

Paper Topics

History of Modern Philosophy

Write a 5-7 page paper on one of the topics below. The explanations and questions relating to each topic are formulated to guide you, not restrict you. Try to formulate a thesis relating to the topic and develop it by providing reasons and responding to possible objections.

Once you have outlined your treatment of the topic and are ready to begin writing, you should meet with one of us (TA or instructor) before proceeding.

If you wish to write on a different topic, you must first obtain approval. You are not required to consult secondary literature but are welcome to do so if you wish.

The paper is due the last day of class.

1. Leibniz's conception of substance. What is Leibniz's conception of substance and how does it differ from Spinoza's? Why are spirits the only substances, i.e. why does Leibniz deny that corporeal beings are substances?

2. Locke's conception of substance and substantial essence. What idea of substance are we capable of acquiring from experience? Is this idea so imperfect, incomplete, and barren that one should hesitate before attaching the word 'substance' to it? Insofar as substance implies a real essence, what can we know about it, especially in view of Locke's assertion (at ECHU III/vi/§6 and III/x/§20) that real essence presupposes nominal? Can we at least say that matter and/or mind are ultimate essences, or are they too, in the final account, merely the farthest our minds are equipped to penetrate into the essences of substances?

3. Berkeley's arguments against materialism. Explain Berkeley's concern with confusions between the contents of ideas and the significative uses to which ideas are put and how this applies to the question whether sensible objects like trees, mountains, the sun, our own human body, can exist unperceived. What is the separability principle and why is it important here? Be sure to distinguish between those arguments designed to show the unintelligibility of the very notion of matter from those intended to prove that matter, even if it could exist, would not help to explain anything in nature. You should also consult Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.

4. Berkeley's conception of vision as the language of touch. Be sure to consider Berkeley's reasons for rejecting Locke's notion of ideas of diverse senses in the case of space (extension, figure, depth, distance, orientation, etc.). Why did Berkeley decide that touch is the sense in which ideas of space have their origin? How do the non-spatial primary objects of vision acquire the status of spatial secondary objects? Once we master the language of visual spatiality, do we come to rely as much (or, indeed, more) on vision than touch for information about spatial reality? To what extent does Berkeley succeed in explaining how the two senses become in effect a single external sense of the same sense-divide transcending objects?

5. Hume's analysis of cause and effect in terms of constant conjunction and customary association. Why did Hume's analysis of cause and effect focus on necessary connection? What is the impression-source of our ideas of necessary connection? How does the source of the idea restrict its application, and with it all reasoning based on cause and effect relations? What is the relation

between the two definitions of cause and effect EHU VII/ii? In what sense is Hume a skeptic about causation and what sense not? What implications does his account have for the nature and role of human understanding in respect of matters of fact and existence? You should also consult *A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. I, pt. iii, esp. sect. §14.

6. Hume on freedom. Analyze and critically assess Hume's treatment of freedom in EHU VIII in light of his examination of the idea of necessary connection in EHU VII (also read the corresponding sections of the *Treatise of Human Nature*: II/iii/§§ 1-2). How does Hume apply his account of the idea of necessary connection in EHU VII to explain the difference between free will and determinism? What are the sources he identifies of the illusion that we are free? What is his solution to the problem of free will: are we free, and if so how? are we necessitated, and if so how? How might a defender of free will respond to Hume? How might the exponent of a stricter version of determinism (e.g. Spinoza) criticize Hume's conception of necessity? What criticisms of Hume's position strike you as the most effective?

7. Hume on miracles. Analyze and critically assess Hume's treatment of miracles in EHU X and its dependence on the points Hume proves about cause and effect in EHU IV-VII. For example, explain when a belief qualifies as rational (i.e. what is Hume's conception of empirical rationality); the source of the authority of testimony; the difference between empirical beliefs that have the authority of *proofs* from those Hume ranks as mere *probabilities* (see also *A Treatise of Human Nature* I/iii/§§11-13); the three criteria an event must satisfy to count as a miracle; when testimony regarding miracles would have the authority of proof, and why it typically falls short of this standard; etc. In what ways does Hume's treatment of miracles illustrate the "mitigated skepticism" he advocates in EHU XII?