

Phil 125: Midterm Assignment (Paper Version)

Fall, 2025

Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due, as an attachment, via the “Assignments” tool on Canvas, by 11:55pm Tuesday, November 4 (in PDF or any format easily converted to PDF, e.g. MSWord).

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 first.

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.

The main focus of the paper should be, one way or another, on texts we’ve read for this class, though you’re welcome to use other material also if it seems useful/relevant. If you do use outside sources, it should go without saying that you must cite them, and provide enough bibliographical information that I can figure out what they are.¹ (For sources from required reading, title and page number should be sufficient.)

I recommend an attempt to interpret (understand/explain/make sense of) the views of the authors we’ve read, rather than, say, an attempt to make an argument of your own against them. (I recommend this *particularly* if one or more of these authors rubs you the wrong way or seems obviously wrong or uninteresting.) All of the suggested topics below are along those lines. This is only a recommendation, however: I suspect that an effort in this direction

¹If you have any questions about plagiarism and related issues, please see <https://guides.library.ucsc.edu/citesources>. To find out what happens if you are accused of plagiarism, see the academic misconduct policy: <https://ue.ucsc.edu/academic-misconduct.html>.

is most likely to produce a good paper, but if you think you have a good idea along other lines, go ahead and try it.

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.

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 is the importance, according to the authors we've read, of using the proper concepts (or: the proper terms, with the proper definitions)? How (if at all) can we be sure we have the right ones? (Is there only one way or are there more than one?) What happens if we have the wrong ones? (The wrong concepts, that is, or: terms improperly defined, terms without proper definitions — are all of those the same?) What happens to science in that case? To philosophy? Pick at least two authors to discuss, one of whom should presumably be Carnap of the *Aufbau*. (You might regard earlier and later Carnap as different “authors” for these purposes).
2. What, according to the authors we have read, is the relationship between science and language, and/or between philosophical interest in science and in language? What, if anything, makes language into an object of special interest for philosophy and/or science? You may want to contrast different authors, or to trace changes in a single one (unless you've done additional reading, that would pretty much have to mean Carnap). (If you do contrast different authors, the contrast need not be simply between Carnap and one of his critics. Neurath, Goodman, and Quine all attack Carnap in different ways, though there are also similarities between all three. What role do views about or attitudes towards language play in this?)
3. Discuss the meaning of and/or relationship between some of the following things, according to authors we've read: (scientific) theory, observation(s), common or everyday knowledge, experience, sense data. How (if at all) do

they define them? Which do they consider most certain/reliable, or more justified, or otherwise better, and why? (In what sense are they or are they not “empiricists”?) How and on what grounds do they disagree with each other about these issues? (How, if at all, is it possible to disagree about the *definitions*? Can’t everyone define the terms as he or she likes? What would our various authors say about that?)

4. What was really important to Carnap, and what wasn’t (in general and/or at the various stages we’ve seen)? How does this explain the adjustments in his project as time went on, and/or his response to (one or more of) his critics? To help with this, you may want to look at the Preface to the second edition of the *Aufbau* (which is in your book).

5. Carnap was an Old Left democratic socialist, Neurath was a Marxist, and Quine was a right wing conservative. Discuss the relationship between the political views of these authors (i.e., one or more of them) and their views in philosophy of science. (I hinted at some things about this in class, but there’s a lot more to be said.) (Note: to do this well you need to understand and deal carefully with the philosophy of science aspect, not just take off on the politics.)