

Humanities 116: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Second Paper

Instructions

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

As usual: 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 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.

For all but one of the below topics, I expect you to discuss in some detail (1) Cervantes and (2) at least one of Leibniz and Descartes (focusing on the *Second Meditation*, though you can use other things from him as well). To write a good paper you will probably have to mention some other things we've read, at least in passing. (The last topic is different, as noted there.) If you want to write about a topic which doesn't fit this, you should *definitely* check with me about it.

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—though of course you can't and shouldn't completely keep your own ideas out of it.

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. Comment on the following statement: "Things are deceptive, but nevertheless always contain some truth." By "comment on," I of course

mean: talk about how our authors and/or characters might react to it, or in what sense they would maintain it or argue against it (not: give your own opinion of it). 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, according to them, 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?

2. What if anything, according to our sources (authors and/or their characters), is or should be the relationship between metaphysics and/or epistemology,¹ on the one hand, and ethics and/or politics, on the other? For example: is correct (or incorrect?) thought necessary, according to them, for correct action? Or vice versa: is it possible, according to them, to think correctly—to know what one knows, to have certainty, to know what (kind of thing) really exists—without moral and/or political reform? How, if at all, can a human being, with human needs and desires, be a philosopher? How if at all, can the philosopher function within society as it now is (or: as it was in the 17th century, if that is relevantly different from now)? Is knowledge of what is right or just (proper moral judgment) useful, according to them, for determining what is true or what exists (proper theoretical judgment), and if so why and how?
3. Included in the above, but you might want to focus on it in particular: according to our sources, what are the political implications of metaphysics and/or epistemology, and vice versa? (See above topic for some more detailed issues.) (Note: if you choose this topic, you may be tempted to discuss only Cervantes. Don't do that!)
4. A topic from last time, but you could write about it for this paper, too:

¹Metaphysics is, roughly, the study of the most general truths about being, and/or of the highest and most important beings. Epistemology is the study of knowledge—what, if anything, we can know, and how we can know it. If you're unclear about the meaning of these see the detailed suggestions in the remainder of this topic.

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, according to our sources (authors and/or 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? (If you wrote about this last time, you can still write about it again, but obviously you must write a completely new paper which says something new.)

5. How much, according to our sources (authors and/or their characters), do we know about ourselves? Supposing we yield Descartes the point that I cannot (rationally) doubt my own existence, how about the rest of the *Second Meditation*, where he talks about essence (what *kind* of thing “I” am)? In what sense, according to Descartes and others we’ve read, is it or is it not possible to know, to be certain, to doubt, and/or to be deceived about what kind of thing/person one really is, and/or about what kind of thing a human being (or human soul) is? Descartes claims that we know this about ourselves better (more distinctly) than about anything else—do others agree with him, and why or why not? (If not, what do they think we know better?) What are the implications for metaphysics and/or for ethics?
6. What (according to our sources) makes something what it is (i.e. what makes an individual thing what it is, different from everything else, and/or what makes it the *kind* of thing it is)? (Are there different ways of saying “what kind of thing” something is, “what it is like”—essence and quality, say—and if so what is the relationship between them?) What does it take to *know* what something is (in the above sense(s))? To what extent (in what cases and with how much clarity and certainty) do we humans know such things, and how do we know them if/when we do? (You might want to contrast the case of human knowledge with that of angelic and/or divine knowledge.) Note: if you choose this topic, I don’t necessarily expect you to bring Cervantes in (though you should feel free to if you think it’s relevant). On the

other hand, you *should* say something about the ancient and medieval authors we read, in addition to at least one of Leibniz or Descartes, and preferably both. Obviously this topic is more difficult than the others; I provide it here in case someone is really interested in these metaphysical issues and wants to write about them.