

## Phil 112: Final Paper Assignment

Spring, 2023

### Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due, as an attachment, via the “Assignments” tool on Canvas by midnight Wednesday, June 14.

The following topics are suggestions. If you want to write on another topic, feel free to do so. It might be a good idea, in that case, to check with me first, but that is only advice, not a requirement.

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 are intended to facilitate making substantial use of material from at least two of our authors, which I recommend (although, again, this is not *required*). You can also write about more than two if you feel that improves your paper. (Obviously in such a short paper there is not room for a substantial treatment of many different figures. But sometimes just a brief allusion is enough to make an important point.)

You can also use other outside material if you think it helps your paper (though I don’t necessarily recommend that). If you do, 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.<sup>1</sup> For possible consequences of plagiarism, see the Academic Misconduct Policy.<sup>2</sup>

Since we are all in America, if not all Americans, these topics all touch us

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<sup>1</sup><https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/citesources/plagiarism>.

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

personally, and I don't think it would be possible (or good) to write about them without manifesting at least some feelings of one's own. Nevertheless, the main 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 final 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 probably consider writing about something else.

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 readings I posted on Canvas or the editions I ordered, you can refer to the readings just by giving the title and page number. If you use a different edition and/or some other source, please give at least enough bibliographical information, in whatever format you prefer, that I 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. What, according to our authors, are the possible ways for human beings to relate to nature? Note that the meaning of "nature" may not be quite clear, or may not be the same for different thinkers. (In one sense "nature" might be equivalent to "wilderness," but in other senses definitely not.) Do they think some ways better than others, and/or that some ways have replaced others, for better or worse, and was that inevitable, and is it irreversible?

How, if at all, does America, or the idea of America, according to them, involve such a relationship to nature, or such a change in relationship to nature? Is America, according to them, founded on natural principles (on the “law of nature”), or supernatural, or artificial?

2. What attitude do our authors take to materiality or corporeity (being a body), as opposed to spirituality or ideality? Are American ideals/principles/values, according to them, fundamentally materialist or somehow anti-materialist? Do they think most Americans exemplify such ideals? For some authors this will be closely connected to their attitudes towards Christianity and their beliefs about the relationship between America and Christianity (Protestant and/or Catholic, including Black Christianity); for others not. Again, for some there will be a close relationship between this and the issues about the “money culture” raised in the next prompt (so that the two prompts might be interchangeable), but for others perhaps not. (In any case, you should not confuse “materialism” as a metaphysical position with “materialism” in the sense of attaching great importance to wealth and physical possessions.)

3. What attitude do our authors take towards, broadly speaking, what Dewey calls “the money culture” or “pecuniary culture” (and/or what some, following Marx, call “capitalism”)? (This may have various different aspects, types, stages, etc., not all of which go together — e.g. there is individual and corporate or state capitalism; there is focus on production, or overproduction, or on consumption; there is technical training and work ethic and discipline and thrift, or on the other hand greed and self-indulgence, or the desire to have a modern house, or a farm with a large barn, or various nice things — e.g. large hats, nice shoes, a yellow convertible, tea and coffee and meat every day — or the desire and ability to own, i.e. enslave, other human beings, or to plunder them and steal their land, timber, etc.) Do our authors think of this “money culture” as fundamentally American? Or as pre-American, perhaps European? Or as a degeneration of American ideals? What has produced it, according to them? Do they think that something can or should end it?

4. What, according to our authors, is the relationship between America and Europe? You may want to focus on Britain, or France, or possibly Germany, or you may want to distinguish between those, or you may want to treat Europe, or even the Old World generally, as all one thing (depending perhaps on which authors you discuss: Emerson and Cordova speak of “Europe” in general, as does Thoreau at times; France plays an important role in Du Bois

and in Coates; France and Britain are both important, but in different ways, to Grant; etc.). Is or was there a good reason, according to our authors, for America to separate from Europe (and from Britain in particular)? Has this separation or independence actually been attained? Where is there more equality and/or more liberty? (Does the answer depend on exactly what we mean by those terms?) Or is what we call “America” essentially just an outpost of Europe (“Euro-America,” as Cordova sometimes says)? What significance do or would our authors attach to America’s intervention in Europe in World War I, World War II, and/or the Cold War?

5. What is or might be the significance of Canada, according to our authors? (If you write about anyone other than Jefferson, Bentham, Thoreau, or Grant — which you could! — you would have to fill this in by speculating as to what they might say, since, at least in the works we read, they don’t mention Canada at all.) What, according to them, does or might the existence and history of (French and/or English) Canada signify about (the United States of) America? What does or might it mean to them that the America has a border? Can America respect such a border, according to them? Should it? What might they think about Canada’s (relatively) peaceful separation from Britain, beginning in the 19th century, compared with America’s violent earlier separation? About Quebec’s continuing attachment to (a conservative version of?) France? Would they say that Canada is more or less free, egalitarian, and/or independent than America, and would they consider that a good thing or a bad? What importance might they attach to the Underground Railroad?

6. This is a trickier prompt to write (and perhaps trickier to respond to), but leaving it out as a suggested topic would be ridiculous: what, according to our authors, is or has been the role of race (in the common contemporary sense of the word “race,” whatever that is exactly), and in particular of Blackness and whiteness, and of the enslavement and persecution of Blacks, in the actual history and/or idea(s) of America? This is tricky in part because all the terms are questionable and might be rejected by some, also because some of our authors (e.g., Banneker, Martineau, Fuller, Thoreau, Du Bois, Coates) treat this issue as in one way or another absolutely central, whereas others (at least in what we read of their works) virtually ignore it. If you choose to write about some of the latter, as you well might, you will no doubt have to treat them as defective in some way, but you should avoid simply ranting

against them. Why or from what point of view might this problem seem of secondary importance? For example (but there are probably other ways to come at this): can Americanness be seen as alike opposed to (or “dissolvent of”) all races, nations, cultures, civilizations, etc. (including even to “white,” or British/European/“Western” civilization)? Grant says this explicitly, and Cordova, at least in some moods, may think something similar, as may even Bentham. So may Dewey, although, if so, he might consider it a good thing. (Note: there are, of course, other races in America besides Black and white. Native Americans/American Indians would probably be better discussed under the next prompt. Other “racial” groups unfortunately haven’t been much mentioned in our reading, so it would probably be difficult to consider them in any depth in a paper written for this course, but nevertheless their existence might be important to bring up when trying to understand the nature of different authors’ views.)

7. In what way, according to our authors, is Americanness related to nationality, particular loyalty, locality, and/or “indigenouness”? One of the first things I pointed out was that the Declaration of Independence speaks first of the rights of “peoples” before it speaks of the rights of individuals, and apparently brings in the latter only to back up the former. Apess, at least, picks up on this fact and uses the language of the Declaration to defend the rights of his adopted tribe, the Mashpee (or Marshpee). However, I also pointed out the paradox or difficulty of this, since the individual rights appealed to are, or are claimed to be, universal. How do our authors propose to deal with this difficulty? Do they think it can be solved — the two aspects (particular and universal) reconciled — under existing terms? Or do they think one of the two aspects is not truly American? Or that a reconciliation between the two would require some radical change? And do they think that “America” is fundamentally a *place* (within certain borders), or not?