

Humanities 116: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Second Paper

Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due Wed., Mar. 16, 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.)

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 *Meditations* 2–4 and 6, 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. I don't recommend a paper only about one author, or which doesn't use Cervantes, or which uses Cervantes and Locke and/or Hume, but not Descartes and/or Leibniz. If you want to write about a topic which doesn't fit these guidelines, you should *definitely* check with me about it.

I *don't* expect any of these papers to use the ancient and medieval material from the beginning of this course. You're free to quote it if it seems useful, but I don't necessarily recommend trying that. On the other hand, if you can use traditional metaphysical terminology—and use it *correctly*—in your discussion of the early modern authors, that might well be helpful. (But this doesn't mean: try to get in as much Aristotelian terminology as you can for extra credit. It means: use it if and when it enables you state your point more clearly or concisely.)

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. That is: you should ideally come up with something interesting and original to say (not mere summary), but it should be something interesting and original *about* what our authors and/or their characters mean. (In particular: I don't expect or encourage you to reach a judgment about whether what they say is correct 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. 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 those authors, are we liable to deception (by our senses, by books, by other people, by God, by ourselves)? 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? (In other words: to what extent is it our own fault if we are deceived?) Are there some kinds of deception which we can't and/or shouldn't want to avoid? (Note: some pieces of advice for avoiding deception are not surprising and therefore not interesting—e.g. don't treat a fiction as if it were a history, don't trust your senses about very small or very distant objects. Also some are too vague to be interesting—e.g., trust your senses and your reading and your reason in the proper balance. If you think there's nothing more surprising than that in our authors, you should probably write about a different topic.)
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

¹Metaphysics is, roughly, the study of the most general truths about being, and/or of

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 the above topic for some detailed issues, to which can be added here in particular: in what ways, if any, is the structure of our knowledge (and of “the sciences”), or the structure of beings in general (of the world as a whole) like that of a city/state, and in what ways if any is it different?
4. A topic from last time, but you could write about it for this paper, too: 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

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.

that I cannot (rationally) doubt my own existence, how about the argument which follows in the *Second* and *Sixth Meditations*, where he talks about essence (about 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, or just as well?) What are the implications for metaphysics and/or for ethics?

6. In what ways, according to our authors and/or their characters, are we or is our world imperfect? Which of those imperfections, according to them, are imperfections only relative to some purpose or to some arbitrary preference on our part (so that they might look like perfections from some other point of view), and which, if any, are *absolutely* imperfect? How, if at all, according to them, can we know/be certain that there are imperfections (of either kind) in ourselves or in the world? Who or what, if anything, according to them, is to blame for imperfection? To what extent, if at all, according to them, can imperfections be corrected, and if so how and by what or whom? Are there imperfections that are better left uncorrected, according to them, and if so why? What are the implications for metaphysics and/or for ethics?

Un-suggested Topics

1. 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 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?

2. I recommend *against* writing about the "formation" of personal "identity." 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 distinguish carefully between the following issues (at least). (1) Who or what makes me (causes me) to exist? (2) What characteristics, if any, do I have which no one or nothing else has? (3) What characteristics, if any, are essential to me (so that I would not be what/whom I am without them)? (4) Who or what, if anything, causes me to have those characteristics? (5) Are some or all of those characteristics *relative*, and if so to what? (For example: is it essential to me that I am short? That I occupy a certain position relative to others in society?) (Notice this is not necessarily the same as [3]. For example, it seems that tall people didn't do something to me to make me short. Similarly, it seems that my students didn't make me a professor; the University did.) (6) What makes me *think* I am the kind of person/thing that I *think* I am? (For example: by trying really hard, either I or someone else might be able to make me think that I'm a knight errant, or Napoleon, or an eggplant. But would that make me actually *become* a knight errant, Napoleon, or an eggplant?) Of course, you might think that some of those supposedly different questions are really the same (some philosophers have). The relevant issue, however, is whether our authors and/or their characters distinguish between them: if they do, you had better keep them straight for purposes of interpretation; if you think they don't, then you would need to show that.