

PHI 171 – PROBLEMS OF PHILOSOPHY – FALL 2014

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ASSIGNMENT #2 – DUE NOVEMBER 17TH

This assignment consists in writing a **1-2 page outline** of your final paper on a topic of your choice. The outline should contain:

- (a) Statement of the philosophical topic/question you want to discuss
- (b) Clear and precise statement of the thesis you want to defend
- (c) A brief sketch of the arguments/reasons why your thesis holds true
- (d) A brief sketch of the objections to your thesis and your arguments
- (e) Ideas for possible replies to the objections

Please be rigorous, clear, precise and original. Rigorous argumentation, clarity of exposition, precision of language, and originality of ideas are essential ingredients for a good philosophy paper.

You are encouraged to write about a topic that interests you. The only restriction is that the topic should be related to what we discussed in class. Feel free to talk to me if you want to brainstorm ideas. I hold office hours on Mondays and Wednesdays, 2–3PM, room C-365. If you are looking for suggestions, read below:

Time: Augustine argues that time only exists in the mind. Summarize his argument. Some might object that time cannot exist only in the mind because we get older¹ or because the fossil record shows that the earth used to be different from what it is today. How could Augustine respond to this objection?

Change: Zeno and Parmenides argue against the reality of change. Summarize their arguments. Although it is hard to find logical flaws in them, their arguments seem wrong because we experience change everyday. *But let's be open minded!* Let's imagine what our lives would be like if there were no change at all in the world. Would living become impossible if there were no change at all? Carefully motivate your answer.

¹Check the photographs in the NY Times piece “Forty Portraits in Forty Years”, October 3, 2014, available on-line at <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/10/03/magazine/01-brown-sisters-forty-years.html>

Free will: Certain findings from genetics and neuroscience seem to undermine our belief in free will. Discuss whether these findings do in fact undermine our belief in free will. In particular, pay attention to the distinction between “lack of free will” and “determinism”. Some philosophers hold that a deterministic world is one in which free will cannot exist, but other philosophers—known as compatibilists—disagree. Discuss whether the findings from neuroscience and genetics support determinism, the denial of free will or both.

Physicalism: The philosopher Frank Jackson offers an argument against physicalism. What is his argument? Evaluate Jackson’s argument carefully. What objection would a physicalist formulate against it? Is the left/right objection a good objection (*see slides*)? Explain.

Thinking computers. More than fifty years ago Alan Turing designed a test that could tell whether a machine was intelligent or not. Describe the test. Today some believe that even if a computer could pass the Turing Test, that would not be enough to show that the computer is intelligent. Do you agree? Explain. What would take for a computer to be intelligent? In this context, discuss Searle’s Chinese Room Argument.²

God and suffering: If God is supremely good and powerful, why does God let people suffer? Why does God let natural disaster happen? Isn’t this a cruelty on God’s part? In answering these questions, discuss Jonas’ suggestion that we should conceive of God as something changing and suffering.

Reason and faith: Is science itself based on belief and faith, just like religion? Is science another form of religion or is it radically different from religion? Could everything that religion tells us be false? Could everything that science tells us be false? In answering these questions, pay particular attention to Wittgenstein’s argument against skepticism.

Knowledge and skepticism: Descartes and Wittgenstein offer different responses to skepticism. Summarize their responses. How do they differ from one another? Would a skeptic be satisfied by Descartes’ or Wittgenstein’s response? What counter-objections could a skeptic formulate?

The good: Peter Singer wants us to donate most of our money to those living in poverty. Reconstruct his argument for this conclusion. Can you find any logical flaw in the argument? If you cannot find any logical flaws, why don’t you give most of your money to the poor? If you don’t have enough money right now, are you willing to pledge that you’ll give most of your future salary to the poor? Explain why you would, or would not, take that pledge.

²Have a look at Massimo Pigliucci’s article “The Turing Test Does Not Matter”, available on-line at <http://scientiasalon.wordpress.com/2014/06/12/the-turing-test-doesnt-matter/>