

Humanities 116: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

First Paper

Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due Wed., Feb. 26, in class.

As was the case last quarter: the below topics are suggestions. If you want to write on another topic, feel free to do so. It might be a good idea, however, in that case, to check with me and/or the writing intern first.

Note that the topics tend to have many sub-questions. You need not (and probably should not) try to answer all of them. (You *certainly* should not just answer them one after another in order—that would make a bad paper.) I put them there to suggest various directions for thinking about the topic, and in particular to head off superficial or excessively simple ways of thinking about it.

This paper is supposed to be related to the material we're reading up through Descartes's *First Meditation*. Whichever topic you write about, you should try to use both Descartes and Cervantes. If you want, in addition, to refer to things we read after the *First Meditation* (or to anything else, for that matter—e.g. things we read last quarter) you should feel free to do so, as long as (this is important) it is still clear that your paper was written for this course. (If you want to write on a topic that does not involve both Descartes and Cervantes, you should *definitely* check with me; if you do check with me, moreover, I'll almost certainly discourage you from doing this.)

As usual, the intent of the paper is to discuss the views or attitudes manifested in the reading, rather than your own opinions on the topic. Of course you can't and shouldn't completely keep your own ideas out of it, but your argument as a whole (and thus your thesis) should aim at establishing something about what the authors and/or their characters mean.

If you're using the editions I ordered, you can refer to the readings just by giving the page number. If you use a different edition and/or some other source, please give at least enough bibliographical information that I can find it if necessary. There's no need for a separate bibliography or title page.

Suggested Topics

1. What, according to our authors/their characters, is the danger and/or value (to the individual and/or to society) of reading in general, and of reading traditional or authoritative texts in particular? (What was the value of Descartes's education, according to him?) Are some texts or types of text better or worse than others in this respect? Is the danger and/or value (or the balance between danger and value) different for the learned and the ignorant? For the intelligent and the stupid? What about the illiterate: how do texts affect them?
2. A variation on the above: what, according to our authors/their characters, is the proper relationship between the learned or educated and the ignorant or uneducated? (Again, you might want to distinguish between the ignorant but literate and those who can't read at all.) What dangers exist for each side separately and/or for society as a whole if the relationship is improperly managed? To what extent should the learned or educated try to teach the others, and to what extent might they hope to succeed? Must there or should there be an important distinction between these two (or three) groups at all? (In the case of Descartes, you may have to do some reading between the lines. For example, what audience do you think he is writing for? What if anything does he assume or claim or demand about the background of his audience?)
3. Here are several possible sources of human knowledge: the senses; logic and/or reason and/or the intellect; imagination (i.e., in some way producing or entertaining sense-like images which do not come directly through the senses); reading authoritative texts. Which of these, according to our authors/their characters, is useful or reliable and which is not? What is the proper relationship between them? What is or might be or tends to be the actual relationship? (If the last two are different, then something is or might be or tends to be wrong.) What kinds of error stem from or affect the use of these alleged sources of knowledge, and how, if at all, is it possible to guard against them? (Note: we will hear a lot more from Descartes on these topics later in the quarter, but you should be able to say at least something based on what we've already read.)

4. Why, according to our authors/their characters, is it important (or is it important?) that a text be *true*? (Are there different ways in which a text can be “true”? For example: what would it take to make the *First Meditation* true or false?) What are the responsibilities of the author and of the reader in this respect? (Remember that Descartes and Cervantes present themselves both as readers and as writers. Also remember that *Don Quixote* is both about a reader, Don Quixote, and addressed to readers: us.) What problems might be caused by attempting to produce true texts and/or by looking for truth in texts and/or by testing or questioning the truth of texts?
5. What, according to our authors/their characters, is the relationship between the interpretation of texts and the interpretation of nature/of the world/of the evidence of our senses? How are they (or should they be) similar or different? Do they require the same or different skills? Would being good at one, or spending a lot of time at one, help with the other, or would it hurt, or would it be irrelevant? (The modern university, or part of it, is often split into natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Would our authors and/or their characters think that that is a mistake? Don't assume they would all agree with each other!)