21L017 – Essay #2 Questions

Prof Raman's Section

Due: Online and in hard copy (by 5 pm) on Wednesday Nov 9th

• Please write an essay of 7-8 pages (approx. 2500 words or 11000 characters) responding to one of the following prompts. If you wish to change the topic or combine prompts, you may do so, but you need clear it with me in advance. As ever, you are not required to respond to every of the prompt you select. Decide on what portions you want to focus on and develop a coherent argument in response.
• Please note that your response should focus on a different author or text from the one(s) you chose for the first essay – you are not forbidden to cite or to use any of the authors we have studied thus far, but the focus of this assignment should not overlap with that of your first paper.
• Consult the general guidelines for essays (available on the Stellar site) for how to format your paper, cite texts, and so on. Don't forget to number your pages and to provide your essay a proper title. You are required to meet with our writing advisor, Nora Delaney, *before* you turn your paper in, so please schedule an appointment and then draft the essay so that you have something concrete to work on during the tutorial session.
• For this assignment too, please list all your topic sentences on a separate unnumbered sheet, as with your first essay.

1. Voltaire's *Candide* (like the selected entries from his *Philosophical Dictionary*) does more than poke fun at philosophical optimism. Consider that Pangloss, the proponent of the view, has no more presence in the text than Martin, the representative of pessimism. Consider that the evils besetting the protagonists are all of human origin save two–the Lisbon earthquake and a plague mentioned by the old woman–and that even here the issue has more to do with human responses to disaster than with the fact that the universe is badly arranged. Consider the El Dorado episode and the book's concluding piece of wisdom: "We must cultivate our garden." Write an essay, accounting for these or other features of the book that do not immediately translate into a satire on Leibniz's philosophic viewpoint, and draw some conclusions about the overall purpose of the book.

2. Leibniz did not, in fact, coin the phrase, "This is the best of all possible worlds" (it was coined by his disciple, Maupertius) but it certainly seems to capture the spirit of his philosophy. How well is that spirit captured by the disquisitions of Pangloss? Is it right to propose that Leibniz's philosophy is a philosophy of optimism? How does Pope's understanding of the phrase compare with Voltaire's as an interpretation of Leibniz's philosophy?

3. Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* characterizes belief (synonymous with the "vivacity" of perception) as proportioned to the frequency and constancy of experience. On the one hand, this argument represents a forceful critique of what it is possible to know through reason – "all probable reasoning," Hume insists, "is nothing but a species of sensation" (T, 103). On the other

hand, Hume maintains that our emotions and sentiments are intuitively exact; our feelings, in other words, are as subject to quantitative measurement as are objective frequencies of occurrence. Discuss the measurement or quantification of sympathy, emotion, or belief in a few episodes from Coleridge, Wordsworth and Byron.

4. Exposit the major themes in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in respect to the ostensible moral of the story. The poem seems to announce a moral clearly towards its end, but the manner of the story implies a sub-text – through aspects such as the prologue, the stopping of one in three, the absence of any motive for killing the albatross, and so on -- which may or may not fall in with it. How overtly is the significance of such things captured by the commentaries that Coleridge eventually added to the margins of the text? How much of a role does chance play in the story? Why does Life-in-Death gamble with Death for his soul? Is the Mariner lucky or unlucky that she won the game?

5. A major feature of Leibniz's philosophy is that it seems to violate the usual distinction between truths known *a priori* and truths that are contingent upon experience. The sort of proposition usually classified as *a priori* are those that do not require experience to be known because they follow from the conception of the things to which they refer, as deductions follow from premises to conclusions, a process that Leibniz (and Hume after him) calls "demonstration." For instance, because the theorems of Euclidian geometry are demonstrations, we understand that we do not appeal to experience when we claim that the angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees. Rather, we regard this feature as inherent in the conception of a Euclidian triangle, which is exactly what we mean when we say that the proposition linking this feature to the thing is *a priori*. In contrast, we say that the taste of an apple or the truth of the proposition "this apple is delicious" is linked to the idea of this apple in particular as one of its contingent features. We think that we have to experience the apple to know its taste and chase after contingent links of causation to account for it. But Leibniz seems to be saying that even though this apple is not linked conceptually to its particular taste so far as we humans are concerned (it is not a contradiction to think that it might have tasted awful), just the same it is linked to that very taste *a priori* in the mind of God. In the same way, Leibniz holds that in God's mind, everything that you are or will do is known *a priori*. God knows everything about you in the *a priori* way, as he knows everything in his creation. And yet Leibniz also maintains that we, being human, are nonetheless endowed with a free will.

Making use of some of the readings (for instance, "Necessary and Contingent Truth"), explain how Leibniz deals with this apparent contradiction. In what ways do one or more – but not too many more! -- of the literary texts we have read over the last few weeks (that is, Pope, Voltaire, and the Romantics) engage with this Leibnizian problem?

7. If Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason is indeed adequately summarized as the view that "nothing happens without a cause," then Hume's arguments in the *Treatise* would be a head-on attack upon a central tenet of Leibniz's view of things. Hume seems to regard causation as a species of fabrication. But Hume also seems to restore the idea that contingent facts are the results of hidden and secret causes even as he maintains that the truth of contingent propositions is established by "a mere passive admission of [sense-] impressions through the organs of

sensation." While Hume has often been seen as arguing for a radical form of skepticism, he himself explicitly denies this charge at several points (not supplied in our selections). Tracing some of the arguments in the reading, explain how Hume responds to the view that every event has a cause. How firm are the foundations of knowledge, in Hume's view? How central to his view is the idea of probability? How do the Romantics respond to the problem of causation as developed in Hume? (You might want here to draw into your ambit the ways in which the problems of causation and personal identity are discussed by Hume).

8. Part III, section xii of the *Treatise* (Of the probability of chances) begins by offering two distinct accounts to explain how the mind comes to regard causes as probable. The first directly involves the vivacity of the impression produced by habitually moving from one impression to another, but Hume argues that this explanation must commonly yield to another, in which the notion of a calculable indifference of the mind between alternatives comes into play. How well does Hume's notion of "indifference" (developed in section xi) reflect the notion of "equal chances" developed by Pascal? How is it used in section xii to explain the mind's sense of the probability of events? What is the force of Hume's example of the man who prefers to earn £1,001 rather than only £1,000, even though he has no mental image (the Humean "idea") of either of these quantities? In your view, how important overall is Hume's notion of probability to his general position?

9. Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason is summarized as the view that "nothing happens without a reason." Hume shifts the discussion from "reason" to "cause." Here is a typical passage: "It is universally allowed that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that chance, when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power which has anywhere an existence in nature." At the same time, Hume argues that causation is an idea that arises in the mind (he calls it a "determination" of the mind) and which it imposes upon experience, arguing that it is a fallacy to suppose that "whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence." Can you say anything significant about the move from Leibniz's "reason" to Hume's "cause@? Tracing some of the arguments in the readings, explain how Hume responds to the view that every event has a cause. How does his view of causation square with his view (announced at the outset of the brief excerpt from Hume's *Enquiries* in our readings) that "there is no such thing as chance in the world", i.e., that chance is nothing but "our ignorance of the real cause of any event"? How does Hume's view of chance square with his view that we cannot know for certain that the sun will rise tomorrow?

10. Central to seventeenth-century accounts of probability is the idea of a "fair" or "equitable" distribution based upon a true measure of expectation. Equal expectations -- rather than equal probabilities underlying expectations -- was usually the starting point. For instance, the Dutch mathematician Christian Huygens says that he begins

> with the hypothesis that in a game of chance one has to win something that has a value such that if one possessed this value, one could procure the same chance in an equitable game, that is, in a game that works to no one's disadvantage.

Here, a player's expectation (and thus his probability of winning) is measured against the assumed standard of a "fair" game, thought of intuitively as one in which expectations are equal.

As scholars have noted, later probabilists would *define* a fair game as one in which the players' expectations equaled the price of playing the game. However, Huygens starts with the idea that one's expectation from a game is measured by how much one would have to ante up in order to buy an equivalent stake in a fair game. Similar -- though subtly different -- descriptions may be found in Bayes' essay on the doctrine of chances. Drawing on any of these sources, examine how the ideas of expectation, equity and justice function in one or more of the literary texts we have read (Pope, Voltaire, and the Romantics).

11. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the ship has often been described as a microcosm of the world, and the sea voyage a metaphor for life. Choosing at least two of the following texts -- Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Voltaire's *Candide*, and Canto II of Byron's *Don Juan* -- compare and contrast how they use the metaphor of the ship and/or the shipwreck to reflect on a world composed by chance and/or design.

12. Bayes' essay develops a symmetrical model to study how we proceed from known effects to their unknown causes by constantly updating our assumptions in light of experience. His particular model (as also Bernoulli's) is restricted to the case of binomial distributions. Later thinkers, such as Laplace and Gauss, would start with less restrictive assumptions, using, for instance, the variations between multiple measurements of a phenomenon such as the location of an astronomical body to deduce probabilistically the actual location. Develop an essay that examines how one (or more) of the literary texts you have read (Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Voltaire's "Candide" come immediately to mind, though you might be able to work with Coleridge or Byron as well) deals with how we adjust the confidence in our beliefs through information and experience? How do their reflections on the movement from effects to causes compare with Bayes'? In what ways do your chosen texts diverge from or suggest the limits of a Bayesian analysis? Consider, too, your position as a reader of these works? In what way might experiencing them affect you? How do the texts reflect on that process?

13. Here is the basis for a science-fiction film. (It is the basis of *The Matrix*, if you must know.) We believe that we live in the material world of everyday circumstance, but what we think of as our selves are just avatars within a virtual simulation. Actually, we spend all our lives motionless, each in our own vessel of amniotic fluid, wired up to an immense computer, which feeds impulses into our brains and receives impulses in return. The computer manages the electrical matrix in such a way as to synchronize each individual's sense of the virtual reality with everyone else's. We live, we breed, we fight, we die in virtual reality, and whatever happens to the bodies and minds of our avatars happens to our bodies and minds in the vessels of fluid, but nothing of the reality behind the illusions within which we collectively live is available to us. The point of this set-up is energy; the sun has gone out and the computer needs our absolute immobility to harvest the electrical output of our brains to keep running. At some point, in one of the vessels a hero is created as intelligent as the computer, who will learn to see the virtual reality for what it is, a vast network of electrical signals in digital code, and he will challenge the computer for mastery in the name of our liberation.

Entertain the supposition that either Leibniz or Hume (or both) rose from the dead in order to view the movie. Which would be more delighted? Which would hate it more? How

would each or both view the situation as described just short of the final sentence (the one about our liberation)? How would they view the final sentence?