

Philosophy 341 – Contemporary Moral Issues
Good Questions: The Graduate Edition

Recall our initial “Good Questions” handout. In that handout, I discussed three types of good philosophical questions. Those are still the basic question types I’d like you to think about, but I want you to try to develop and present them in a more robust way. Why am I asking you to do this? Because it will push you to further develop skills that will enable you to better grapple with the questions our readings are raising. See below for examples.

Basic CLARIFICATORY question:

The author said that “X” is true. What do they mean by this?

Robust CLARIFICATORY question:

On page 32, the author said, “X.” I’m confused about what this means. Here is one possible interpretation... Here is another possible interpretation... The first interpretation seems the more plausible one for this reason... But the second interpretation seems to fit better with what the author says earlier on page 24, when she says “Y.” That’s because... Which is correct? Here’s why I think it’s important to sort this out...

Basic EVALUATIVE question:

The author says “X” is true. What are the reasons to believe this?

Robust EVALUATIVE question:

On page 25, the author says “X” and seems to offer Y reasons in support of X. This seems like a bad argument to me for Z reasons. Does the author just not see this problem, or is there something I’m missing about what she says? I know she says W in response to a nearby objection, but it doesn’t seem to apply to my objection, for the following reasons...

Basic EXPLORATORY question:

The author said “X”, but then wouldn’t that also mean that “Y” is true?

Robust EXPLORATORY question:

On page 42, the author says “X”. Now, if I’m understanding X correctly, it means that if X is true, then Y would also be true. This is because of reasons A, B and C. But Y is clearly false (or, at the very least, extremely problematic). So I’m thinking that if the truth of X also commits the author to the truth of Y, then we have good reason to think X is false. Does this line of reasoning hold up, or is there a way in which the author can rationally think X is true while not being committed to the truth of Y?

Note: These are just a few illustrations. You *do not* need to slavishly stick to this format. Generally, good questions should make two things clear: 1) that you have read the assigned reading and 2) that you have critically engaged with the content of the reading. That is ultimately what is most relevant.