Question Improvement

After class, you will be divided into small groups and given Critical Questions submitted by other students. Your task is to *revise* these questions, with the goal of ensuring that they lead to the most productive discussion possible. After all, the better the question, the better the discussion.

IMPORTANT: Your task is *not* to *answer* the questions you've been given, merely to improve them *as questions*.

In completing this assignment, you should follow the process below:

- Select *two* (and only two) of the questions you have been given.
- Identify problems with the question, as currently asked or phrased.
- Explain the nature of the problems.
- Rewrite the question to remove those problems.
- Describe how your revision fixes the problems you have identified.

The following is a list of *some* of the problems you might encounter. It is not exhaustive, and you are encouraged to discuss problems not on this list. Your basic criterion for evaluating the question is: *will this question lead to a philosophically productive discussion?* Any respect in which the question can be improved to achieve this better is worth bringing up.

That being said, it is *strongly advised* to start by explicitly drawing on problems in the following list. As you start to become more comfortable with the activity, you can then go beyond them.

IMPORTANT: You *must* change the questions before submission, and you should do so *substantively* rather than in trivial ways. No question is perfect; every question can be improved in some way.

Opinion Polling

Questions that merely ask what people *think* about a topic are not appropriate for a philosophical discussion. Instead of asking us to consider philosophical arguments and concepts, they shift the focus to what people *happen* to think. But what people happen to think has no bearing on whether that way of thinking is correct or incorrect. At best, such questions invite speculation; at worst, they substitute sociology for philosophy.

Unproductive Questions

- "What do most people think about capital punishment?"
- "Why are people uncomfortable with AI making decisions?"

Revised Questions

- "What moral reasons are commonly given in support of capital punishment, and how strong are they?"

- “What ethical concerns arise when AI systems make decisions that affect people’s lives, and how should those concerns be evaluated?”

Empirical Questions

Some questions ask whether one thing causes another, or whether a policy has certain effects. Answering such questions responsibly would require empirical evidence, data, or specialist knowledge that we do not have in class. Discussion then risks becoming speculative, anecdotal, or driven by unsupported assumptions. Philosophical discussion cannot focus on settling empirical facts that we cannot establish or make progress on through discussion.

Unproductive Questions

- “Do longer prison sentences actually reduce crime?”
- “Does social media make people more politically extreme?”

Revised Questions

- “If longer prison sentences were shown not to reduce crime, what moral implications would that have for punishment policy?”
- “Why would political polarisation, if caused by social media, be morally troubling, and how much weight should that concern carry?”

Category Confusion

Some questions blur together distinct kinds of issues, making it unclear what is actually being asked. Common confusions include moral obligation versus legal right, justice versus charity, individual duties versus state policies, or ideal principles versus real-world implementation. When categories are mixed together, we talk past each other and cannot make meaningful progress.

Unproductive Questions

- “Do states have the right to control their borders?”
- “Is free speech justified?”

Revised Questions

- “Do states have a moral right, rather than merely a legal power, to control their borders?”
- “Is free speech morally justified, as opposed to legally protected or socially valuable?”

Smuggled Conclusions

Some questions are framed in a way that already assumes a moral answer. Loaded terms, emotionally charged language, or one-sided descriptions can settle the issue before discussion

begins. A good philosophical question should leave the moral conclusion open, even when the topic is emotionally or politically charged.

Unproductive Questions

- "Is it wrong to punish people for actions they couldn't control?"
- "Why is exploiting workers morally unacceptable?"

Revised Questions

- "To what extent does lack of control undermine moral responsibility for an action?"
- "Under what conditions, if any, does unequal bargaining power make an employment relationship morally problematic?"

Scale Confusion

Some questions fail to specify the level at which the issue is being considered. They move ambiguously between individuals, states, and the global system. When the level of analysis is unclear, participants may talk past one another while appearing to disagree.

Unproductive Questions

- "Do we have a duty to address climate change?"
- "Is it wrong to lie?"

Revised Questions

- "What duties, if any, do individual persons have to address climate change, as opposed to states or corporations?"
- "Is lying morally wrong when done by individuals, or does its wrongness primarily arise in institutional settings such as law or testimony?"

Practical Feasibility

Some questions focus on whether a proposal is realistic or feasible rather than on whether it is morally justified. This can make it unclear whether feasibility is being treated as a moral consideration or simply assumed as a constraint. Good discussion questions clarify the role feasibility is meant to play, rather than letting it substitute for moral argument.

Unproductive Questions

- "Is it realistic to expect people to act altruistically?"
- "Is universal basic income realistic?"

Revised Questions

- "What role should feasibility play in assessing moral demands on individual behaviour?"

- "If a policy like universal basic income were morally justified but difficult to implement, what follows from that?"

False Dilemmas

Some questions assume that only two positions are available, when the issue actually allows for mixed, conditional, or threshold views. By forcing an artificial choice, such questions narrow the discussion and obscure more nuanced positions that may be philosophically interesting.

Unproductive Questions

- "Is punishment about revenge or deterrence?"
- "Are moral actions motivated by reason or emotion?"

Revised Questions

- "What different aims might punishment serve, and how should conflicts between those aims be resolved?"
- "How might reason and emotion play a role in moral motivation?"

Unmotivated Definitions

Questions that stop at asking what a concept means often fail to generate sustained philosophical discussion. While definitions matter, a question that only asks for a definition does not yet indicate what is at stake or why different interpretations would matter. Strong discussion questions move beyond definition by testing a concept, contrasting interpretations, or asking what follows from understanding it in a particular way.

Unproductive Questions

- "What is justice?"
- "What does autonomy mean?"

Revised Questions

- "How do different conceptions of justice lead to different evaluations of punishment?"
- "If autonomy requires the ability to reflect on one's desires, what implications does that have for assessing consent?"

Opinion-Mongering

Some questions are framed in a way that primarily invites participants to state whether they agree or disagree. While such questions can provoke discussion in a good class, they place little pressure on participants to articulate reasons or engage with competing views. A stronger question shifts the focus from personal agreement to the structure and evaluation of arguments.

Unproductive Questions

- "Do you agree that lying is sometimes acceptable?"
- "Should we be worried about artificial intelligence?"

Revised Questions

- "Under what conditions, if any, can lying be morally justified, and what principles would support that judgment?"
- "What kinds of risks associated with artificial intelligence raise genuine moral concerns, and why?"

Unmotivated Hypotheticals

Hypothetical cases are common in philosophy, but they do not automatically improve a discussion. When a hypothetical is introduced without a clear purpose, discussion can drift toward imaginative speculation rather than philosophical analysis. A well-framed question makes clear what feature of the case is being tested and how the hypothetical bears on a broader issue or principle.

Unproductive Questions

- "Imagine a world where no one ever lied. Would that be better?"
- "Suppose humans could live forever. Would that be good?"

Revised Questions

- "If lying were impossible, what moral functions currently served by truthfulness would be lost or preserved?"
- "If human lives were indefinitely long, which moral values tied to finitude would be challenged, if any?"

Unstructured Disagreement

Some questions invite disagreement but do not indicate where or why disagreement might arise. As a result, discussion can generate opposing answers without clarifying the underlying reasons for disagreement. Strong philosophical questions anticipate points of reasonable disagreement and frame the issue so that competing considerations can be examined rather than merely asserted. A good question places pressure on a concept by asking where it might fail.

Unproductive Questions

- "Is technology making society better or worse?"
- "Is moral responsibility real?"

Revised Questions

- “When a technology brings significant benefits but also predictable harms, what should determine whether its use is morally acceptable?”
- “When an agent’s actions are heavily shaped by factors beyond their control, to what extent should they still be held morally responsible?”