

Assignment Title: Leveled Philosophy Writing Prompts

Type of Course: Undergraduate Ethics Course

Mechanic(s): Challenge

Draft of Prompt:

Consider the following thought experiment from Robert Nozick (1974):

“Suppose there were an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Superduper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life’s experiences? If you are worried about missing out on desirable experiences, we can suppose that business enterprises have researched thoroughly the lives of many others. You can pick and choose from their large library or smorgasbord of such experiences, selecting your life's experiences for, say, the next two years. After two years have passed, you will have ten minutes or ten hours out of the tank, to select the experiences of your next two years. Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think it's all actually happening. Others can also plug in to have the experiences they want, so there's no need to stay unplugged to serve them. (Ignore problems such as who will service the machines if everyone plugs in.) Would you plug in? What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?”

CHOOSE A LEVEL:

Easy:

- 1) What is the structure of Nozick’s hedonistic argument in this thought experiment?

Medium:

- 1) What is the structure of Nozick’s hedonistic argument in this thought experiment? Show the argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).
- 2) Test to see if the premises of this argument are true or false.

Hard:

- 1) What is the structure of Nozick’s hedonistic argument in this thought experiment? Show the argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).
- 2) Test to see if the premises of this argument are true or false.
- 3) How might an imagined opponent respond to Nozick’s argument? Show the argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).

Very Hard:

- 1) What is the structure of Nozick's hedonistic argument in this thought experiment? Show the argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).
- 2) Test to see if the premises of this argument are true or false.
- 3) How might an imagined opponent respond to Nozick's argument? Show the argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).
- 4) How would you show that objection to be insufficient? Test to see if the premises of this argument are true or false. Show this final argument in the form of premises (P1, P2,...Pn) and a conclusion (C1).

GRADING

There will be five assignments like this across the semester consisting of a short reading and this same set of questions asking the students to reproduce the argument, etc. The first four assignments are assessed on a scale of fail, pass, and mastered. If a student is graded as "mastered," they've "leveled up," and are only able to choose levels at or above their current level. For example, if a student masters the "Medium" level, they can continue to do "Medium" level assignments or above in the future, but not "Easy." Failing forces the student to go down a level if possible. The last (fifth) assignment will be graded for full points according to the scale below, which will be their final grade for this series of assignments for the semester.

"Easy" level is capped at a "B"

"Medium" level is capped at a "B+"

"Hard" level is capped at an "A-"

"Very Hard" level is capped at an "A"

Role of the Difficulty Level:

The role of difficulty levels allows students to scale their skill level throughout the semester to the course materials.

Effects of the Difficulty Level:

Just like in a video game, the player (or student) can choose which level to begin with according to their assessment of their own level. There is low risk for the difficulty level early in the semester, but incentive for them to "level up" to get a better grade by the end. The intention is to encourage them to get to the "Very Hard" level at their own pace.