Phil 100B: Final Paper Assignment
Winter, 2026

Instructions

The paper (6–8 pages long) is due, as an attachment, via the "Assignments" tool on Canvas, by 11:55pm on Tuesday, March 17. However, an introductory paragraph and brief outline (approximately one sentence per paragraph of the proposed complete paper) is due (via the same tool on Canvas) at some time on or before Tuesday, March 13. There will then be special section meetings, including perhaps extra meetings, at which you can get feedback on these plans from your TA and fellow students. This preliminary assignment will not be separately graded, but if you do not hand it in at all or if it is wholly unsatisfactory, your grade on the final paper will be reduced by one half step (e.g. A to A-).

Suggested topics are given below. These 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 your TA first (i.e., even before writing your introductory paragraph and outline).

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.

All of the topics below require you to make substantial use of material from at least two of our main authors (Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz). You can also write about all three if you feel it improves your paper (but you will not get extra credit just for including a third author). If you want to write about a topic which involves only one of the three, you should check with me or with your TA about it.

I don't expect any of these papers to use the ancient and medieval material from the beginning of the course. You're free to quote it if it seems useful, but

I don't necessarily recommend trying that (you will not get extra credit just for throwing it in). 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.)

You can also use other outside material if you think it helps your paper (though, again, I don't necessarily recommend that). If so you must of course make it clear exactly what you are using and how. Also, it should still be clear that the paper was written for this course. If you have any questions about what plagiarism is or how to avoid it, you can ask me, or consult the resources listed on the Library website.[1] For possible consequences of plagiarism, see the Academic Integrity Policy.[2]

AI policy: I encourage the use of AI assistance with proper caution (i.e., keeping in mind that current AI is often wrong). You may use AI assistance basically in any way that would not constitute cheating if you used a human for the same thing. Similarly, you should cite the AI in cases where you would cite a human. If in doubt, feel free to ask me for clarification.

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 something interesting and original *about* what our authors 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 are upset by something one of our authors says, or find it ridiculous, you should use that as an excuse to try and understand better why someone would say such a thing. If you can't manage that, you should try to write about a topic which doesn't touch on the problem area.

For a good comparison paper, remember that the *comparison* should be interesting. This means, for example, that the paper should not read like two shorter papers (one on each author) stuck together. Also it should say

[1] `https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/c.php?g=1349850&p=9960819`.

[2] `https://undergraduate.ucsc.edu/our-units/academic-integrity-office/academic-misconduct/`.

something non-obvious about their similarities and differences. (It is always possible to make any two positions sounds similar if one is vague enough. But that isn't interesting.)

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 and/or your TA can find it if necessary. There's no need for a separate bibliography or title page.

You can find answers to some commonly asked questions about my assignments and grading in my FAQ (`https://people.ucsc.edu/~abestone/courses/faq.html`).

Suggested topics

1. Descartes's Meditator is afraid of being deceived. According to the authors we've read (including Descartes himself), is the Meditator 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, but only 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 authors, is or should be the relationship between metaphysics and/or epistemology, 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 authors, 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. 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 authors, 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, that would mean that the actual relationship is or might be or tends to be not the proper relationship, i.e. that 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 that a good answer to this must be more than just a list of which sources are reliable and which are not — you must find a single surprising and interesting point to make about how different authors relate to different sources.)

5. How much, according to our authors, do we know about ourselves? Supposing we yield Descartes the point 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 can know this

about ourselves better (more distinctly) than about anything else (except God?). 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, 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?

7. In what sense (if any), according to our authors, are human beings free, or in what sense (if any) can they become free? In what sense (if any) can the become unfree? What is the relationship, according to them, between freedom and power? Between freedom and necessity? Between freedom and divine causation? Between freedom and divine foreknowledge? Between freedom and coercion? Between freedom and clear and distinct intellectual perception? Between freedom and correct or moral action? Between freedom and happiness? Between freedom and error or sin? What is freedom good for, according to them? Why does God make human beings free (if God does make them free, and if there is a reason)? Or why does God allow them to become free? Or why does God allow them to become unfree?

8. How, according to our authors, can we know that God exists? What is it, according to them, that we know, when we know that? How much or little do we know about God's nature? About God's power? About God's will (its nature and contents)? Why, if at all, is this knowledge important, according to them? What, if anything, will it help us to understand about ourselves? About the world? About the proper course of action? How is the knowledge we gain in this way related to the human institution of religion (e.g. Judaism, Catholicism)? To the contents and interpretation of the Bible?