Philosophy 101

• This is Philosophy 101 (section 2)

• NOTE: the course is full — no SPN’s available.

• Make sure you get a syllabus.

• Plan for today’s class:
  • PART I: Organization of Course (syllabus, website, etc.)
  • PART II: What the course is about – an overview:
    • This course is about Arguments (not disputes)
    • Comic Interlude: The Argument Clinic (Monty Python)
    • Rationality and responsiveness to reasons/arguments.

Arguments I

• The word “argument” has at least two meanings:
  1. a dispute (often a heated or angry dispute)
  2. a set of reasons or considerations intended to support (or provide evidence in favor of) some statement.

• We’re only interested in meaning (2).

• Here’s a Comic Interlude to illustrate the difference:
  • The Argument Clinic (Monty Python, via youtube)
  • Here is a link to the transcript.

Arguments II

• There can be arguments about anything:

  • Social Issues. E.g., abortion, saving Social Security, tax cuts, the causes of crime, whether violence on TV is harmful, whether stem cell research should be permitted. [Note: In each case, scientific results matter. There are arguments about what the results show and about what to do in their light.]

  • Personal Issues. Where to go to school, what field to major in, which party to go to Friday night.

  • Other issues. E.g., should teachers grade on a curve, is eating red meat really bad for you, etc.
Arguments III

• On any of these issues, you can consider some premises (or reasons) and then draw a conclusion.

• Or you may hear someone else’s argument on the topic and then think about that argument.

⇒ An argument is just a set of premises/reasons, and a conclusion that is meant to be supported by the premises.

• In this course, we will be learning how to formulate, reconstruct, analyze, and evaluate arguments.

• This involves learning a rather subtle set of distinctions and skills. So, we will have our work cut out for us…

Irrational Reactions

• Here are several irrational reactions to arguments:

  • Credulity
    • Unreflective acceptance of arguments (e.g., someone who “agrees with everything” or thinks “everyone is right”).

  • Contradiction
    • Unreflective rejection of arguments (e.g., someone who “disagrees with everything” — a contrarian).

  • Dogmatism
    • Not changing one’s beliefs in light of arguments.

  • Skepticism
    • Persistent doubt an argument/issue (i.e., someone who worries the issue cannot be resolved or has no answer).

Rational Reactions I

• Someone can be selectively credulous or contradictory — they may only accept arguments from certain people.

⇒ When someone reacts in one of these ways to an argument, they are not engaging rationally with it.

• On the other hand, a rational person will try their best to deal with the information they receive and form conclusions on the basis of their evidence/reasons.

• Sometimes they acknowledge that people they dislike have made a good argument or those they like have not.

• They see the issues as real issues to which there are correct answers, even if they are hard to figure out.

Rational Reactions II

• In addition to trying to deal with information in this way, (successful) rational thinkers draw the right (justified or reasonable) conclusions from the information they have.

• Rational thinkers can:
  • distinguish genuine arguments from other things,
  • understand and interpret those arguments, and
  • evaluate them.

• They have an open mind, which:
  • changes when the arguments call for it,
  • sticks to its views when the arguments call for it,
  • goes along with popular opinion when it’s right,
  • goes against popular opinion when it’s called for, and
  • forms beliefs in the face of uncertainty.
Goals of the Course I

• “Dream Goal”: To turn you into rational people.

• Well, that’s too ambitious, but…

• I’d like you to have the right goals or motivation — to evaluate information in the manner just described, and to be able to do it effectively (or more effectively, at least).

• All I can test/grade is how well you acquire the skills.

• Whether you apply the skills elsewhere in your life is your business. But I do think that, individually and collectively, we’d be better off if more of us were rational people

• The course is more a “skills” than a “content” course.

Goals of the Course II

• That is not an entirely clear and precise distinction.

• Roughly, the goal is to teach you how to do some things — recognize, formulate, reconstruct & analyze arguments (rather merely absorbing a lot of facts about these topics).

• Of course, I will teach the skills by telling you facts about how to do it. So there will be many such facts to learn.

• But there is no way you will learn the skills (just) by listening to me. Participation and practice will be crucial.

• That’s why there are lots of short quizzes and homeworks. One really must learn these skills by doing.

Goals of the Course III

• Each day I will attempt to identify a few of the key points about argument analysis that we cover in class that day.

• We’ll often spend a lot of time on some examples, but your goal should be to extract from the discussion of those examples some more general point.

• We may spend some time talking about that. I’ll ask, “What was the point of thinking about that example?”

• There have been two such points so far: what an argument is, and what a rational person is.

• For next time: read pages 1-33 of the text.