"Philosophy in the Wild" Reports

This assignment involves using the knowledge and skills you have gained from this course to engage in philosophical inquiry "in the wild."

You will do two reports over the semester, one for each major topic in the course. For each report, you will be given a small set of philosophical questions tied to that topic, from which you must choose *one* (and only one). The questions are typically of the kind that are both philosophically substantive and connect to issues people care about in everyday life. For example, in a course on cosmopolitanism and immigration, the questions might be:

- *Do our moral obligations extend beyond national borders?*
- *Does national membership have moral significance?*
- *Are states morally justified in restricting immigration?*
- *Do individuals have a moral right to move and settle across borders?*

Your task for this assignment is to discuss the question with someone unrelated to the class – e.g., a friend, family member, or even a stranger. You will then be required to submit a 1500-word report reflecting on this experience.

IMPORTANT: While this assignment is not graded, whether you read these instructions and make a genuine effort to implement them in your assignment will be an important factor in determining your final course grade. Doing your best to follow these instructions and messing up: no problem. Ignoring these instructions: a big problem. So, make sure to familiarise yourself with the instructions carefully before beginning this assignment.

Your reports should include the following:

- A (brief) summary of the discussion, including the responses of the person you spoke with.
- A "meta-analysis" of the discussion (see below).

The bulk of your paper should be meta-analysis of the discussion, rather than mere reporting.

Meta-Analysis and Reflection

Meta-analysis and reflection is not about whether the discussion was "good" or "bad," but about understanding how it worked as a philosophical discussion. You need to step back from the content and examine the process:

- **Assumptions and frameworks:** What underlying assumptions did you and your discussion partner share? What unstated premises were driving your arguments? Where did these shared assumptions help the conversation, and where did they prevent you from making progress?
- **Points of disagreement:** What were the key points where you disagreed? Don't just list them – analyse what made them difficult to resolve. Were you talking past each other? Using terms differently? Operating from incompatible starting points?

- **Argumentative strategies:** Which specific moves helped advance the discussion? When you gave an example, asked a clarifying question, identified a hidden premise, or tested a principle against an edge case – what effect did it have? Which strategies failed, and why do you think they failed?
- **Getting stuck:** Where exactly did the discussion stall? Can you identify the precise point where progress stopped? What was causing the sticking point: conceptual confusion, terminological disagreement, emotional resistance, lack of shared framework? What might have helped you get unstuck?
- **Pre-philosophical commitments:** How did background beliefs, values, religious commitments, cultural assumptions, or personality traits shape how the discussion went? Were these explicitly acknowledged or operating under the surface? Did they prevent certain moves or make certain arguments impossible to hear?
- **Surprises and insights:** What happened that you didn't expect? What did you learn about philosophical discussion itself (not just about the topic)?

Learning Across Assignments

For your second report, you must:

- Explicitly describe what you learned from your first discussion.
- Explain how you modified your approach based on these lessons.
- Analyse whether these modifications were successful and why/why not.
- Reflect on what you would do differently in a third discussion.

This is a Discussion, Not an Interview

To be absolutely clear:

- You should not prepare a list of questions to work through.
- Your partner's views should influence and potentially change your own thinking.
- You should actively challenge your partner's views and defend your own.
- The conversation should flow naturally, with both parties steering its direction.
- You should be genuinely trying to figure something out together.

Think of this as collaborative problem-solving rather than data collection. You're not recording their views; you're engaging with them to explore a philosophical question together.

DURING THE DISCUSSION: If you find yourself doing the following, STOP

- **Asking a question, getting an answer, then asking your next question** → You're conducting an interview, not having a discussion. *Instead:* respond to what they said, challenge it, explain why you disagree, offer a counterexample.

- **Nodding along when you agree** → Agreement is not the end of discussion; it's the beginning of deeper inquiry. *Instead:* attack your shared view together. Ask "but what about…?" or "wouldn't a critic say…?"
- **Avoiding disagreement to be "respectful"** → In philosophy, the deepest respect is taking someone's ideas seriously enough to argue with them. *Instead:* tell them why you think they're wrong and invite them to do the same to you.
- **Letting claims pass without asking "why?"** → Surface agreement/disagreement without understanding the reasons means no progress. *Instead:* drill down. "Why do you think that?" "What makes you say so?" Keep asking until you hit bedrock.
- **Staying neutral or not taking a position** → You can't have a philosophical discussion without skin in the game. *Instead:* argue for what you actually think, defend it, be willing to be wrong.
- **Moving on when things get confusing or stuck** → Confusion and getting stuck are where the interesting philosophy happens. *Instead:* pause, try to identify exactly where the confusion is, clarify terms, try different examples.
- **Forgetting the course material exists** → You've spent weeks learning concepts, distinctions, and arguments that are directly relevant to this discussion. When your partner says something, ask yourself "does this connect to a relevant concept from the course?" Use the conceptual tools you've learned to clarify confusion or advance the argument. But don't just cite course material as an authority: use it to illuminate what's happening in the discussion.

DURING THE WRITING: If you find yourself doing the following, STOP

- **Summarising what each person said for more than 300 words** → You're writing a transcript, not an analysis. *Instead:* briefly sketch the arc of the conversation, then spend most of your words analysing why it went that way.
- **Reporting conclusions instead of examining process** → "We decided X" tells me nothing about the discussion. *Instead:* "We got stuck at X because…", "The turning point was when…", "My strategy of using example Y worked/didn't work because…"
- **Writing "the discussion went well" or "it was interesting"** → Generic evaluation isn't analysis. *Instead:* What specific moves advanced the discussion? Where exactly did it stall? What assumptions were we both making that we didn't notice?
- **Finishing without answering: where did we get stuck and why?** → This is mandatory. If you don't have a clear answer to this, you haven't analysed the discussion.
- **Writing less than 1200 words** → If you're under this, you haven't done enough analysis. The bulk of the paper should be meta-analysis, not summary.

What Meta-Analysis Actually Looks Like

Meta-analysis means stepping back from what you discussed to examine *how* the discussion functioned. You already have questions to guide this in the assignment instructions, but here's what good answers look like:

Bad: "The discussion went well. We both learned things and it was productive."

Good: "The discussion stalled when we disagreed about X. Looking back, I think this was because we were using the same word to mean different things. I meant X_1 and she meant X_2. Once I realised this (around the 20-minute mark), I tried using a concrete example to clarify, which helped us see we weren't actually disagreeing about the substance. This taught me that when discussion stalls, it's often terminological rather than substantive disagreement."

Bad: "My friend changed their mind about the issue."

Good: "My friend shifted from position A to position B after I raised counterexample C. I think this worked because C was concrete and relatable rather than abstract: it connected to their own experience. What surprised me was that my initial argument from authority (citing what we learned in class) didn't move them at all, but the personal example did. This suggests that for non-philosophers, experiential reasoning may be more persuasive than theoretical arguments, even when the theoretical arguments are stronger."

Bad: "We both had different pre-philosophical commitments that affected the discussion."

Good: "I realised mid-discussion that my friend's religious background was making them resistant to argument X, not because they had good counterarguments, but because accepting X would create tension with their faith. I didn't notice this at first because they framed their objections in philosophical terms. Once I recognised it, I tried to find a way to make X compatible with their broader worldview, which helped them engage with it more openly. This taught me to listen for the unstated commitments driving someone's resistance to an argument."

The difference: specific moments, specific strategies, specific diagnoses of what worked/didn't work and why, insights about the discussion process itself.

Final Checklist

Before you submit, ask yourself:

- Did I have an actual discussion (not an interview)?
- Did I challenge my partner's views?
- Did I defend my own views?
- Is my summary under 300 words?
- Did I explain where and why the discussion got stuck?
- Did I analyse specific argumentative moves and strategies?
- Is my paper at least 1200 words?
- (For the second report) Did I explicitly discuss what I learned from the first report?

If you answered "no" to any of these, revise before submitting.

A Note on AI

AI is *not* permitted for this assignment in any form (including fixing grammar). The whole point of the assignment is an unmediated human exchange and an unmediated reflection on it. Any AI use will result in serious consequences under the course's AI Use Policy.