

First paper topics

Write a paper no longer than 1800 words, about 5-6 pages, on one of the topics below. Please turn your paper in by the beginning of class on Tuesday, 20 February.

There is no need to consult anything other than the text and handouts from class, though you should feel free to make use of any resource you find helpful, including your classmates. The final product, of course, should be your own. Why would you pay me for my advice about someone else's work? My suggestions for writing philosophy papers and grading standards are available on the course website.

1. Jeremy Waldron makes a strong and a weak claim about the right to do wrong. Choose at least one of these and do the following. First, explain the claim you have chosen and Waldron's reasons for making it. Second, give what you regard as a compelling objection to the claim. Third, consider how Waldron would reply in defense of his claim. Finally, explain your own opinion: is Waldron's claim correct, incorrect, or something in between?
2. MacDonald criticizes the natural law tradition's derivation of human rights. But her article is not solely critical. She also gives what she regards as a superior explanation for the hold that natural or human rights have on us. Explain MacDonald's positive account of human rights: what does it consist in and why does she think it helps to justify the belief in human rights? Give what you regard as a compelling objection to MacDonald's account. Consider how she would reply. What do you think? Is her explanation satisfactory, unsatisfactory, or something else?

3. Hart has a choice theory of rights. Explain what that theory holds and why Hart believes it is true. Give what you regard as a compelling objection to Hart's choice theory. How might Hart respond? What do you think: are there good reasons for accepting the choice theory or not?
4. Hart tries to show that the following is true. If there are any moral rights, then there is at least one natural right, the equal right of all people to be free. Explain how Hart tries to show that this is true. Give what you regard as a compelling objection to Hart's argument. How might Hart defend his argument? What do you think: has he shown that this natural right exists?
5. There are two main objections to the benefit (a.k.a interest) theory of rights. First, it fails to capture what is distinctive about rights, since if it were true rights would be redundant with duties. Second, it gets the wrong answer in the so-called third party beneficiary cases. Explain how Raz's version of the benefit theory addresses at least one of these objections. Give what you regard as a compelling reason for thinking that Raz has not succeeded in dismissing the objection. Consider how Raz would respond. What do you think: has Raz successfully defended the benefit theory?
6. According to Feinberg, there is an intimate relationship between having rights and self-respect. Explain his reasons for holding that. Then give what you regard as a compelling reason for rejecting it. How might Feinberg reply? What do you think: are rights really necessary for self-respect or not?