important objection, in a careful and detailed way, but if you do consider more than one objection, you should divide this section up into clearly labeled sub-sections.

For each objection that you address, there are two tasks. First, try to set out the objection both clearly and crisply, and in a way that makes the objection seem as strong and plausible as possible. Your goal here should be to formulate the objection at least as forcefully as it would be formulated by someone who was directing that objection against you.

Secondly, you then need to indicate how you are going to respond to the objection, and why you think that the objection, however plausible it may initially have seemed, is ultimately unsound. In doing this, try to make it as clear as possible where you think the central flaw in the objection lies.

Instructions for Part 2: The Completed Essay

1. Before doing a draft of your essay as a whole, you should read through the online handout, "Writing a Good Ethics Essay".
2. The main points to keep in mind are summarized on the "Essay Checklist and Cover Sheet". This is to be attached to the front of your essay, and before doing the final draft of your essay, you should go through your essay carefully to see whether your essay is satisfactory in the relevant respects.
3. The heart of your essay is in the argument (or arguments) that you offer in support of your basic thesis, in the objections you consider that might be directed either against your thesis, or against your supporting arguments, and in the plausibility of your responses to those objections. The feedback that you have received on Part 1 of this essay-writing exercise should give you a good idea whether both your positive argument (or arguments), and your discussion of objections, are falling into place, or whether, on the contrary, some strengthening is called for. If the latter is the case, do make use of the feedback that you have received on Part 1, and talk with me if further advice is needed. On the other hand, if there wasn't much that seemed problematic with Part 1, then it's basically a matter of incorporating your argument (or arguments) and your discussion of possible objections into a nicely structured and polished essay.

TOPICS

1. The sexual revolution was naturally very appealing to many, and the rejection of traditional sexual morality may well have appeared to be a liberating move that would both give women sexual equality, by eliminating the notorious double standard, and also further human happiness in general. But while the sexual revolution may have increased the short-term happiness of some, for society as a whole it has meant, among other things, the replacement of relations involving long-term commitments by extremely superficial relations, the ever-increasing breakdown of marriages, with the obvious negative effects upon children, the birth of more and more children outside of a stable and supportive family environment, and an explosion of sexually transmitted diseases that involves an enormous cost in human suffering and death. In short, while the sexual revolution looked like a good idea, the experiment has now been performed, and the results are in: it is one of the greatest disasters in human history. The time has come to return to traditional sexual morality, to chastity and fidelity."

Discuss this argument. If you think that the argument is sound, set out what you take to be the most important objections to the argument, and indicate carefully why you think those objections are unsound. If, on the other hand, you think that the argument is unsound, indicate very clearly what objection or objections you would raise to the argument.

In either case, be sure to consider possible objections to your own line of argument.

2. Is prostitution morally wrong? What are the most important arguments that might be offered in support of the view that it is? What are the most important arguments that might be offered against that view? Which position would you defend, and why? What is the most important objection (or objections) to your own view, and how would you respond?

3. Many people hold that sexual activities involving individuals of the same sex are morally wrong. What view would you defend on this question, and what argument (or arguments) would you offer in support of your position? What's the most important objection that might be raised against your own position, and how would you reply?
4. Should all explicit, erotically stimulating material be illegal? Why, or why not? What objections would someone who disagreed with your view be likely to raise? How would you try to sustain your view in the face of those objections?
5. What are the most important arguments bearing upon the question of whether prostitution should be illegal? What view would you defend, and why? What important objections are there to your position, and how would you respond to those objections?
6. Should there be a law against adultery? What arguments might be offered in support of the view that there should be? And what arguments could be offered on the other side? What is your own position, and what are your reasons for holding it? What is the most important objection to your view? Why do you think that that objection is unsound? (If you are defending the view that there should not be a law against adultery, be sure to respond, at some point in your essay, to the following argument. "Adultery is morally wrong. That in itself, of course, may not be a sufficient reason for having a law against it. In addition, however, adultery often inflicts harm upon innocent people - the other spouse, and any children that there may be. And this is a good reason for treating adultery as a crime - even as quite a serious crime.")
7. Two widely advocated forms of sex education are "abstinence only" sex education and "comprehensive" sex education, where the latter includes information about contraception and about ways of reducing the risks of sexually transmitted diseases if one does engage in sexual activity. Do you think that one of these is the right approach, or is there some third approach that you think would be better? What argument or arguments would you offer in support of your view? What is the most important objection, or objections to it, and how would you respond to that objection, or objections?
8. Sexual activities involving individuals of the same sex are illegal in many American states. Should those laws be repealed or not? What are the most important arguments bearing upon this question, and which view would you defend, in the light of those arguments? What's the most important objection that might be raised against your own position, and how would you reply?