Tutorial Exercises ATS2946

Topic 11: Critical thinking in the wild

A note before we begin:

*This week’s exercises are quite different from what you have done in the other weeks. They are really more of an invitation to think about these issues, start a conversation with other students, try your hand at some critical writing (see the critical writing material in the additional resources folder on Moodle), and hopefully also have some fun.*

*Because these are open-ended exercises aimed at getting you to think about these issues and form an opinion, there aren’t any solutions.*

*Especially this week, we encourage you to post in the discussion forum and comment on other students’ work!*

*This week is about* **productive** *skills, so it is all about producing original arguments.*

Your Task:

*Choose one of the following five prompts. The questions the prompt invite you to write critically about the given topic and are there to* ***guide*** *your written response. You don’t have to do all of the recommended reading and watching to participate.*

*Try to* ***spend half an hour to an hour****, and write as much as you can, building a good argument and exercising your productive critical thinking skills. Then, post your response (or a short version of it, or a reflection on the experience) to Moodle. Even short exchanges between you and other students can help you practice these skills, and your tutors will periodically interject in the conversations with further prompts or pointers for how to improve your arguments.*

***Remember!*** *We’re an intellectually humble community that helps each other build the best possible arguments! When responding to other students, try to reformulate their argument to be stronger as well as offering your own response to the topic prompts.*

*You can do as many of these as you like, but we do encourage you to* ***try at least one****, and to both* ***do some writing*** *and* ***have a brief exchange with other students****.*

*Most of these questions invite you to defend a normative claim. Please also consider the material from Topic 10: Normative Reasoning.*

# Topic 1: The ethics of belief and critical thinking

Do people have a moral obligation to learn to think critically?

This question asks whether learning and using critical thinking skills is not just useful, but possibly also praiseworthy. It asks you to defend a normative position (and consider the challenges and pitfalls of normative arguments).

The question is inspired by the philosophical debate on the ethics of belief. That debate asks whether there is something like an ethical obligation to form beliefs in a certain manner. For example, should we say that it is morally wrong to hold a belief based on insufficient evidence? Are we actually morally obligated to consider all (or certain) kinds of evidence before we adopt a belief? And so on. If yes, then ethical considerations—and not just considerations about truth and support—are relevant to the analysis and evaluation of arguments.

The most famous paper in this debate is William Kingdon Clifford’s “Ethics of Belief”. The language is dated, but the ideas are not. Clifford begins the paper by telling the following story:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not overwell built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

Next, Clifford asks:

What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him*. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts. And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise, yet inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it.

Let us alter the case a little, and suppose that the ship was not unsound after all; that she made her voyage safely, and many others after it. Will that diminish the guilt of her owner? Not one jot. When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that. The man would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out. The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him.

This story leads to two famous principles:

**(Clifford's Principle)** “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.”

**(Clifford's Other Principle)** “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way.” (Van Inwagen 1996, 145)

If this is on the right track, we are morally obligated to consider and even actively gather evidence that could be relevant to our beliefs.

Throughout this unit on critical thinking, we have been considering different strategies for analyzing and evaluating various types of arguments. Clearly, critical thinking can be a very useful skill. But are we also obligated to *use* it? Are we perhaps even obligated to *learn* critical thinking skills? What do you think?

Take a position on this issue. In doing so, you may want to make your claim more specific, by referring to certain types of critical thinking skills, certain types of situations, and so on. Then try to defend your position by offering some reasons in its support.

A good way of doing this is to come up with an example of your own, similar to Clifford’s, in which there is (or isn’t, depending on the claim you are defending) an obligation to use (or learn) critical thinking skills. Try to make this as concrete as possible – which of the skills discussed throughout this unit is relevant in this case? And try to link your example, if you can, to a specific debate (for example from the news).

**Additional recommended reading**

* Chignell, Andrew, "The Ethics of Belief", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/ethics-belief/>.
* Clifford, W.K., 1877 [1999], “The ethics of belief”, in T. Madigan, ed, The ethics of belief and other essays, Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 70–96.
* Van Inwagen, Peter, 1996, “It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”, in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, freedom and rationality*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 137–153.

# Topic 2: Filter Bubbles

Should tech companies (Google, Facebook, etc) do something about ‘filter bubbles’?

Watch [this TED talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.) Eli Pariser, Beware Online Filter Bubbles as a primer.

Where do you stand? Build and argument either for or against the view that tech companies should do something about filter bubbles. This is a normative claim so remember to consider both reasons for and reasons against when constructing your argument.

**Recommended further reading & watching**

* There is a huge and ongoing discussion on the filter bubble, net neutrality, and so on—have a look around the web to find your own resources! You can also check out some TED talks on these and related topics.
* **G.L. Ciampaglia & F. Menczer: Misinformation and biases infect social media, both intentionally and accidentally.** <https://theconversation.com/misinformation-and-biases-infect-social-media-both-intentionally-and-accidentally-97148>
* For background information and suggestions on using internet search engines, see <https://time.com/5318918/search-results-engine-google-bias-trusted-sources/>
* Watch Astra Taylor talk about her book “A People’s Platform,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zegh0gaK0Oc>

# Topic 3: How technology changes our minds

Technology changes how we think and behave. Are we literally turning into cyborgs??

Read [this article](https://www.edge.org/conversation/natural-born-cyborgs) and watch [this TEDx talk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hanv8y_wYEQ) by philosopher, Andy Clark.

* Consider [Clark’s argument](https://www.edge.org/conversation/natural-born-cyborgs) carefully. What does he believe are the main similarities between new cognitive technologies and older ones, such as reading, writing, or moveable typeface? What does he believe to be the main differences? Do you agree, and why / why not?
* Do you believe the way you use technology (such as your phone, social media, your computer) has changed how you think or even who you are? Why, and in what ways?
* Do new cognitive technologies make us more vulnerable than we were before, and how? Are we in danger of being hacked, and is that danger different from the ways in which we could be manipulated by more conventional means (such as by other people)?

**Recommended further reading watching**

* Hugh Herr, a professor at MIT who builds bionic legs that augment human walking and amputee himself, disagrees with Clark. Herr, does not think his bionic legs are literally part of him despite being directly linked to his central nervous system.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLk8Pm_XBJE>

* Have a look at Julia Shaw’s website, including the media coverage and video clips featured there: <http://www.drjuliashaw.com/>
* George Dvorsky, [How ‘Memory Hacking’ Is Becoming a Reality](http://gizmodo.com/how-memory-hacking-is-becoming-a-reality-1757888568), <https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2016/02/how-memory-hacking-is-becoming-a-reality/>
* Douglas Starr, Remembering a Crime that You Didn’t Commit, <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/false-memory-crime>
* Have a look at Andy Clark’s website: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/andy-clark>
* Wilson, Robert A. and Foglia, Lucia, "Embodied Cognition", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/embodied-cognition/>. (Especially sections 5.3 on memory and section 6.3 on the extended mind thesis).

# Topic 4: The trolley problem

*Is it permissible to sacrifice the wellbeing, or even the life, of a few people to save a larger group? How can we decide the question?*

The trolley problem is one of the best-known thought experiments in philosophy. It is also often discussed in the psychology of moral reasoning and moral decision making, and there have been numerous psychology and even some neuroscientific studies on variations of the problem.

Try [this online version of the trolley problem](http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/fatman/Default.aspx). Then, read David Dobb’s [article, “*Kill Whitey. It’s the right thing to do.”*](https://www.wired.com/2010/09/kill-whitey-its-the-right-thing-to-do/)

**Make sure to read the analysis of your results to the online version of the** [**trolley problem**](http://www.philosophyexperiments.com/fatman/Default.aspx)**!**

* First of all, consider your results. Was there anything surprising about them? For example, were your answers less consistent than you expected? Do you think those results will lead you to reconsider your position, for example on the general principles you were asked about at the beginning of the test?
* Next, consider what you think of the test itself. Do you think thought experiments such as the trolley problem are useful to guide real-world decisions?
* Do you think these types of thought experiments are useful to inform ethical principles—for instance on whether it is ever permissible to kill or torture someone? Do you think the truth of these principles has anything to do with how many people believe they are true, and why / why not?
* Finally, can you think of any real-world examples that require decisions similar to trolley problems? How are they similar and how are they different?

**After reading, David Dobb’s**[***“Kill Whitey. It’s the right thing to do.”***](https://www.wired.com/2010/09/kill-whitey-its-the-right-thing-to-do/)

* Consider the differences between the standard version and the footbridge version and why most people respond differently to them. Do you think these different response rates track a deep, ethically relevant difference between the two scenarios? Or do they tell us something about the psychology of moral decision making?
* How worried should we be about the fact that many people’s answers to the trolley problem are inconsistent? Why/why not?

**Recommended further reading**

* *For further discussion,* read Laura D’Olimpio’s “The trolley problem: Would you kill one person to save five?” in the Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/the-trolley-dilemma-would-you-kill-one-person-to-save-five-57111>
* For some work on order and framing effects and the trolley problem, see <http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/xphi/2014/10/professional-philosophers-susceptibility-to-order-effects-and-framing-effects-in-evaluating-moral-di.html>
* You might also enjoy watching David Pizarro talk about the problem: <https://www.edge.org/conversation/a-new-science-of-morality-part-6>

# Topic 5: Designing online spaces

What obligation do social media platforms have to the greater good? How can we improve social media platforms? Should we do this?

In [this video](file://G:\My%20Drive\Teaching\COVID2020\Critical%20Thinking%20Semester%201%202020%20Covid%20Takeover\Class%20Material\Topic%2011%20Productive%20Critical%20Thinking\•https:\www.ted.com\talks\eli_pariser_what_obligation_do_social_media_platforms_have_to_the_greater_good?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare), Eli Pariser discusses these issues.

* [**Watch**](https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_what_obligation_do_social_media_platforms_have_to_the_greater_good?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)Eli Pariser’s TED talk.
* What do you think of Pariser’s proposal that we should design online spaces to promote better behaviour, much as urban designers and architects do in real towns and cities? Do we need a new design movement to create more public-friendly spaces online?
* Who has an obligation to make this happen (for example social media platforms, users, or governments, and so on)?
* Consider Pariser’s proposal in light of recent social distancing across the globe. Which aspects of face-to-face interaction are the most important ones that we should try to replicate online, and why? Which aspects do you think we will never be able to replicate online and/or through new technologies (such as virtual reality)? Do you think the current situation, if it continued, changes the obligation social media platforms have to their users?
* Which (if any) critical thinking skills (such as evaluating sources or cultivating a culture of intellectual humility) are most important to guide this process?