

Phil 100C: Final Paper Assignment

Spring, 2026

Instructions

The paper (6–8 pages long) is due, as an attachment, via the “Assignments” tool on Canvas by 11:55pm Tuesday, June 9. 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, June 2. 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. That 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-).

The following 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 authors (Locke, Berkeley, and Hume). 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.

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 Misconduct Policy.²

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 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 something non-obvious about their similarities and differences. (It is always possible to make any two positions sound 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>).

¹<https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/c.php?g=1349850&p=9960819>.

²<https://ue.ucsc.edu/academic-misconduct.html>.

Suggested topics

1. In what sense can our authors be called “empiricists”? (Here, as in the other topics below, you should most likely select two of them to compare, not necessarily all three together). To what extent would “empiricism” mean the same thing applied to each, and in what ways would the meaning of the term have to differ? For example: what is “experience” for each of them, and in what way does it form the sole basis for our knowledge? As opposed to what? What makes anyone so much as suppose there might be some other basis (i.e., against what opponent is the empiricist arguing)? What else is there to our knowledge besides experience? What is the difference between sensation, imagination, and thought (if the last two are different)? What role is played by space, time, body (solid extended substance), spirit (incorporeal substance), or causation, in making experience possible and/or how does experience form the basis for the knowledge we have (if any) about those things?

2. In what ways do our authors take themselves to be, or present themselves as, partisans of *common sense*? What is common sense, and what is good about it? What opposes it (e.g. absurd, wrangling philosophy, “superstition”) and why? What forces tend to corrupt healthy common sense? How can we tell the difference between what is really common sense and what is merely received opinion or entrenched superstition? When, if at all, is it possible or necessary for correct philosophy to depart from common sense? By adding to it? By outright opposing it?

3. What does or would it mean, according to our authors, for “God” to “exist”? How could we know, or how do we know, whether he exists? What possible role is there, for example, for revelation, for tradition, for common sense, or for philosophical argument, in establishing the right conclusion? How do our moral failings (e.g., greed, ambition, desire for power, laziness, desire to escape responsibility) tend to distort our thought about this subject in particular? Why should we care about getting the correct answer?

4. What, according to our authors, is or should be the relationship between our theoretical concerns (our concerns qua wanting to know the truth) and our practical concerns (our concerns qua wanting to act correctly)? What can or should or must we be satisfied with as agents (doers), and how is that different from what we could be satisfied with as knowers? Is there a

kind of knowledge or justified faith that is based on practical principles (i.e., moral principles)? Or must it always be the other way around (practical conclusions must be based on theoretical principles)? Or could it go both ways? Consider relating these questions specifically to our knowledge of and/or reliance on the existence of external world, the predictability of the future, the existence of others (other minds = finite spirits), or the existence of God.

5. What, according to our authors, is the meaning of *personal identity*: in what sense can we say that the same person exists at different times? (Remember that “identity” means “sameness.”) Why do we or should we think that there are such continuing, self-identical persons (including ourselves)? Do we *know* that there are? What, if any, is the role of experience (including “inner sense”) in establishing that conclusion, if there is such a conclusion? Why, if at all, does it matter whether the conclusion is correct? What would be the epistemological and/or moral implications of deciding that there are no such continuing, identical persons (persons who are the *same* person at different times)? Or is that supposition (the supposition that there are no continuing persons) just absurd?

6. What, according to our authors, is the basis of, and the content of, mathematics (i.e., arithmetic and geometry — though you might want to focus on just one of the two)? In what sense, if at all, is mathematical knowledge better (more certain, more precise, more universal, more reliable, more useful) than other types of knowledge, and why? What are the limits of mathematical knowledge? In what ways do mathematicians tend to claim more than they are really justified in claiming, and why? What, if anything, makes mathematics especially important in physical science? In “mechanics” (or say, roughly, in engineering)? How is moral knowledge similar to or different from mathematics?