

PHILOSOPHY 5340 - EPISTEMOLOGY

ESSAY TOPICS AND INSTRUCTIONS

INSTRUCTIONS

1. As is indicated in the syllabus, the required work for the course can take the form either of two shorter essay-writing exercises, of about 7 or 8 double-spaced, typewritten pages in length, or of one longer essay-writing exercise, of about 16 to 20 pages in length.
2. On the class website, there is a handout entitled "Writing Philosophy Essays". It contains a detailed discussion of the things that make for a good philosophy essay in any area of philosophy, including epistemology. I think you may find it helpful to read through that handout even before you start to work on the outline of your essay.
3. That handout also contains a number of questions relating to different aspects of your essay. Once 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, perspicuous, and forceful fashion.
4. Regardless of whether you do two shorter essays, or one longer essay, the essay-writing exercise or exercises will consist of two parts:

Part One: A clear outline, of about 400-600 words, in which you briefly describe:

- (1) The problem that you are going to consider.
- (2) The basic thesis that you will be defending.
- (3) One or two central supporting arguments.
- (4) One or two important objections that you will address.

Part Two: The completed essay.

Course Grade

The outline (or outlines) will count for **10%** of your grade for the course.

The paper (or papers) will count for **90%** of your grade for the course.

5. Due Dates for the Two, Shorter Papers Option:

First Paper

Outline Due: Monday, February 22

Completed Essay Due: Monday, March 15

Second Paper

Outline Due: Monday, April 5

Completed Essay Due: Monday, April 26

6. Due Dates for the One, Longer Paper Option:

Outline Due: Monday, April 5

Completed Essay Due: Monday, April 26

7. The list of possible essay topics that follows contains topics for both the first and the second essay, if you go with the two-essay option. But these topics are only suggestions, and an essay on any epistemological topic connected with the material that we are covering in this course is fine. But if you have any doubts about whether a topic is a good one, chat with me about what you have in mind.

8. Aside from topics that focus on material in Michael Huemer's book *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, all of the essays and excerpts from books referred to in the following list of topics are contained in the anthology *Epistemology – Contemporary Readings*, edited by Michael Huemer.

SUGGESTED ESSAY TOPICS

1. Outline the account of the concept of knowledge that seems to you most plausible, and then indicate why you think it is preferable to important alternative accounts.
2. Briefly set out, and then critically evaluate, the analysis of the concept of knowledge that is defended in any one of the following three selections: Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing"; Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief"; Robert Nozick, "Knowledge".
3. An important approach to skepticism is what is known as the "G. E. Moore Shift". After reading G. E. Moore's essay "Hume's Theory Examined", plus section 5 of chapter II and section 2 of chapter III of Michael Huemer's *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, briefly summarize Michael Huemer's exposition and defense of the G. E. Moore Shift, and then discuss whether or not that response to skepticism is satisfactory.
4. Briefly set out, and then critically evaluate, the response to skepticism advanced by Hilary Putnam in his "Brains in a Vat" article.
5. Briefly summarize and then critically evaluate the argument for skepticism advanced by I. T. Oakley in his article "An Argument for Scepticism Concerning Justified Beliefs".
6. In a section of his *Treatise of Human Nature* that is concerned with skepticism regarding the senses David Hume offers a defense of skepticism concerning the external world. In the course of that discussion, Hume describes a certain philosophical view:

"The natural consequence of this reasoning should be, that our perceptions have no more a continued than an independent existence; and indeed philosophers have so far run into this opinion, that they change their system, and distinguish, (as we shall do for the future) betwixt perceptions and objects, of which the former are supposed to be interrupted and perishing, and different at every different return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continued existence and identity."

Hume then goes on to claim that this philosophical view is not really satisfactory:

"But however philosophical this new system may be esteemed, I assert that 'tis only a palliative remedy, and that it contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself."

Part of what Hume claims is that this "philosophical hypothesis" has nothing to recommend it from the point of view of reason, and his argument in support of that contention is contained in the following paragraph:

"As to the first part of the proposition, *that this philosophical hypothesis has no primary recommendation, either to reason or the imagination*, we may soon satisfy ourselves with regard to *reason* by the following reflections. The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent, and are the first foundation of all our conclusions. The only conclusion we can draw from the existence of one thing to that of another, is by means of the relation of cause and effect, which shows, that there is a connection betwixt them, and that the existence of one is dependent on that of the other. The idea of this relation is derived from past experience, by which we find, that two beings are constantly conjoined together, and are always present at once to the mind. But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions, it follows that we may observe a conjunction or relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence of any of the qualities of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our reason in this particular."

Try to set out the above argument in an explicit, step-by-step fashion. If you think that Hume's argument is plausible, defend it against one or two important objections. If you think the argument is unsound, carefully set out what you take to be the crucial objection (or objections) to it, and defend that objection (or objections) in a detailed way.

7. What objections to foundationalism does William Alston address in his article "Has Foundationalism Been Refuted?" How satisfactory are Alston's responses?
8. After briefly summarizing the approach to justification set out by Susan Haack in "A Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification", critically evaluate her account.
9. What are the central claims that Bishop Berkeley is defending in the excerpt from *Of the Principles of Human Knowledge*? Focus on any one argument that Berkeley offers, and after carefully setting out that argument in an explicit, step-by-step fashion, discuss whether the argument is sound.
10. After summarizing the main features of Thomas Reid approach to perception as set out in the excerpt from his book *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, offer a critical evaluation of it.
11. Briefly set out, and then critically evaluate, the approach to perception defended by Bertrand Russell in the excerpt from *The Problems of Philosophy*.
12. In chapter IV of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Michael Huemer sets out and defends a version of direct realism. Offer a critical evaluation of the view that he defends.
13. In chapter V of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception – "A Version of Foundationalism"*, Michael Huemer defends the view that one can have noninferential knowledge of physical states of affairs by appealing to a principle he calls "Phenomenal Conservatism". After carefully describing that principle, discuss whether it is sound.

14. One of the most important objections to direct realism that Michael Huemer discusses in chapter VI of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* - "Objections to Direct Realism" is objection 8, "The Illusoriness of Secondary Qualities". Set out Michael's response to that objection, and critically evaluate it.
15. Critically evaluate the objection to indirect realism that Michael Huemer sets out in, chapter VII of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* - "An Objection to Indirect Realism: The Problem of Spatial Properties". How do you think that an indirect realist should reply to this objection? Is the reply satisfactory?
16. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, the answer to skepticism that Michael Huemer defends in chapter VIII of *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* - "The Direct Realist's Answer to Skepticism".
17. Both in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, and in his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley offers a variety of arguments against the view that there is a mind-independent, physical world. Among them is an argument that he sets out in the *Three Dialogues*, and in which he tries to show not just that we do not have any adequate reason for believing that there are physical objects that can exist outside of any relation to a mind, but that the very idea of a physical object that exists independently of all relations to any mind involves a contradiction. This argument is contained in the following passage:

PHILONOUS: But (to pass by all that has been hitherto said, and reckon it for nothing, if you will have it so) I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.

HYLAS: If it comes to that, the point will soon be decided. What more easy than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by any mind whatsoever? I do at this present time conceive them existing after that manner.

PHILONOUS: How say you, Hylas, can you see a thing which is at the same time unseen?

HYLAS: No, that were a contradiction.

PHILONOUS: Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of *conceiving* a thing which is *unconceived*?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: The tree or house therefore which you think of, is conceived by you?

HYLAS: How should it be otherwise?

PHILONOUS: And what is conceived, is surely in the mind?

HYLAS: Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind.

PHILONOUS: How then came you to say, you conceived a house or tree existing independent and out of all minds whatsoever?

HYLAS: That was I agree an oversight; but stay, let me consider what led me into it. – It is a pleasant mistake enough. As I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place, where no one was present to see it, I thought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of, not considering that I myself conceived it all the while. But now I plainly see, that all I can do is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving, that I can conceive them *existing out of the minds of all spirits*.

PHILONOUS: You acknowledge then that you cannot possibly conceive, how any one corporeal sensible thing should exist otherwise than in a mind.

HYLAS: I do.

Is the argument offered by Philonous sound?

In order to discuss this question, try to set out Philonous's argument in a careful, step by step fashion, numbering each step, and indicating which steps are premises, and which are conclusions that are supposed to follow from earlier steps. Then, if you think that the argument is basically sound, set out what you think are the one or two most important objections to the argument, and indicate, in each case, what you take to be a plausible response. Alternatively, if you think that the argument is unsound, describe, in a careful and detailed fashion, what you take to be the central flaw in the argument, and defend your view against possible objections.

This is a tricky argument to evaluate unless you are familiar with the distinction in philosophy of language between extensional and intensional contexts. So if you would like to tackle this topic, but are not familiar with that distinction, please read the relevant handout on the class web site, and talk to me about anything that is unclear.

18. Explain what is meant by the claim that the having of a sense experience involves nothing more than an intentional state. What can be said for and against that claim? Can this view of sense experience be sustained?
19. Two important alternatives with regard to the logical grammar of the language to be used in describing sense experiences are (1) a language of appearing, and (2) a sense datum language. After explaining the difference, carefully discuss the choice between these two alternatives.
20. In chapter 5 of his book *Perception*, Frank Jackson offers a defense of the view that "colour is not a property of material things" (128). Carefully set out Jackson's argument in a step-by-step fashion, and then discuss whether it is sound. (This chapter from Jackson's book is available in the Philosophy Department's library.)
21. Set out what you take to be the most promising account of the justification of beliefs about past events, and either defend it against possible objections, or else indicate why you think the account in question is to be preferred to some important alternative account.
22. In his essay "Memory", in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Sydney Shoemaker describes a number of different approaches to memory knowledge. Which one seems most promising, and why?
23. Outline, and then critically discuss, the account of memory set out by Norman Malcolm in his essay "A Definition of Factual Memory".
24. What seems to you to be the most important thesis advanced by Michael Huemer in his essay "The Problem of Memory Knowledge"? Discuss whether that thesis is sound.
25. Briefly describe, and then critically evaluate, Paul Edwards's response, in his essay "Russell's Doubts about Induction," to Bertrand Russell's discussion of the problem of induction.
26. What is Nelson Goodman's "new riddle of induction"? What do you think is the most promising response to it, and why?
27. Briefly set out, and then evaluate, John Foster's approach to the problem of justifying induction that he defends in his essay "Induction, Explanation, and Natural Necessity".

28. Carefully set out, and then evaluate, some central aspect of Bertrand Russell's discussion of *a priori* knowledge in the excerpt from his book *The Problems of Philosophy*.
29. Critically evaluate some central aspect of A. J. Ayer's discussion in his essay "The Elimination of Metaphysics".
30. Carefully set out, and then critically evaluate W. V. O. Quine's criticisms of the idea of analyticity that in his essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism". How might a believer in the analytic/synthetic distinction best reply to Quine's criticisms?