

1ST WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Knowledge, mind, and existence

Papers are due Monday, October 4 at **12 noon** in my mailbox in the Philosophy Department (Pearsons 208). Papers turned in after that are considered late, so plan accordingly! Late papers are penalized 1/3 grade for each day late.

Please write a roughly 1800 word (five page) paper on one of the following topics.

Use your own words. Quotations are not a substitute for your own explanations — only use a quotation if the author says something so baffling that you need to unpack phrase by phrase. If the bit you want to quote is straightforward, find a way to say it in your own words.



**Philosophy 30
Fall 2004**

1. Austin attempts to diffuse the skeptical argument by claiming that we only need to rule some alternative Q if we have some “special basis” for thinking or “reason for suggesting” that Q.

a. Explain this principle, and how Austin uses it to answer the skeptic (it may help to first briefly lay out the version of the skeptical argument Austin discusses).

Consider the following example:

Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.¹

b. How might the case of Norman the Clairvoyant pose a problem for Austin? Explain why this case might be seen as a counterexample to Austin’s principle.

c. Critically discuss. How best might Austin respond to this counterexample? Do you think this response is successful?

2. Stroud attempts to respond to a key premise of Austin’s anti-skeptical argument using what we might call a “warranted assertability maneuver” (WAM): he claims that we are often *warranted in asserting* statements like, “I know that P” even though they are not literally true.

a. Explain Stroud’s strategy. What precisely is a WAM, and how does he use it to answer an objection to skepticism? (It may help to first briefly lay out Austin’s objection to the skeptical argument.)

¹ From Bonjour, L. (1985). *The structure of empirical knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 41 (emphasis added).

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Consider the following example:

Justin is an excellent dancer but a lousy mathematician. He holds the following mathematical theory: that squares have three sides. Justin acknowledges that the way people talk tends to contradict his theory. His explanation of why people talk that way is that they are *warranted in asserting* statements like, “Squares have four sides,” even though they are literally false.

- b. How is the case of Justin the mathematical moron supposed to present a problem for Stroud?
- c. Critically discuss. What are the criteria for a good WAM? Is Stroud’s WAM any better than Justin’s? Are they both bad?

You will be evaluated both on the clarity of your exposition (e.g., how clearly do you lay out Austin or Stroud’s view?) and the quality of your discussion.

Writing Guidelines

It should go without saying that papers will be word-processed or typewritten and have: a large, easy to read font (12 point); double spacing; standard margins; page numbers; correct spelling and grammar. There are roughly 350 words on a page (in 12 point Times). You may not exceed the required page length.

Consult Jim Pryor’s paper writing guidelines:

<http://www.princeton.edu/~jimpryor/general/writing.html> (link on our website)

Even if you’ve written many papers in the past, you’ll benefit from reading Pryor’s guidelines.

Clarity

What I want you to focus on is *clarity*. I want to see evidence that you understand the material, and clear, well-structured writing is excellent evidence of your mastery of the material. In class you sometimes know that you have a thought or question — you know what you want to say — but you can’t quite put it into words. In your writing you should aim for clarity: aim for finding just the right words.

Though clarity is most important, you should also aim to be concise and thorough. It may seem like these goals conflict; in a sense, they do. But it’s still possible to achieve all three at once; the best papers will do just that.

- Note: it is almost impossible to meet all three goals the first time you try to answer a question. That’s natural and to be expected: when you’re trying to figure out what to say, you tend to be a bit long-winded as you work towards your answer, and you might resort to saying things like “you know what I mean...” or “something like that...” which is fine when you’re just trying to get the gist of your point across. It

is not okay to be long-winded or hope that “I know what you mean” in your paper. If what you write down is your first attempt to answer the topic question, you will sometimes be long-winded, sometimes not thorough, and you will *definitely* be unclear. This will be **very obvious** to anyone who reads your paper. It is strongly suggested that you **start early** and write out an answer to the topic question. This initial answer may get this gist across, but it will need to be refined and sharpened to be made clear. Pryor’s guidelines have much more on how to do this.

- The intended audience for your answers is not the instructor, nor the other students in the class — you know we are familiar with the view and the vocabulary in which it is stated. Your aim is rather to make the view, distinction, or argument easily understandable to someone *completely unfamiliar* with the material, like your average college student. If you introduce a bit of new terminology you think your average reader won’t know, you should explain what it means.

Language

Try to avoid loose use of logical language (“therefore”, “thus”, “it follows”, “prove”, “refute”, “false”, “true”). If you mean to say that a point or a claim is true, do not say that it is valid. Only arguments can be valid. Do not use “thus” or “therefore” or “it follows” to make assertions or state opinions; these words should be reserved for stating the conclusion of a chain of reasoning.

Be particularly careful with terms like ‘idea’ and ‘concept’. If you write a sentence like, “Descartes discusses the idea of X...” ask yourself whether Descartes is really discussing *the idea* rather than *X itself*. Ideas are “in the mind” or “in the head,” whereas X is “out there,” in the world. Most of the time we aren’t talking about our ideas, we’re talking about things out there in the world. If we were to debate the Eagles victory in Monday Night Football, we would be discussing *football*, and *the game*, not the idea of football, or the idea of a game.²

There is no need to include dictionary definitions in your paper (“Webster’s dictionary defines ‘evidence’ as ...”). If this term is one under philosophical scrutiny, the dictionary’s authority will not settle the matter. If it is not a philosophical term, you may assume that your audience already understands the meaning of the term. You may assume your reader is familiar with basic logical and philosophical vocabulary that isn’t under scrutiny; e.g., you may assume your reader knows what it is for an argument to be valid, or sound.

² Another reason to avoid sentences like “Descartes brings up the idea of X”: as topic sentences, they are unhelpfully vague. Rather than just saying that, tell the reader *what Descartes thinks* about X. E.g., vague: “Descartes bring up the idea of the will,” better: “Descartes argues that the will is perfect but the understanding is imperfect.”

Views, Arguments, and Critical Discussion

A *view* is distinct from the *argument for that view*. A view is a thesis, or position, like: knowledge requires justification; or skepticism illegitimately inflates the standards for knowledge; or justification supervenes on factors accessible to the subject “by reflection alone.” Stating a philosopher’s view can be fairly straightforward, though you may have to explain unfamiliar vocabulary (e.g., ‘supervenies’ in the last example). An argument is a reason to believe the view. A philosopher may offer many reasons to believe her view.

When I ask you to explain a philosopher’s argument, I am asking you *extract* the argument into premise-conclusion form, making explicit premises that X or Y leaves implicit. This is almost never the same task as summarizing the entire article. In many of the readings, the author does not present the argument all in one place, or in the clearest way possible, and authors almost never explicitly state all of the premises for their argument. If you just paraphrase readings, that shows only that you have the fairly low-grade skill of paraphrase, and not that you genuinely understand the material.

When I ask you to critically discuss an objection or a philosopher’s reply to an objection, I am asking for more than your opinion on the matter. I want to be *persuaded* that your opinion is the right one, so I’m looking for your *reasons* for holding that opinion (e.g., your reasons for rejecting a premise of an argument; your reasons for thinking a conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises; or your reasons for rejecting a particular principle).

Style

You are writing a very short paper. You may assume that your reader is interested in epistemology generally and skepticism in particular. Your first paragraph should get right to the point. (E.g., “The KK principle states that to know that P you must know that you know that P. This principle plays a crucial role in Stroud’s argument for skepticism. In this paper I argue that Stroud’s defense of the KK principle fails on the grounds that ...”)

Avoid rhetorical flourishes; e.g., “Throughout the ages, humans have been mystified by everything from thunder to drought to the meaning of life, and they have consistently turned to God for explanation and solace.”