

Paper Topics and Guidelines

1. Assignment: Write an argumentative essay of 1500-1800 words (~5-6 pages), on some philosophical topic from this course.

2. Due Date: Due Friday, 5/2, by the beginning of class. By that time, please upload your paper to Blackboard (click on *Medieval Philosophy* → *Written Assignments* → *Paper Assignment* → *Start Submission* → scroll to *Submission* → add your file → click *Submit*).

3. Late Penalty: Late papers will be penalized –10 points (out of 100) for the first day, and –2 points for each additional 24 hour period after that. For instance, turn it in by 11:59pm on 5/2, receive –10 points; turn it in on 5/3, receive –12 points; and so on.

4. Suggested Topics: You will argue for or against some philosophical position in the context of the philosophers and texts we have discussed. Below are some suggestions.

- 1) **Freedom and Foreknowledge:** First, present the problem of human freedom vs. divine foreknowledge, and either **Boethius's** or **Ockham's** solution.

Then, argue either that the presented solution is successful, or unsuccessful; i.e., has your chosen author successfully demonstrated that human freedom is compatible with divine foreknowledge? Why or why not?

- 2) **The Nature of Free Will:** First, present **Anselm's** theory of the nature free will and his account of how the devil sinned freely (i.e., his thesis of the dual wills).

Then, argue that his explanation is satisfactory, or unsatisfactory; i.e., has he successfully explained how the devil sinned freely? Why or why not?

- 3) **The Nature of Sin:** First, present **Abelard's** view of sin (where sin is located in intentions rather than in actions—which, he says, are morally indifferent).

Then, argue that this view is correct, or mistaken; i.e., has Abelard given a satisfactory account of the location of sin / wrongness? Why or why not?

- 4) **The Cosmological Argument:** First, present **Avicenna's** argument from contingency for the existence of God.

Then, argue that it is successful, or unsuccessful; i.e., has Avicenna successfully proved the existence of the "necessarily existent"? Why or why not?

- 5) **Divine Command Theory:** First, present the Euthyphro dilemma regarding the relationship between God and morality, and the position defended by **Scotus & Ockham**. (You may also present/discuss **Aquinas's** view if you like.)

Then argue whether the Ockhamist view (and Thomist view, if applicable) is satisfactory, or unsatisfactory. (Be sure to assess the pros and cons of each horn of the dilemma along the way.) I.e., have the authors you've presented delivered a satisfying picture of the nature of morality? Why or why not?

- 6) **Design Your Own Thesis:** Alternatively, you may design your own thesis based on ANY topic from our course. However, **you must first get instructor approval** for any topic not listed above. Some additional topics that might be ripe for philosophical exploration include (a) Anselm's Ontological Argument, (b) the problem of individuation and universals, (c) Avicenna's argument for the existence of the soul, (d) Aquinas's quasi-proof of the existence of God from the desire for happiness, and (e) Ghazali's problem of causation and induction, among others.

Papers in the history of philosophy do not always argue for a philosophical thesis. They are frequently exegetical instead – i.e., proposing arguments for how we ought to interpret various texts. So, you might consider: Do you have an interesting interpretation of one of our authors/readings that conflicts with the way that we presented it in class? Can a strong case be made for your interpretation? (And does it shed some light on the subject, or the author's views?) If so, then that might be an interesting paper topic too.

5. How to Begin: First, decide which of the above topics you want to discuss. Then decide what stance you will take regarding that issue. Did any particular topic or reading excite you? Do you feel passionate about any of these issues? Write about that.

6. Structure: After completing the preliminaries, you will write a paper where you:

- (i) **introduce** and explain some philosophical thesis, argument, or problem. As you explain it, be sure to **motivate** it; i.e., make it sound plausible to the reader that it might be a sound argument, or that the problem is a legitimate and troubling problem, etc., *even if* you ultimately plan to refute the argument or solve the problem. Then,
- (ii) **critically grapple** with what you've just presented by way of, e.g., raising an objection to the argument you've presented, or a problem for the view you've presented, or a potential solution to the problem you've presented, etc. Here, you should always choose what you perceive to be the *strongest* response(s) to the view you are discussing.
- (iii) You will then **evaluate** the objection or solution just presented, by explaining why you believe that it is either successful or unsuccessful. Then,
- (iv) add a concluding remark, stating what **conclusion** the reader should draw from your discussion.

For instance, if you were writing on topic #1, you *may* want to use something like the structure below. (*Note: this is merely an example; the structure is ultimately up to you*)

Sample Structure for: Freedom and Foreknowledge (Against Boethius)

- (a) Write a brief **introduction** explaining what you are about to do. Be sure that your paper has a clear **thesis**. That is, make it clear that you are trying to **persuade** the reader to agree with you about something.

(In this example, I'll convey to the reader that I'll be arguing against Boethius's solution to the problem of human freedom vs. divine foreknowledge.) [*Roughly 2-3 sentences*]

- (b) **Present the view** that you are defending or refuting, **or the problem** that you are trying to solve.

(In this example, I'll explain what the problem of human freedom vs. divine foreknowledge *is*. To this effect, I'll explain the view that God, as an omniscient being, knows all facts, including those about what will happen in the future. Yet, if God knows what is going to happen, then it is *definitely* going to happen. This seems incompatible with free choice.) [*Roughly 2 pages*]

- (c) Provide the details of your favorite **objection(s)** to the view that you have presented, or **solution** to the problem you have presented. (Keep in mind that, as this is a course in the **history** of philosophy, one of your most important tasks will be to bring to life the words and ideas of some historical figure.)

(Here, I'll present Boethius's 'eternalist' solution. Along the way, I'll be sure to explain what his views of knowledge, definite events, time, and eternity *are*, and *how* his understanding of the nature of eternity supposedly diffuses the tension between human freedom and divine foreknowledge. I'll use examples to illustrate his point – for instance, the case of presently seeing a charioteer presently driving a chariot. This entails that he is definitely driving it. And yet this is a voluntary action. Therefore, there can be definite knowledge of a non-definite / voluntary action; and this is what God has from His standpoint of eternity.) [*Roughly 1-2 pages*]

- (d) **Critically assess** the objection or solution. Do you agree with it? Why or why not? (Again, as a **history** course, it will be helpful to situate your assessment within the context of the author(s) that you are discussing. How do you think they would respond to the objection/solution just presented? Why? Do you have any ideas that could help them out? How do you think they *should* respond? Ultimately, does the objection/solution succeed or fail? Why? Explain.)

(I'll be assessing Boethius's solution. I'll put it to the test by raising a difficulty for it: The charioteer example only works because the action is already happening, and what has already happened is fixed. But, God has definite knowledge of our *future* actions. Therefore, we either *do* have the ability to do otherwise than what God foreknows (in which case we have the ability to make God have been mistaken, which is absurd) or we do *not* have the ability to do otherwise (in which case we are not really free after all). Then, I'll explain how Boethius would reply: He would point out that, since God is an eternal being, our future *is* His present. So, the charioteer example *is* analogous. It only seems to us that it is *not* analogous because we perceive things temporally rather than eternally. I'll also say a bit about how God's mode of perception is "above" ours, and impossible for us to truly understand. I'll respond to Boethius by pointing out that, nevertheless, it follows on Boethius's solution that there is still *presently* a *fact* of the matter about what I will do tomorrow, and it is presently true that God knows this—and God cannot be mistaken. I'll spend some time arguing that this really does seem to be incompatible with my ability to do otherwise; and furthermore, an appeal to a mysterious different mode of perception from eternity is ultimately unsatisfying.) [*Roughly 1-2 pages*]

- (e) Write a brief **conclusion** summarizing what you have just done.

(I'll convey to the reader that I have just demonstrated that Boethius's solution to the problem of divine foreknowledge vs. human freedom is ultimately unsatisfying.) [*Roughly 2-3 sentences*]

7. Grading Rubric: Primarily, I will be looking for two things when I assign grades:

- (1) Clarity: Do you explain yourself in a way that is **clear, concise, persuasive, and well-organized**? Imagine that you are writing for someone who has never taken a philosophy course. Your writing should be clear enough so that they would (a) easily **understand** you, (b) would **learn** something new about a philosophical problem and the ideas of a historical figure, and (c) maybe even be **persuaded** by you.
- (2) Critical Reasoning: Does your treatment of the view demonstrate your ability to think critically? It should be apparent that you have thought about the view and the objections **carefully**, that you **understand** their implications, and that you have **put some thought into** your response.

For a more detailed rubric of what I look for when grading, please consult the list of [writing do's and don't's](#) in *The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes*. You may also find it helpful to review Questions #10 and #12 of [my FAQ](#). There, I detail some of the most common mistakes that students make in their papers, as well as some suggestions for how to improve on written assignments.

8. Academic Integrity: As per the syllabus, any student caught cheating or plagiarizing will immediately be issued an F for the course and a report to [the honor council](#).

Plagiarism is defined as any instance of presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own (e.g., by copying an internet source, another student's work or ideas, or any other source at all without citation). So, be sure to cite any and all ideas that are not your own.

*Note: Even with citation, turning in an exact copy or a slight re-wording of someone else's work is still plagiarism. Do not turn in a copy or a slightly re-worded version of the readings or my lecture notes. The purpose of this assignment is for me to be able to assess **your** ability to communicate clearly and persuasively, and **your** understanding of the material. So, your work needs to be put into your own words.*

In addition, it should go without saying that the use of Chat-GPT or any other A.I. to generate content for this paper constitutes plagiarism and is not permitted.