

Humanities 116: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Third (Final) Paper

Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due Wed., Mar. 17, in my office, Gates-Blake 228, by 4:30pm. Gates-Blake is the building connected to Cobb. (The 4:30pm limit is mostly because Gates-Blake gets locked at some point in the evening—I'm not sure exactly when.)

As was the case with the first two papers: 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 Justin first.

Note once again 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.

Due to the nature of the texts we've most recently been reading, many of the topics below have something to do with knowledge about God. But not all of them do, and there is no general requirement that papers must focus on that.

If you do write on a theologically-oriented topic, I expect you to discuss in detail at least Hume (in the *Dialogues*) and Descartes, possibly also others (St. Anselm, Leibniz, Cervantes, Spinoza, etc.). Most of the other topics are designed so that it should be easy to use Hume for them, too, but, on the other hand, you might be able to write a good paper about them and not say much about Hume. (In that case, however, you would *definitely* have to make serious use of the *Fourth* and *Sixth Meditations*, along with other things, probably including Cervantes and/or Leibniz.)

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. I expect you to say something original, non-obvious, and interesting *about what the texts mean* (and how they relate to each other). (This is basically what I

try to do in class, so you've at least seen someone attempt this, whether successfully or not.)

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. Pamphilus says: "What truth is so obvious, so certain, as the *being* of a God, which the most ignorant ages have acknowledged, for which the most refined geniuses have ambitiously striven to produce new proofs and arguments?" (*DNR*, p. 2). According to Hume's characters (or Hume himself, if you think you can figure that out) and others we have read, what motivates attempts (their own attempts, or the attempts of others) to prove that God exists? Is it mainly ignorance and/or ambition, as Pamphilus seems to suggest, or are there other motives? Do different motives imply or require different types of proof? How do they affect what must be proved—i.e., what is meant by "God" (and/or by "exists")?
2. According to our sources, to what extent (if at all) can we understand God's nature (what God is)? How does the way we know this (if at all) compare with the way we know the nature of other things (ourselves, other people, external bodies)? Would (or does) knowing what God is help in proving that he exists, and if so how? (Note: one way this comes up, though not the only way, is in discussions of the ontological proof.) Is it (again, according to our sources) more pious and/or more helpful to religion (as a human institution) to say that we know God's nature, or that we don't? (Implied here, obviously: it might or might not be pious/helpful to religion to say the truth. Different authors/characters might disagree about this; also, they might disagree about whether religion and piety are good things or not.)
3. What, according to our sources, is or should be the relationship between philosophers and "the vulgar"? (This is related to one of the suggested topics for the first paper, though the contrast I mentioned then was between the learned and the ignorant, which might or might not be

the same thing.) What kind of knowledge and/or belief is possible for each (possibly including, but not necessarily limited to, knowledge and/or belief about God)? To what kinds of deception (including self-deception) are each particularly prone? What kind of access, if any, do or should the vulgar have to the things known by philosophers? (Do “the vulgar” possibly know some things that philosophers don’t?) What does this imply about the actual, possible, and/or desirable role of philosophers in society? What does it imply about the actual, possible, and/or desirable relationship between philosophy and religion?

4. Of these 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 (if any), according to our authors, is useful in proving the existence and/or determining the nature of God? What does this imply about the relationship between knowledge of or about God and knowledge of or about other things? (In particular: how, if at all, can knowledge of one help or interfere with knowledge of the other?) (I’ve left “other things” here deliberately vague. This could be pushed mostly in the direction of God vs. corporeal/physical reality, but on the other hand could also or instead involve our knowledge of ourselves, of other people, of human society, of human history.)
5. What, according to our authors and/or their characters, is the relationship between belief and suffering? (I mean belief in general, not just religious belief, but obviously religious belief might be an important case.) Does suffering (or the fear of suffering) tend to teach us the truth, or to deceive us? Conversely, does or can knowledge help to alleviate suffering, or might it make things worse? (Is ignorance itself, or knowledge itself, a form of suffering?)
6. Philo says: “All men of sound reason are disgusted with verbal disputes, which abound so much in philosophical and theological inquiries; and it is found that the only remedy for this abuse must arise from clear definitions, from the precision of those ideas which enter into any argument, and from the strict and uniform use of those terms which are employed” (*DNR*, p. 80). Would all of our authors/characters agree

with that? That is: (1) would they agree that “verbal disputes”—disputes, let us say, about how certain words should be used, or about what should be called what—are disgusting (or at least uninteresting), and (2) if so, would they agree that the (only) remedy is the one Philo describes? (Note that Philo himself goes on to give examples where the “remedy” apparently won’t work, but it seems that those are supposed to be cases where—because there is no “remedy”—the whole argument is worthless.) If not, how can disputes (or questions) about names actually be serious and/or productive? (This is somewhat difficult; you may need to pay a lot of attention to what certain authors *do*, rather than what they explicitly say, and then conjecture—based on what they do say—as to how they would justify their practices.)

7. A topic from last time, but which might look different in light of the *Fourth* and *Sixth Meditations*: comment on the following statement: “Things are deceptive, but nevertheless always contain some truth.”¹ In particular: Descartes and Don Quixote (among others) are afraid of being deceived. According to the authors we’ve read (including Descartes himself), are they right to fear this? In what ways, according to them, are we liable to deception (by our senses, by books, by other people, by God)? What steps, if any, can be taken to head this off? How, if at all, might or must potentially deceptive things (including, for example, but not limited to: dreams, fictions, history, traditional philosophy, logical arguments, the Bible, the sensible world, the Eucharist) nevertheless yield truth if properly used and/or understood?
8. (An “anti-topic.”) I recommend *against* writing on freedom of will, and in particular on the possible conflict between freedom and divine foreknowledge and/or divine causation. However, if you feel you must write about this, either on its own or as part of one of the above topics, I urge you to think carefully about the following (by which I mean, about our *authors’* views on the following). (1) What exactly is supposed to happen in a rational being when it “freely chooses” to do something? In particular, what, in that case, is supposed to be the relationship

¹Note that this statement is vague and ambiguous. That’s deliberate: different ways of understanding it could lead to different papers. But, obviously, no particular paper should simply *leave* it vague and ambiguous (though you might usefully discuss more than one way of taking it).

between its prior state (of belief, desire, etc.) and the action that follows? (2) What, *if anything*, is the relationship between acting freely and (a) acting without outside influences; (b) possibly acting in one of two different ways; (c) possibly acting wrongly? (3) What, *if anything*, is the relationship between acting freely and knowing or believing or understanding some good reasons for acting, and why? (4) What, *if anything*, is the relationship between acting freely and being responsible and/or potentially culpable for one's action, and why?