

Argument Reconstruction Exercises

PHIL 1250: Contemporary Moral Issues

1. Cultural Relativism

Approval by one's own culture cannot be what makes an action right. For if it were, no culture could ever be mistaken about a moral question — its approval would settle the matter automatically. And cultures plainly have been mistaken. The societies that approved of chattel slavery were not thereby made correct.

Reconstruction

- P1** If cultural approval makes actions right, then no culture can be morally mistaken.
- P2** Some cultures have been morally mistaken.
- C** Cultural approval does not make actions right.

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2. The Well-Timed Coupon

A fast-food chain's app tracks your location and your past orders, and it has learned that you tend to get hungry around 4:40 on weekdays and that you pass one of its restaurants on your commute. So at 4:35 your phone buzzes with a coupon. The company's own designers say the technique works best when customers don't consciously notice the timing. But an influence that works by bypassing a person's reasoning, rather than by giving her reasons, is manipulation. And manipulating people for profit is wrong. So the practice is wrong, however ordinary it has become.

Reconstruction

- P1** An influence that works by bypassing a person's reasoning rather than engaging it is manipulation.
- P2** Timed, targeted notifications work by bypassing the customer's reasoning.
- P3** Manipulating people for profit is wrong.

C The practice is wrong.

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3. Positional Goods

Above a modest threshold, a general rise in consumption cannot make people better off. The reason is that much of what we buy above that threshold is positional — its value depends on having more of it than others do, like the corner office or the address or the watch that signals you could afford the watch. And when people are buying mainly for what a purchase signals about their standing, a rise in everyone's spending leaves everyone's standing exactly where it was.

Reconstruction

- P1** If goods are bought mainly for the standing they signal, general increases in consumption leave relative standing unchanged.
- P2** Above a modest threshold, goods are bought mainly for the standing they signal.
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- C** Above that threshold, general increases in consumption do not make people better off.

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4. Can a Tree Be Harmed?

A spruce cannot literally be harmed, whatever we say about fires “harming” forests. To be harmed, after all, is to have one’s interests set back, and having interests requires having a point of view — some way things can go well or badly for you, as experienced. Nothing is ever like anything for a spruce. So whatever is wrong with burning the forest must be wrong for some other reason.

Reconstruction

P1 To be harmed is to have one’s interests set back.

P2 Having interests requires having a point of view.

P3 Trees have no point of view.

C Trees cannot be harmed.

Note: The final sentence is a consequence of the conclusion, not the conclusion itself.

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5. Sentience and Moral Status

Pigs merit moral consideration. A being merits such consideration if it has interests — if there is some way its life can go better or worse for it — and a being has interests if it can suffer and enjoy, since suffering makes a life go worse and enjoyment makes it go better. Pigs suffer and enjoy; their nervous systems and their behavior leave little room for doubt.

Reconstruction

P1 A being merits moral consideration if it has interests.

P2 A being that can suffer and enjoy has interests.

P3 Pigs can suffer and enjoy.

C Pigs merit moral consideration.

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6. Birthplace and Unearned Luck

The current system of citizenship is unjust, since it distributes enormous advantages on the basis of unearned luck — and institutions that do that are unjust. Nobody does anything to earn the country of her birth; it is as much a matter of chance as the family or the century. Yet citizenship in a wealthy state is among the largest advantages a person can have, shaping her income, her safety, and how long she lives.

Reconstruction

P1 Birthplace is unearned luck.

P2 Citizenship distributes major life advantages on the basis of birthplace.

P3 Institutions that distribute major advantages on the basis of unearned luck are unjust.

C The current citizenship system is unjust.

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7. The Right to Life and the Use of a Body

A fetus's right to life, however robust, does not by itself entitle it to continued use of the woman's body. A right to life is a right not to be killed; it is not a right to the use of another person's body. Even if I will die without your kidney, I have no claim on it, and you do me no wrong by declining. And pregnancy is precisely the sustained use of a woman's body.

Reconstruction

P1 A right to life does not include a right to the use of another's body.

P2 Pregnancy is the use of a woman's body.

C A fetus's right to life does not entitle it to continued pregnancy.

Note: The last sentence is a premise, not the conclusion.

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8. Autonomous Vehicles

Every crash involving a driverless car makes national news, while the roughly hundred Americans killed daily by human drivers make none. Per mile driven, the autonomous fleets now on the road kill substantially fewer people. If we face a choice between two policies and one predictably results in far fewer deaths, without imposing other comparable costs, we ought to choose it. Slowing the transition, then, is not the cautious option — it is the one with a body count.

Reconstruction

- P1** Autonomous vehicles cause fewer deaths per mile than human drivers.
- P2** Adopting them imposes no other comparable cost.
- P3** Of two policies, we ought to choose the one that predictably results in fewer deaths, absent comparable countervailing costs.

- C** We ought to accelerate the transition to autonomous vehicles.

Note: The conclusion is restated here in figurative language — students must render it plainly.