

2ND WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Papers are due the last day of class, Wednesday, December 8 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.

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.

Please write a roughly 1800–2200 word (roughly five to seven page) critical discussion on your choice of topics from material covered in the course. Below are some sample topics, but you do not have to restrict yourself to these topics. You should, however, pick a fairly narrow topic (e.g., don't simply write “on Boghossian” – we read over 70 pages of his manuscript). If you have questions about your topic, by all means come to talk to me about it.

You will be evaluated both on the clarity of your exposition and the quality of your critically discussion. To get an A, your critical discussion should advance the debate past what we discussed in class. Do you have another objection you'd like to develop? Do you think there's a way for the defender of the position or argument to reply to one of the objections we discussed? (Don't feel like this has to be your final word on the debate. You've made progress if you show that one objection doesn't work, even if you think there may still be other good objections.) Is there an objection that was mentioned in class but never discussed that you think can be developed? Do you think you can show that one of the objections we discussed is decisive? And so on.

I. Consider the following passage from Paul Boghossian's manuscript:

If we are to extricate ourselves from the grip of this conundrum we must show either that a relativism about epistemic principles is sustainable after all, or that the argument from rule-circularity never gave it much support to begin with.

I see no hope at all for the first option, but considerable promise in the second. In the remainder of this chapter, I will begin the complicated task of explaining why the argument from rule-circularity should not be credited with supporting Epistemic Relativism (more precisely, why it should not be seen as supporting Epistemic Non-Factualism). It bears emphasis, though, that the issues we are about to examine are among the hardest in all philosophy – and there is still much about them that remains to be understood. (p. 61)

How does Boghossian go about trying to show that we do, after all, have reasons to favor our epistemic system over that of competitors? Do you think his attempt is successful? Critically discuss.

**Knowledge,
mind,
and
existence**



**Philosophy 30
Fall 2004**

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2. Carefully explain how Hume proposes to resolve the apparent conflict between free will (“Liberty”) and determinism (“Necessity”). Is Hume’s solution satisfactory? Critically discuss.
3. What is physicalism? Does what it’s like to see red involve something non-physical? Frank Jackson argues that it does. Explain and evaluate his argument. (Note: it is not enough to describe the Mary in the black and white room example. You must explain how this example is relevant to the debate over physicalism.) Describe what you take the best objection to Jackson’s argument (it may be David Lewis’s objection, it may be the Old Fact reply, it may be some other; pick one and explain it thoroughly). Does the objection succeed? Critically discuss.
4. In his paper, Roger White claims that though the Preference Problem is a surmountable problem for explanations of life that appeal to intentional biasing. He thinks on the other hand “that while the Preference Problem is less than compelling against the suggestion of intentional biasing, it is devastating against [natural, non-intentional biasing]” (25). What is the Preference Problem? Why does White think it is a problem for one kind of explanation but not the other? Critically evaluate his position. (Be sure not to neglect the material from the end of White’s paper.)
5. What is the problem of evil? What do you take to be the most promising reply to the problem? How do you defend this reply against the objections we raised in class (if we discussed it) or in Mackie’s article (if your reply is discussed in Mackie’s article)? Critically discuss.

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.¹

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

¹ 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."

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.

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.”