Lecture 9-2

Assignments+ A mini-lecture on how to write an good critical paper

7-Oct-2020

Dr. Atoosa Kasirzadeh

Assignment 1
(15%)

Available: October 13
Deadline: October 28

Critically assess a proposed AI project (~500 words)

Drawing on the readings for the class and the topics we cover in lectures, you will **critically assess** a proposed AI project. I will provide you with a brief description of the project, and you need to identify 3 potential problems with the proposed project that could raise ethical and social concerns. Your answer **should take the form of 3 paragraphs**, each paragraph including (1) the identification of the source of the problem and (2) the explanation(s) for how the social and ethical issues are at stake. The problems that you identify should be as distinct as possible to be considered as a full grade.

Assignment 2
(25%)

Deadline: November 14

Write a final paper that revisits a recent controversy (~2000 words)

In **a double-spaced paper,** you will revisit a recent controversy involving different course themes. You can choose a case from a set of 5 predetermined cases. Your paper should draw extensively from the course materials, lectures, and in-class discussions, and present a comprehensive plan for undertaking the project in a way that addresses ethical concerns and principles such as privacy, transparency, fairness, or value alignment. The paper should also point to some difficult tensions and unavoidable trade-offs. You should explain why it is not possible to satisfy and have all the ethical requirements if the project is going to run. After that, you should provide a thoughtful justification for the specific trade-offs that you suggest.

All the writing assignments should be typewritten, double-spaced, and with adequate margins (around 3/4 inch). They should be submitted digitally in the through Wattle, and will be graded, commented, and returned to students via Wattle and turnitin.com (for a review of textual similarities and detection of possible plagiarism.

It is strongly recommended that the writing assignments follow the standard format of notes and bibliography.

- A critical paper is a special kind of a philosophy paper
- Let’s review some basic ingredients for a critical paper

(The content of this lecture is directly based on two writing sources:

http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

&

https://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/Handouts/CriticalAnalysisPapers.pdf

Not every points these authors make apply to your paper. So, follow me in the rest of the lecture.)

Potential points of criticism

Expose the fact that even though the proposals are highly qualified, they are still advancing an argument and providing evidence--their aim is to persuade you that their argument is true, not to just present facts. Once you recognize that the project proposals are making arguments, you can analyze whether or not you find their argument compelling.

Some possible questions you could ask to evaluate arguments:

- **Theoretical questions –** How does the author understand the situation? What is his/her theoretical background? How would this influence their view of the situation?

- **Definitional questions —** Are all the concepts in the text clear?Does the author define a concept vaguely to allow it to travel across different situations? If a concept can relate two seemingly different situations, is the concept meaningful?

- **Evidence questions —** Does the author's evidence support their argument? Do they have enough specific evidence to prove the more general point? Does the author underemphasize or ignore evidence that is contrary to their argument?

- **Implication/Policy relevance questions –** What are the implications of this argument? Are those implications positive or negative? How has the author dealt with this issue?

Your paper consists of the reasoned defence of some claim

Your paper must offer an argument. It can't consist in the mere report of your opinions, nor in a mere report of the opinions of the philosophers we discuss. You have to defend the claims you make. You have to offer reasons to believe them.

So you can't just say:
My view is that P.

You must say something like:
My view is that P. I believe this because…

or:
I find that the following considerations...provide a convincing argument for P.

There are a variety of things a critical paper can aim to accomplish. It usually begins by putting some thesis or argument on the table for consideration. Then it goes on to do one or two of the following:

- Criticize that argument; or show that certain arguments for the thesis are no good
- Offer reasons to believe the thesis
- Offer counter-examples to the thesis
- Contrast the strengths and weaknesses of two opposing views about the thesis
- Give examples which help explain the thesis, or which help to make the thesis more plausible
- Discuss what consequences the thesis would have, if it were true
- Revise the thesis, in the light of some objection

No matter which of these aims you set for yourself, you have to explicitly present reasons for the claims you make. Students often feel that since it's clear to them that some claim is true, it does not need much argument. But it's very easy to overestimate the strength of your own position. After all, you already accept it. You should assume that your audience does not already accept your position; and you should treat your paper as an attempt to persuade such an audience. Hence, don't start with assumptions which your opponents are sure to reject. If you're to have any chance of persuading people, you have to start from common assumptions you all agree to.

Originality

The aim of these papers is for you to show that you understand the material and that you're able to think critically about it. To do this, your paper does have to show some independent thinking.

That doesn't mean you have to come up with your own theory, or that you have to make a completely original contribution to human thought. There will be plenty of time for that later on. An ideal paper will be clear and straightforward, and will contain thoughtful critical reflections based on the texts we read. It need not always break completely new ground.

But you should try to come up with your own arguments, or your own way of elaborating or criticizing or defending some points we discussed in class in the context of the proposed project. Merely summarizing what others have said won't be enough.

Assignment 2

Begin with a short summary of the controversy and then dive in to the argument. Writing an outline (and following it) is crucial to remain focused on your argument and avoid summary or irrelevant description. Following is a sample outline for a critical paper:

Introduction

Identify the controversy that you revisit and briefly summarize it

Preview your argument, and briefly say what are the steps you will take to prove your argument

Your argument (expanded over a few sections, the bulk of your paper)

Your argument will likely involve a number of sub-arguments– mini-theses you prove to prove that your larger argument is true. For example, if your thesis was that the author's presumption that the world will soon face a "clash of civilizations" is flawed because he inadequately specifies his key concept, civilizations, you might prove this by:

i. Noting competing definitions of civilizations
ii. Identifying how his examples do not meet the example of civilizations

iii. Argue that civilization is so broad and non-specific that it is not useful

Conclusion

a. Reflect on how you have proven your argument.
b. Point out the importance of your argument (beyond it being a requirement for passing the class)
c. Note potential avenues for additional research or analysis

- Three stages of writing

1. Early stages
2. Write a draft
3. Re-write, keep re-writing

1- Early stages

The early stages of writing a philosophy paper include everything you do before you sit down and write your first draft. These early stages will involve writing, but you won't yet be trying to write a complete paper. You should instead be taking notes on the readings, sketching out your ideas, trying to explain the main argument you want to advance, and composing an outline.

I strongly recommend that you make an outline of your paper, and of the arguments you'll be presenting, before you begin to write. This lets you organize the points you want to make in your paper and get a sense for how they are going to fit together. It also helps ensure that you're in a position to say what your main argument or criticism is, before you sit down to write a full draft of your paper. When students get stuck writing, it's often because they haven't yet figured out what they're trying to say.

2. Write a draft

Once you've thought about your argument, and written an outline for your paper, then you're ready to sit down and compose a complete draft. Be concise but express yourself fully. Anticipate objections.

Use simple prose [This is not a literature class]

Don't shoot for literary elegance. Use simple, straightforward prose. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short. Use familiar words. We'll make fun of you if you use big words where simple words will do. These issues are deep and difficult enough without your having to muddy them up with pretentious or verbose language. Don't write using prose you wouldn't use in conversation: if you wouldn't say it, don't write it.

If you take any philosophy class, you will sometimes encounter philosophers whose writing is obscure and complicated. Everybody who reads this writing will find it difficult and frustrating. The authors in question are philosophically important despite their choice of writing, not because of it. So do not try to emulate their writing styles.

Make the structure of your paper obvious

You should make the structure of your paper obvious to the reader. Your reader shouldn't have to exert any effort to figure it out. Beat him over the head with it.

How can you do this?

First of all, use connective words, like:

- because, since, given this argument
- thus, therefore, hence, it follows that, consequently
- nevertheless, however, but
- in the first case, on the other hand

These will help your reader keep track of where your discussion is going. Be sure you use these words correctly! If you say "P. Thus Q." then you are claiming that P is a good reason to accept Q. You had better be right. If you aren't, we'll complain. Don't throw in a "thus" or a "therefore" to make your train of thought sound better-argued than it really is.

Another way you can help make the structure of your paper obvious is by telling the reader what you've done so far and what you're going to do next. You can say things like:

- I will begin by...
- Before I say what is wrong with this argument, I want to...
- These passages suggest that...
- I will now defend this claim...
- Further support for this claim comes from...
- For example...

3. Rewrite, and Keep Rewriting

Now you've written a complete draft of your paper. Set the draft aside for a day or two.

Then come back to the draft and re-read it. As you read each sentence, say things like this to yourself:

"Does this really make sense?" "That's totally unclear!" "That sounds pretentious." "What does that mean?" "What's the connection between these two sentences?" "Am I just repeating myself here?" and so on.

Make sure every sentence in your draft does useful work. Get rid of any which don't. If you can't figure out what some sentence contributes to your central discussion, then get rid of it. Even if it sounds nice. You should never introduce any points in your paper unless they're important to your main argument, and you have the room to really explain them.

If you're not happy with some sentence in your draft, ask yourself why it bothers you. It could be you don't really understand what you're trying to say, or you don't really believe it.