

PHILOSOPHY 4360/5360 - METAPHYSICS

ESSAY TOPICS AND INSTRUCTIONS

INSTRUCTIONS

1. As is indicated in the syllabus, your grade for the course is based upon two essays and a final examination, each of which counts for one-third of your grade.

Length

In the case of **undergraduates**, each essay should be about **1250-1500 words** in length.

In the case of **graduate students**, each essay should be about **2000-2500 words** in length.

Due Dates

First Essay: **Tuesday, October 29**

Second Essay: **Tuesday, December 10**

2. A list of possible essay topics is given below. If there is a somewhat different topic on which you would like to write an essay, please discuss the topic that you have in mind with me to see whether or not it is suitable. (Potential topics that may be interesting and very appealing sometimes turn out to be much more difficult than they initially seem.)

3. The list of possible essay topics that follows contains topics for both the first and the second essay.

4. On the class website, there is a handout entitled "Writing Philosophy Essays": (<http://spot.colorado.edu/~tooley/WritingPhilosophyEssays.html>)

That document contains a detailed discussion of the things that make for a good philosophy essay in any area of philosophy, including metaphysics. I would strongly recommend that, even before doing a draft of your essay, you read through that handout. This should help you to develop a good overall plan for your essay, and one that is sharply focused on your topic.

5. That handout also contains a number of questions relating to different aspects of your essay, and those questions are also listed, in a slightly different order, in the "Essay Checklist" handout. (The latter is also found on the above website.) After you have completed a draft of your essay, I would recommend that you look over those questions to see if there are ways in which your essay could be revised so that you can set out your ideas and arguments in a more effective and perspicuous fashion.

6. All of the essays and excerpts from books referred to in the following list of topics, with a very few exceptions, are contained in the anthology *Metaphysics* – Second Edition, edited by Ronald C. Hoy and L. Nathan Oaklander. The articles that are not in the anthology *Metaphysics* are available on E-Reserve.

ESSAY TOPICS: FOR BOTH THE FIRST AND SECOND ESSAY

Note: Topics accompanied by ‘***’ in the margin are ones that are usually not a good choice for your first essay.

1. In his essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", Thomas Nagel argues that at present there is no reductionist strategy that will enable one to reduce the subjectively given qualia that characterize conscious mental states to phenomena dealt with by physical science. Nagel's argument (or arguments) in support of this claim are criticized by Frank Jackson in section III of "Epiphenomenal Qualia", and, at greater length, by Paul Churchland in section III of "Reduction, Qualia, and the Direct Introspection of the Brain". After briefly setting out what you take to be Nagel's basic line of argument in a step-by-step fashion, discuss whether it can be sustained.
2. Frank Jackson, in his essay "Epiphenomenal Qualia", offers what he calls the knowledge argument for the existence of qualia. Discuss whether Jackson's argument can be sustained, taking into account the discussion of it by Paul Churchland in section IV of "Reduction, Qualia, and the Direct Introspection of the Brain", and by John Perry in his essay "Time, Consciousness, and the Knowledge Argument".
3. John Locke's views on personal identity are set out in the selection, "Of Identity and Diversity", taken from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and a number of criticisms of Locke's account are advanced by Thomas Reid in the selection "Of Identity and on Mr. Locke's Theory of Personal Identity". After briefly setting out Locke's theory of personal identity, along with what you take to be Reid's most interesting objection (or objections) to Locke's account, discuss whether Locke's approach to personal identity can be defended against the objection (or objections) in question.
4. In the selection, "The Third Night: The Bodily Theory of Personal Identity", from John Perry's book *A Dialogue on Personal Identity*, the bodily theory of personal identity is discussed. Carefully set out what you take to be both the most important argument for this view, and the most important argument against it. Then indicate, in the light of those arguments, whether you think that the bodily theory of personal identity is sound or not, and why.
5. In his essay, "Personal Identity," Derek Parfit defends a sophisticated version of Locke's approach to personal identity against a variety of objections. After offering a brief summary of the view that Parfit is defending, discuss whether Parfit provides satisfactory answers to what you take to be the most crucial objections.
6. Discuss the claim, advanced by Derek Parfit in his essay, "Personal Identity", that what matters, with respect to survival, is not identity, but, rather, psychological connections and continuity.

7. In the selection "The Self as a Private Object" taken from his book *The View from Nowhere*, Thomas Nagel argues for the view that one is identical with one's brain. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, Nagel's argument. Is Nagel's view defensible or not?

8. Discuss the choice between the very different approaches to persistence, or identity through time, that are defended by Roderick Chisholm in the selection, "Problems of Identity", and by David Armstrong in his essay, "Identity through Time". Which view seems to you correct, and why?

*** 9. In his essay, "The Distinction between Mental and Physical Phenomena", Franz Brentano advances an answer to the question of how the distinction between the mental and the non-mental is to be drawn. Briefly explain, and then evaluate, Brentano's proposal. Is Brentano right in thinking that all and only mental phenomena are characterized by "intentionality"?

10. Briefly summarize the main claims that John Searle is defending in his essay "Reductionism and the Irreducibility of Consciousness". Then focus on any one of those claims, and after describing the support that Searle offers for it, discuss whether the claim in question is tenable or not.

11. One of the main issues that Patricia S. Churchland discusses in "Dualism and the Arguments against Neuroscientific Progress" is the bearing that the inverted spectrum argument has upon neuroscientific attempts to understand and explain conscious phenomena. After briefly summarizing the view she is defending, critically evaluate the support that she offers for that view.

*** 12. The first part of the selection "Fatalism, Voluntary Action, and Choice" consists of a selection taken from Aristotle's "On Interpretation", in which Aristotle sets out, and discusses, an argument for fatalism that rests upon the logical law of the excluded middle. After briefly summarizing that argument, discuss whether the argument can be sustained.

13. Taking into account the discussions by St. Augustine in "God's Foreknowledge and Human Freedom" and by William Rowe in "Predestination, Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom", what view would you defend on the question of whether divine foreknowledge is compatible with human freedom, and how would you defend that view?

14. Can human actions be both predestined from all eternity, and free?

15. Can actions be free even if they are causally determined? In the selection "On Liberty and Necessity", from his *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argues for the soft compatibilist view that freedom and causal determinism are compatible. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, Hume's case for this conclusion.

16. Is it true that, even if one's action was causally determined, one could have done otherwise? Evaluate the argument that Moore advances on this issue in the selection "Free Will", taken from his book, *Ethics*, taking into account the criticism of Moore's compatibilist view that is offered by Roderick Chisholm in the selection "Human Freedom and the Self".

17. Both Thomas Reid, in the selection "Of the Liberty of Moral Agents", taken from his book, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, and Roderick Chisholm, in the selection "Human Freedom and the Self", argue that human freedom requires the existence of a substantial self whose decisions are not caused. Focusing upon what seems to you the most forceful line of argument in support of this claim, discuss whether the claim can be sustained.

18. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, the approach to freedom of the will that is set out by Harry Frankfurt in his essay, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person".

19. In his essay, "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism", Robert Kane attempts to show that there is an interpretation of libertarian freedom of the will that is compatible with a thoroughly naturalistic worldview. Kane's view is, in turn, criticized by Daniel Dennett in his essay "A Hearing for Libertarianism" argues that Kane's naturalistic form of libertarian freedom of the will is unsatisfactory. After briefly setting out Kane's proposal, discuss whether Dennett's criticisms are successful or not.

20. In the selection entitled "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge", George Berkeley argues that we are not justified in believing in the existence of material objects, and he proposes a different, immaterialist account of the objects of perception. After carefully set out either one of Berkeley's most important arguments, discuss whether the argument in question is sound.

*** 21. Briefly set out, and then discuss, the proof of the unreality of time set out by J. M. E. McTaggart, and contained in the selection "Time Is Not Real".

*** 22. In his essay, "The Myth of Passage", Donald Williams argues against the idea that the world is a dynamic, or tensed one involving the passage of time. What do you take to be Williams's most important argument (or arguments)? Is his criticism of the idea of a dynamic world successful?

*** 23. Hugh Mellor, in his essay, "McTaggart, Fixity, and Coming True", sketches a case for a tenseless view of time – a case that is developed much more fully in his books, *Real Time*. and *Real Time II* –arguing, among other things, that the world does not "grow by the accretion of facts", that tensed statements have tenseless truth conditions, and that it is possible to offer a tenseless account of our experience of time. Focusing on **one** of the issues that Mellor discusses, briefly sketch, and then evaluate, Mellor's approach.

*** 24. Which is correct: a realist (or substantival or absolute) view of time, or a reductionist (or relational) view?

*** 25. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, the argument offered by Sydney Shoemaker in his essay "Time Without Change" in support of the claim that there can be temporal intervals during which no change at all takes place.

- *** 26. What account can be offered of the direction of time? Is it a matter of the patterns exhibited by events in time, or of something else?
- *** 27. Can a causal account of the direction of time be sustained? What are the most important objections to a causal theory of the direction of time? Can those objections be answered or not?
- *** 28. Parmenides' argument for the unreality of change seems brief and rather cryptic at the crucial stage where he is claiming that something cannot have different properties at different times. What do think is the most plausible suggestion concerning how that stage of the argument might be formulated? How satisfactory is the argument, thus formulated?
- *** 29. In his book, *Infinity: An Essay in Metaphysics*, José Benardete sets out different versions of an argument related to that in Zeno's Dichotomy Paradox – versions that appear much more troubling and difficult to answer than Zeno's. After briefly outlining one version of argument in question, discuss how one might respond to it.
- *** 30. What do you take to be the most promising formulation of a reductionist approach to laws of nature? What are the most important objections that might be directed against the account in question? Are there satisfactory answers to those objections?
- *** 31. Fred Dretske, in his essay, "Laws of Nature", and Michael Tooley, in "The Nature of Laws", both contend that laws are to be identified with second-order relations between universals. What objections is this view exposed to? Can those objections be answered?
- *** 32. What do you take to be the most promising formulation of a reductionist approach to causation, and what are the most important objections that might be directed against the account in question? Are there satisfactory answers to those objections?