21L.017: ART OF THE PROBABLE **Professor Raman**
Fall 2011 (14N-433)

FIRST PAPER TOPICS

Papers are due on **Friday**, **October 7** by 5pm in both print and electronic form: a hardcopy in my office or mailbox and an electronic copy (rtf, doc, docx or pdf) posted on the Stellar site.

Description of Requirements: Papers should consist of at least five double-spaced pages in no more than 12-point typeface (preferably Times Roman or equivalent) and with one-inch margins, not counting page numbers at the bottom of the page. The length stipulated should require about 8,500 characters.

A **title page** should be precede the essay itself – it should not be numbered, and it should not be included in your count of words/characters. The title page should include (a) your name (b) the title or subject of your essay (c) a character-count of the document (less the title page), and (d) the list of topic sentences (see below). Any reasonable word-processing program will provide the facility to enable you to fulfill this requirement. The remaining pages of your paper should be numbered, starting with the first page of text.

Your essay should be divided into paragraphs and each paragraph should be headed by a one-sentence summary of the paragraph's point or comment. This sentence may become the first sentence of the paragraph in a final, revised draft or it may find its way to a position elsewhere in the paragraph or it may not appear in the paragraph at all, but whatever its fate, it should also remain on a separate line printed in **bold** in the copy submitted to me.

The list of sentences should also appear on the title page. Please note: These sentences should read like a paragraph. If they read like a shopping-list or a laundry-list you will have failed to produce a coherent paper.

The Writing Advisor: It is part of the requirement of this subject that you consult our Writing Advisor (Nora Delaney) both before initial submission, and before you turn in your rewrite. Please contact her or use her online signup sheet to make an appointment. Before meeting her, you are required to email her at the very least a brief "agenda" for the meeting, that is, a list of three topics or issues you want to discuss at the meeting. Ideally, of course, you would have a partial or complete draft you want to discuss, but you should nonetheless email her three issues concerning that draft, so that your discussion is a directed and focused one.

Further details on working with the advisor are available in the "General" section of our "Materials" page.

Please pay good attention to the following enjoinder: Remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. We have all (presumably) read the text under discussion and do not require a full rehearsal of its contents. (A book-report fills up pages, but they are all empty calories, intellectually.) What an essay does is to offer an argumentative interpretation of a text, and it rehearses or paraphrases the text only when it is thought that some (brief) reminder of the contents will be useful in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret them.

Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write the essay if you can announce (to yourself or to the reader) the overall point that you are trying to make. Such a point should not be self-evident; you should always have in mind an opposing point (the one that you are arguing against) that is not so obvious or so silly that no one would be able to argue for it -- for, after all, you are taking five pages to argue against it.

TOPICS

The following questions and topics are meant as suggestions. If you wish to modify them or invent a topic of your own, you may do so. Indeed, I rather hope that you *will* do so; the point of these suggestions is to get you thinking; they are not to be followed as if they provided an algorithm for a successful paper. In any case, the essay should address one or more of the texts read and discussed so far this term (i.e., up through Leibniz's "Theodicy", Newton, and Pope) and should deal with issues relevant to both the text and the subject-matter of our discussions in class.

1. Give a careful account of Aristotle's four "causes" and explain the relationship among them in such a way as to make it sound as if Aristotle had a plausible view of what is natural. What does Aristotle mean by "cause" (*aitia*, plural *aitiai*)? Whatever they are, they have to do with change, the capacity for which is inherent in the nature of things. Do we believe that particular kinds of change are sometimes inherent properties of things? Or is change induced by externalities? Or both?

2. Compare Aristotle's view of luck with the reflections that end Cardano's story of how he gambled and lost his shirt (and other garments as well) but applied himself thereafter to master luck and won back everything. What view would Cardano take of Aristotle's distinction between luck and chance, should he have been presented with the text of the *Physics* as we have it? What view of the nature of things is implied by his final reflection upon mastering luck in life and mastering luck in games of chance and what do you suppose Aristotle would have thought about Cardano's views if he could have read them?

3. Aristotle distinguishes between luck (*tuche*) and spontaneity or chance (*automaton*), arguing that the former is a special case of the latter; luck is the kind of chance that can operate only in human affairs because it is the kind of chance which looks as though it is connected with what we have done as agents responsible for our actions when really it is just something that happens to us. How well does this distinction apply to the case of Oedipus in Sophocles' drama? What does the success or failure of its application tell us about the play? Keep in mind (although our English translation does not do justice to the fact) that ideas of happiness and unhappiness, success and failure, reaching your appropriate end or avoiding it, are most often expressed in the Greek text by words that are variants of the Greek word for luck. Also keep in mind that the Aristotelian notion of purposeful does not suppose that purposes must always be driven by intelligence; Aristotelian purpose is not necessarily intentional purpose.

4. *Oedipus the King* is not a drama of fate, although unavoidable (therefore 'fated') events lie in the background of the play. Granted, the past that overwhelms Oedipus is odd from our point of view, but in a sense, the past is always 'fated' (a word which derives from the Latin "fatum", which means "that which has been spoken"), and we are all liable to Oedipus's fate insofar as we are all liable to discovering that something we did has taken on unanticipated qualities in the light of events subsequent to our doing it. In this connection, we can say that the action of *Oedipus the King* is not the spectacle of a man who becomes a puppet in the hands of the gods (or at least Apollo, whose oracle delivers two messages, one about what will happen and another about what must be done) but rather the spectacle of a man acknowledging that what he has done and not just what he has intentionally done has authority over him. It is an attitude dead opposite to Hamlet's apology to Laertes just before the duel. ("If Hamlet when he's not himself does wrong Laertes, then Hamlet does it not.") Present arguments on one or even both sides of this issue.

5. Pascal's wager concerning God is concerned with how to act under conditions of uncertainty. Pascal's reason has imperative force; it says that if the stakes are in your favor, you must wager; it is irrational to think of the certainty of the stake that you possess and the uncertainty of winning the pot. In light of

Pascal's argument, write an essay that examines the problem of the decision of whether and how to act in *Hamlet*. Pascal's wagerer (the nameless one he is addressing) does not want to wager but to hang back; Hamlet delays setting right the time that is out of joint. In what ways do either Pascal or Shakespeare represent what it means to be rational, and how does either treat the relationship between uncertainty and acting?

6. Narratives are often said to balance two opposed functions: on the one hand, the regularity, familiarity or predictability of a structure; and, on the other, the unexpectedness of seemingly chance events. We have touched upon how these two function in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*; we may observe them as well in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The audience at the outset of *Hamlet* would have recognized all the lineaments of a revenge-play–the murder of a family-member, here both a father and a head of state, and the duty laid upon the main character to execute justice in an act of vengeance; and they would have expected Hamlet, as he puts it, to sweep to his revenge–making due allowance, to be sure, for the dangers and impediments that must be overcome if the play is not end almost as soon as it begins. But Hamlet seems to resist the role assigned him and talks much about it–until, at the end, he speaks of submitting to chance in the guise of Providence and a readiness to comply with opportunity as it happens to arise (in the course of a wager, no less). Comment in any way that you think will illuminate an understanding of the play.

7. Compare Aristotle's view of change with Newton's, in any way that will reveal the characteristics of each. Alternatively, compare their views about what counts as an explanation. What sort of thing does an Aristotelian explanation explain? What sort of thing does a Newtonian explanation explain? What are the consequences of the differences between these explanations of what it means to explain something?

8. In the *Physics*, Aristotle asserts that "[i]t is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present in nature because we do not observe the causes deliberating" (ch. 8). Once the Aristotelian idea of different inherent tendencies in different kinds of matter was scrapped and all matter became something that changed only in response to external force, the sense of purpose in nature had to be accounted for differently. Consider the case(s) made for design/divine purpose in the work of one or two of the following authors: Leibniz, Newton, Pope. On what ground(s) do these authors insist on the underlying justice of events (such as the presence of randomness or evil in the world) whose causes are obscure? What is or what should be the relation of faith to determinate knowledge founded in experience? What kinds of knowledge are we capable of acquiring to assess the likelihood of purposes that are beyond our power to comprehend in full?

9. Leibniz's *Theodicy* attempts to refute certain propositions about God. Put the best face that you can upon the propositions and upon Leibniz's refutation and try to show what issues are involved in them and whether the quarrel between them makes sense. For example (you may use this as a starting-point), the first section of the reading suggests that God could have made a world without evil but chose not to, because the world without evil would not have been as good overall as the actual world, which does contain evil. How can this view be explained? Or, again, section three tries to separate the idea of predetermination (God knows what we are going to do) from necessity (there is no choice, for what can be known in advance must happen, and knowing in advance how we will choose is contrary to the very idea of choice). Of our actions, says Leibniz, if it is certain that we will perform them, it is no less certain that we will choose to perform them. How can this view be defended? We have no account of Leibniz's view of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* but it is likely that he knew it well. What would he have thought of the play?

10. Pope's *Essay on Man* is divided into "Epistles" and the epistles are divided into units that by convention are not called stanzas but paragraphs. Give an account of the consecutiveness of the arguments in the first epistle by taking stock of the subject-matter in each paragraph and showing how the matter of one leads to or suggests the matter of another. Alternatively, analyze with care the matter and the poetic or rhetorical devices in any segment and show what the segment contributes to the argument of

the whole. Unlike Leibniz's text, Pope is addressed to a reader who is being chastised or rebuked for pride. But it has this much in common with Leibniz: pride is rebuked is not as a sin but as folly, stupidity, intellectual incoherence. Comment.

11. In a fragment of his *Pensées*, Pascal writes: "What a chimera, then, is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depositary of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and refuse of the universe!" In the play named for him, Hamlet says: "What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals! And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (2.2.304-308) And here is Pope, from the Essay on Man:

> When the proud steed shall know why man restrains
> His fiery course, or drives him o'er the plains;
> When the dull ox, why now he breaks the clod,
> Is now a victim, and now Egypt's god:
> Then shall man's pride and dulness comprehend
> His actions', passions', being's use and end;
> Why doing, suff'ring, check'd, impell'd; and why
> This hour a slave, the next a deity (Epistle I)

Taking any two of these quotations, and reading them in the context of the texts from which they are taken, contrast and compare them.