

PHILOSOPHY 130 SUGGESTED PAPER TOPICS

Please Note: The following topics are suggestions for your first very short (2-3 page) paper. For some of the topics below, I have asked a series of questions. DO NOT treat these as if they constitute an essay exam. I do not intend for you to answer each of the questions asked under a given topic. If you try to answer them all, you will almost certainly fail to answer any of them well. The questions are intended to provoke and direct your thought about the subject. Part of your assignment involves narrowing a topic and selecting a specific thesis to defend.

If some topic discussed in readings, lecture or discussion was of particular interest to you but is not mentioned below, discuss the possibility of writing on that topic with your teaching associate. If it is an appropriate topic for a short paper in a beginning philosophy class, you may be allowed to write on it.

These papers are due in your discussion section on Thursday, October 19, 2000.

1. Is there a plausible reply that the religious moralist can give to the objections raised in class and readings to religious moralism? Consider and develop this reply and discuss responses that the critic of religious moralism might make to the reply.
2. In class it was argued that the facts of cultural variability about moral practices and attitudes does not provide compelling evidence for the truth of normative (prescriptive) ethical relativism. Many people harbor the belief that despite the arguments the critic of moral relativism offers to establish this claim, these facts do provide evidence for normative relativism. Pick a side on this dispute and defend it against the position of the opposing side.
3. Some people believe that the thesis of moral relativism is obviously true. Others think it is obviously false. Often when there is this sort of conflict, it arises because people have a somewhat different conception of the thesis they are arguing about. Either explain what a plausible moral relativist theory means and show why it is not undermined by the objections of the critic of moral relativism, or explain what a plausible moral absolutist theory means and explain why it is not objectionable in the way that moral relativists think it is.
4. Two writers for *The Lantern* (Rich Bordner and Greg Weston) have exchanged columns concerning the issue of moral relativism. (See the class web page for assignments and exam materials for links to these columns.) Take some issue that divides these two writers and adjudicate the dispute—that is, argue that one of the authors is right and the other wrong, or that both are wrong on the issue. (If they really disagree, they can't both be right, of course.) Since your paper is a philosophy paper—not a *Lantern* column, I expect it to be deeper, more carefully argued and better written than a newspaper column. Also, be sure to make reference to our readings, lecture and other sources where relevant to make your point.
5. Normative egoism (often called 'ethical egoism') fails to satisfy certain minimal conditions for being an adequate moral theory. Briefly explain what these conditions are and why normative egoism fails them. Does this failure show that normative egoism presents no challenge to the other normative theories of ethics we discussed in class? Develop your position and defend it against criticisms.

6. In a follow-up column to his attack on moral relativism, *Lantern* columnist Rich Bordner seems to challenge any consequentialist theory of morality. He argues that these theories are inadequate because “It is almost impossible to predict the consequences of any action unless you are all knowing.” Does this epistemic limitation undermine the validity of consequentialism? How might the consequentialist reply? Is the reply adequate? Bordner, himself, seems to favor some sort of religious moralism as a solution to the epistemic problems with consequentialist theories. Is religious moralism a solution to the epistemological problems of morality? (The same caution given in question 4 applies here: make sure your paper is a suitable philosophy paper. It should be more developed and better argued than is possible in a newspaper column. Cite readings, lecture and additional resources where relevant.)
7. Critically evaluate hedonism as a theory of value for a utilitarian theory of morality. (Try not to simply repeat arguments raised in class; raise your own criticisms of the theory or defend the theory against criticisms raised in class.)
8. Critically evaluate this claim:

John Stuart Mill claims to present an alternative theory of value to hedonism. His theory holds that happiness and only happiness is intrinsically valuable. But since he defines happiness as “pleasure and the absence of pain”, his theory is really just a version of hedonism—subject to the same criticisms as Bentham’s theory.
9. Consider utilitarian replies to either the problem of retributive justice or that of distributive justice. Are they adequate?
10. What might a Kantian say in response to the objection raised in class about determining the maxim of one’s action? Is there a way to do so without encountering the problem of excessive generality or excessive specificity? (Be sure to explain what these problems are.)