

Normative Reasoning

Exercise 1:

Note: Solutions are not provided for this exercise, given the broad range of possible answers, but some examples of possible claims in each domain are listed below.

- a) individual choices and goals
 - Musicians should practice for at least an hour every day.
 - When deciding what units to enrol in, you should choose those you think you will find the most interesting.
 - We should start saving money to buy a house now, rather than later.

- b) health, safety and risk
 - Every house should have a smoke detector installed and it's a good idea to check the battery once a month.
 - You should quit smoking and try to get some more exercise.
 - Avoid foods that have a high cholesterol content.
 - Everyone should drink the equivalent of nine glasses of water per day.
 - You should get your children vaccinated against measles, mumps and rubella.

- c) organisational decisions
 - This company needs to ensure that our computer systems are protected against cyber-attacks.
 - We should not cut back on the advertising budget this quarter.
 - We should focus on increasing the number of supporters of our charity who donate a fixed amount of money each month.
 - The university needs to find ways to teach more students using fewer classrooms.
 - We should do more to increase the representation of women in executive positions in our company.

- d) social policies and laws
 - The proposal to raise petrol taxes to support public transport is unfair to drivers who never use buses, trams or trains.
 - All cigarette advertising should be banned.
 - The council should not approve any more residential building applications in our suburb.
 - The government should introduce an incentive scheme aimed at decreasing carbon emissions from electricity generation.

- e) Interpersonal ethics and morality
 - If you borrow money from a friend, you should pay it back as soon as you can.
 - Everyone who can afford to do so has a moral obligation to donate some of their income to foreign aid agencies.
 - Social welfare programs paid for by taxation are an illegitimate restriction on individual freedom.
 - It is a responsibility of government to provide education and health care to all its

citizens.

Exercise 2 - Evaluating Short Normative Arguments

Here, we provide some notes on each argument – but this is not an exhaustive evaluation. You might additionally consider counterexamples, identify other sides in the debate, and so on.

1. Increasing the size of the police force is only a stopgap method of crime prevention because it does not get at the root causes of crime. Therefore, the government should not respond to rising crime rates by increasing the size of the police force.

Standard Form (as presented in argument):

1. Increasing the size of the police force doesn't get to the root causes of crime.

Therefore,

2. Increasing the size of the police force is only a temporary solution to rising crime rates.

Therefore,

C. The government should not respond to rising crime rates by increasing the size of the police force.

Evaluation:

The main problem with this argument is that the argument relies on an unstated assumption that is likely false: the government should not implement policies that only provide temporary solutions to rising crime rates.

If there is no readily implementable alternative policy that does a better job of managing rising crime rates, then plausibly the government should respond to rising crime rates by increasing the size of the police force, even if only as a stopgap measure.

2. There are several reasons why the Australian Government should not give handouts to the car industry. Firstly, if Australian car manufacturers are not successful, it is not the responsibility of the Australian taxpayer to help them become more innovative and creative. Secondly, the car industry is not a major employer in Australia. It employs only about 50,000 people, compared to over 100,000 employed in mining for example.

Standard Form (as stated):

1. If Australian car manufacturers are not successful, it is not the responsibility of the Australian taxpayer to help them become more innovative and creative.

2. The car industry employs only about 50,000 people, compared to over 100,000 employed in mining for example

Therefore,

3. The car industry is not a major employer in Australia.

Therefore,

C. The Australian Government should not give handouts to the car industry. (from 1 and 3 independent)

Evaluation:

There are two major problems with this argument. The first is that the second prong of the argument relies on an unstated normative premise that the Australian Government should only give handouts to major employers. There are reasons to reject this premise. Presumably the reasoning underlying this assumption is that, handouts should be based on the number of jobs that can be saved by that handout. But there might be other reasons for government to support industries. For example, funding for the Arts is based on the cultural value of their contribution not the number of jobs they support. But even if jobs is the sole focus, it doesn't follow that size of industry is the best metric. If saving jobs is ultimately the goal, then handouts should be allocated based on the number of jobs that can be saved per dollar given. And this may mean funding non-major employers.

A second major problem is that the other prong of the argument assumes that the reason the Australian car industry is struggling is that it is not innovating and creative. But there might be other reasons why the car industry is not succeeding – such as those relating to the cost of operating in Australia – and that these are things that the Australian tax payers should contribute to.

3. Many foods which are marketed to children are regarded by health experts as ‘unhealthy’; they are high in fat, salt and sugar and low in vitamins, minerals and other things important for good health. The result is that many children are overweight or even obese and are increasing their chances of getting heart disease, diabetes and various other diseases. Since governments prohibit the sale to children of other harmful products – like cigarettes and alcohol – why not treat harmful foods in the same way? Young people under 18 should only be allowed to buy foods which are healthy and nutritious. (From Fisher, ‘Critical Thinking’, 2nd edition, page 179)

The main argument states that young people under 18 should only be allowed to buy foods that are healthy and nutritious. The premises are that many children are overweight or even obese and increasing their chances of various diseases, and that governments prohibit the sale to children of other harmful products like cigarettes and alcohol. This assumes that unhealthy foods are harmful in a way that is comparable to cigarettes and alcohol. It also assumes that governments should prohibit the sale of potentially harmful products to young people.

There is also a subargument. That many children are overweight or even obese and are increasing their chances of getting heart disease, diabetes and various other diseases is supposed to be the result of marketing unhealthy foods to children. This seems fairly uncontroversial—however, we are not given much background about the correlation between marketing and weight gain in children, which would be useful.

It is also noteworthy that marketing certain foods to children and limiting their sale to children are different things. We would need to know whether the problem results from advertising or from under 18-year olds buying these foods. For example, parents may be pressured by their children into buying these foods because of advertising, in which case limiting their sale to children would not address the problem. We would also need to hear more about how healthy and unhealthy foods are defined, whether the harm resulting from unhealthy foods is indeed comparable to that resulting from cigarettes and alcohol, what the appropriate age limits would be, and whether the ban on selling cigarettes and alcohol to under 18-year olds is effective. Quite possibly, a ban on advertising unhealthy foods to children would be more effective—this also needs to be considered.

4. An increased number of oil spills and the consequent damage to the environment indicate the need for stricter safety standards for the oil industry. Since the industry refuses to take action, it is the national government that must regulate industry safety standards. In particular, the government should require oil companies to put double hulls on their tankers and to assume financial responsibility for accidents.

1. An increased number of oil spills and the consequent damage to the environment indicate the need for stricter safety standards for the oil industry.

2. The oil industry refuses to act to implement stricter safety standards.

Therefore,

3. The national government must regulate oil industry safety standards.

Therefore,

C. The government should require oil companies to put double hulls on their tankers and to assume financial responsibility for accidents

This argument relies on the assumption that if the oil industry won't act to implement stricter safety standards then the government should. But since this is plausibly true, it is not a problem for the argument. The main weakness here is that this argument only considers one side of the issue. The benefits of requiring oil companies to put double hulls on their tankers and to assume financial responsibility for accidents may seem clear, but we are given no information as to how successful double hulls would be at reducing spills. More importantly, there may also be significant costs. The price of oil in Australia may spike considerably, or worse still oil companies may refuse to trade with Australia leading to a shortage in availability. In order to establish this conclusion we would need to weigh the costs vs the benefits of such a policy.