

History of Modern Philosophy
First Paper Assignment—Due (by email) 10/3/2019

Papers should be approximately 3 – 5 pages in length, typed, and double-spaced. Please email your paper to me (at baldner@wmich.edu) no later than the day it is due, Friday, October 3. Please submit your papers in Word, (Mac) Pages, .rtf, or .txt format.

I'll suggest some topics below. But let me start with some general comments about writing a thesis defense paper.

Your assignment is to write a thesis defense paper on some topic of your choice.

In a *thesis defense paper*, your task is to *explain and defend a thesis of your own about the reasoning found in the text* in support of some philosophical position or claim. Keep in mind that I am not looking for a paper strictly about your own philosophical theories, nor for a mere book report on what our authors have said. Rather, your goal is to critically analyze some of the reasoning you find in the text.

Your task, then, is to say something of your own about something you find interesting in the text. (Why the reasoning doesn't work, something the author forgot to consider, why there are inconsistencies in the text, implications of what the author says, etc.) This is the "thesis" you must explain and defend. To *explain* your thesis about the author's reasoning, you will need to explain what the author is trying to accomplish in the part of the text you are examining. What is the philosophical question the author is trying to answer? What claim is the author making about this question? What reasoning does he offer in support of this claim? To *defend* the claim you are making (about the reasoning you find in the text), you need to give your reader reasons to agree with you. Why should the reader accept your analysis of the text? This is where your own philosophical views can be relevant.

Your papers should begin with an opening paragraph where you introduce just enough of the general topic so that a reader not already familiar with the issues will be able to understand the claim you are going to explain and defend. And *this introductory paragraph should include an explicit thesis statement*. You need to tell the reader what you will have shown by the end of the paper. If you tell the reader where you are going, it will be easier for the reader to follow you. On the other hand, if you can't tell the reader up front what your point is, that suggests that maybe you don't actually yet know what your point is. (Figuring out, for yourself, exactly what point you're trying to make is what rough drafts are for.)

Finally, keep in mind that your goal is not to prove to the teacher that you have read the material (that's what tests are for), but to explain the issues to a reader not already familiar with them. That is, you are not writing to *me*, as the instructor of the course. You are speaking to someone who doesn't already understand the issues you will be talking about. So you can't presuppose that your reader already understands the issues: it is your job to explain it to them. In a paper, *you* are the teacher, and the reader is the student.

Suggested topics: These are just *suggestions*. You can pick a different topic of your own. But read the suggestions below to get an idea of the sorts of questions you should be asking yourself, no matter which topic you choose.

The suggestions below each ask a number of questions about some issue we have discussed in class. These questions are posed to help you find issues that you might want to write about. But they are not test questions. Your role in the paper is not to answer the questions as they appear below, but to explain and defend a thesis of your own about what Descartes or Leibniz had to say about one of these issues.

- Descartes' claim that dreams are like paintings: What is his point here? How is this relevant to the strength of the skeptical challenge of his claim that there is "never any reliable way of distinguishing being awake from being asleep"? Does his argument succeed? Is it necessary for his overall purposes?
- Descartes thinks that the accuracy of sense perception is open to doubt. He thinks that we must appeal to "reason" in order to justify our trust in our sense experience. What do you think about this? Are the questions Descartes asks serious questions, or are they just silly? What do you think about this? What do you think about Descartes' search for an "epistemic foundation?" Note: these are big questions I am posing here. Don't try to answer them directly—I am just trying to get you to think. Find some specific passage in the text to look at in light of these questions. Analyze the reasoning you find in terms of how you think about these big questions, and see if that leads you to something you can say about Descartes' reasoning.
- Descartes' discussion of the piece of wax: What point is he trying to make in this discussion? What are the steps in his reasoning? Is his reasoning sound? There are lots of issues that get discussed in this short passage. Is there one of them that particularly interests you? Why is it interesting? Do you agree with what Descartes has to say about the role of the mind in sense perception? If not, why not? If you agree, why is what he says interesting or important?
- A thinking thing: Descartes argues in the second *Meditation* that the only thing he knows for sure about himself is that he is "thing that thinks," i.e., the sort of thing that can be the subject of conscious experience. Descartes reasons that he can be certain of this even while remaining uncertain as to whether or not he has any kind of physical or material body. Do you understand his reasoning here? Why is it important and/or interesting? Is what he is saying something that is controversial, or is it obvious in a trivial sort of way? Do you agree with him? Why or why not? This is, again, a big question. Don't try to tackle the entire question of mind/body dualism, but find something specific he says, and explain to the reader something about his reasoning that is not obvious without thinking about this bigger question.
- In the third *Meditation*, Descartes says:

... even if the objects of my sensory experience and imagination don't exist outside me, still sensory perceptions and imagination themselves, considered simply as mental events, certainly do occur in me. [p. 9]

What is his point here? If I am hallucinating, there *are no* objects that exist outside me that I am perceiving. In that case, what, according to Descartes, *am* I perceiving? What are the “objects?” And what does all of this suggest about the nature of sense perception in general? Am I “trapped” inside of my own mind? How do I get out? How do I know there is anything “outside” my mind at all? Descartes makes comments similar to the above in a number of places in our excerpts from the third *Meditation*. Examine one or more of these passages and see if you can explain what he is saying and why he thinks this way. Do you agree with? Is this an important or controversial question? Explain to the reader why this is important to Descartes, and why it might be important to the reader too.

- Explain why Descartes thinks that human error is compatible with the perfection of God. What are the steps in his reasoning? Assuming the existence of God (which is not at stake in the Fourth Meditation), does the argument succeed? Why or why not? Why do you find this discussion interesting? (If you don't, why do you want to write about it?) Do you think the question is one that Descartes really needs to answer? If so, do you think that he succeeds, at least for his own purposes in the *Meditations*?

- Discuss one or more of the arguments Descartes gives for the metaphysical distinction between mind (mental substance) and body (material substance). How does the argument (the arguments) work? What are the key steps? Where is it (where are they) open to challenge? This is a huge topic. Books (hundreds, if not thousands of them) have been written on it, so don't expect to have anything conclusive to say in a five-page paper! Rather, find some specific argument he gives in the text, and critically examine the reasoning Descartes provides.

- In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes makes the following two claims:

Nature also teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely in my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am closely joined to it—intermingled with it, so to speak—so that it and I form a unit. If this were not so, I wouldn't feel pain when the body was hurt but would perceive the damage in an intellectual way, like a sailor seeing that his ship needs repairs. [p. 20]

and later

The mind isn't immediately affected by all parts of the body but only by the brain—or perhaps just by the small part of it which is said to contain the 'common sense'. The signals that reach the mind depend

upon what state this part of the brain is in, irrespective of the condition of the other parts of the body. [p. 22]

Explain the tension between these two passages regarding the manner in which an immaterial and non-spatial mind can be connected to a material and spatial body. That is, what does each passage suggest about the way in which the mind is related to the body, and how are these two suggestions different? Finally, why might we expect some such problems concerning the relation of minds and bodies?

▪ Explain Leibniz' understanding of truth. What does it mean to say that all truths are reducible to first truths? And then explain why you do or don't think that this theory of truth entails the belief that a full understanding of any individual things would give one (or give God, if not you and I) a complete understanding of the entire universe, past, present, and future.

Finally, have fun! Really. This is important. If the topic isn't interesting to you, it's a pretty good bet that it will not be interesting to your reader. The point of this, after all, is for you to learn something, so take the opportunity to think more deeply about something that interests you.