

Humanities 117: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

Second (Final) Paper

Instructions

The paper (8–12 pages long) is due Wed., June 11, in my office, Gates-Blake 228, by 4:30pm. Gates-Blake is the building connected to Cobb. (The 4:30pm limit is mostly because Gates-Blake gets locked at some point in the evening—I'm not sure exactly when.)

As was the case with the first paper: the below topics are suggestions. If you want to write on another topic, feel free to do so. It might be a good idea, however, in that case, to check with me and/or the writing intern first.

Note that the topics tend to have many sub-questions. You need not (and probably should not) try to answer all of them. (You *certainly* should not just answer them one after another in order—that would make a bad paper.) I put them there to suggest various directions for thinking about the topic, and in particular to head off superficial or excessively simple ways of thinking about it.

In general you should try to discuss two or three different authors, including at least one from the later part of this course (post-Kant)—but there could be exceptions to that for a really good idea; if you're not sure, check with me. Some of the topics also suggest the use of other sources; in general you are welcome to bring in such other sources (especially things you read in previous quarters) if you think they're relevant. If you do so, however, please make sure it's still clear that the paper was written for this course.

As usual, the intent of the paper is to discuss the views or attitudes of the authors and/or their characters, rather than your own opinions on the topic. Don't forget that the author of a work of fiction doesn't necessarily agree with the views expressed by all or any of its characters. Also, don't forget that some characters are dishonest or confused or hypocritical (they may not accurately report—even to themselves—either what has happened, or what they desire or intend, or what they think or feel); also, remember that some may change their views as time goes on. (These remarks mostly apply to Gene Wolfe, but Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, also has some fictional characters.)

If you're using the editions I ordered, you can refer to the readings just by giving the page number. If you use a different edition and/or some other source, please give at least enough bibliographical information that I can find it if necessary. There's no need for a separate bibliography or title page.

Suggested Topics

1. What, according to various authors (and/or their characters), is "justice"? To what extent is the disagreement between them merely a verbal one (about how to use this word), and to what extent are they really arguing about the nature of one single thing? (For example, if justice is giving each his, or possibly her, due, to what extent are they disagreeing about what is "due" to whom and why?) What, according to these authors/characters, is the relationship between justice and mercy? (Do they apply in the same cases? Is there necessarily or possibly a conflict between them? Can it be good to be merciful *instead of* being just, or vice versa?) What about the relationship between justice and obedience to the law, or to those in authority?
2. A possibly related topic (and a variant on an old topic from last quarter): according to our sources, why is it important (or is it important?) not to lie and/or to tell the truth?¹ (When is it important? Always?) Is telling the truth good, or is lying bad, for the speaker, or for the hearer, or for both, or neither? Are there different ways in which a statement can be true, or different ways in which a statement can be a lie? What is the relationship between truth-telling and knowledge: do they go together, or are they possibly in conflict? What about truth-telling and memory? What about the relationship between truth-telling, or not lying, and virtue/morality: is one a special case of the other, or are they identical, or are they possibly or even necessarily in conflict? (Note that if there are different ways of "telling the truth," as suggested above, the answers to the other sub-questions could obviously depend on which way we are talking about.) When, if ever, should a (moral) philosopher tell the truth, and why? Or: when, if ever, should a (moral) philosopher lie?

¹Notice that not lying is not the same as telling the truth: you can avoid lying by saying nothing. (And you *must* mostly do this, since you can't possibly always say everything that is true about everything.)

3. Discuss the role in morality or in thinking about issues related to morality of the concepts of law, rules, and/or necessity. According to our authors and/or their characters, in what sense, if any, is a moral act a *necessary* (rather than a contingent) act? In what sense, if any, is acting morally acting according to law or following rules? In what sense, if any, are these rules self-legislated, or in what sense, if any, does morality involve legislating for or ruling over oneself? Or are some of the above things, according to some authors and/or characters, in some sense not true of morality? If so, are they true of something else, and does this make that something else is some way better or more desirable than morality? Or: is there some sense in which necessity and/or submission to law is in conflict with morality—e.g., because morality requires “freedom”? (Obviously because of the “in some sense” qualifiers someone might consistently hold both that morality requires necessity and that it is in conflict with necessity—as Kant does, for example.)
4. An extended version of a topic from last time: what, according to various authors and/or their characters, would an exemplary and/or ideally moral person be like? (Would an ideally moral person be “exemplary”—that is, roughly, would or should one want to be like such a person? Or is there a distinction, perhaps even a contradiction, between the two? Is there more than one kind of moral ideal or more than one kind of exemplar?) What kind of *personality* (or personalities) would such a person (or such people) have? How would these authors and/or characters judge themselves and/or each other? Do or could they consider themselves and/or each other to be moral? To be exemplary? (Included among the possibilities here is to consider the relationship between, say, Kant’s ideally moral person and some particular character(s), e.g. Severian, Dr. Talos, etc. But this should not turn into just praise and criticism of fictional characters according to someone or other’s standards—you would want to say how these characters cast light on, or show problems with, those standards.)
5. A related topic, or a way of thinking about some parts of the above topic: if a murderer were after you and you had to hide in someone’s attic (choosing between some of: Hume’s, Kant’s, Emerson’s, early Nietzsche’s, later Nietzsche’s, Severian’s—or, Aristotle’s, Socrates’, Achilles’, Don Quixote’s...), which would it be and why? (Note: if

you want to write about this, make sure (a) that your answer is really based on the reading—though not necessarily on specific quotes; (b) that you explain what, if any, implications the answer has for our understanding and/or evaluation of the various authors *and their theories*; and (c) that, on the other hand, this is not just an excuse to dress up each theory in a fictional form. For example, if you say you would rather hide in Don Quixote’s attic because he always defends the weak, you might go on to discuss the implications—for Hume, say, or Kant—of the fact that the best protector would be a madman rather than a philosopher. Also remember that people, even philosophers, may not always follow their own theories of morality or do what they say they will do—you may need to make some judgment about that. And remember that in some cases philosophers may not even “recommend” that one be moral according to their theory.) (I recommend against using too many authors/characters here. Also, I recommend against organizing the paper as a list of authors/characters and reasons for or against each.)

6. How do the different authors (all of whom are male) and/or their male characters think about women? (In the case of female characters you might also discuss this, I mean how they think about women, or—if you find evidence that the author has presented things from such a perspective—you might discuss how they think about men.) What role, if any, do women and/or (more abstractly) gender differences play in their theories of morality (or, more generally, in their way of thinking about moral issues, or issues related to morality—e.g. issues of what is desirable or worthwhile or valuable)? Would they or do they consider unequal treatment of men and women to be an injustice (or to be wrong or bad for some other reason), and why? If so would they or do they think the injustice (or other problem) can be corrected, and why or why not? Do they think it is good or just for a man to in some sense possess a woman (or vice versa), or do they think it is bad, or do they think it is not even possible? (Are there relevant differences between different men and/or different women? In the case of Severian, in particular, you might want to consider what different women mean to him, or how the different women in his life represent his shifting or developing ideas. Also, don’t forget that there are minor characters you could talk about, e.g. Dr. Talos.) (If you want you could try to relate this to

things from previous quarters—e.g. the role of women in the *Iliad*, or what Socrates says about women in the *Meno* and or the *Ion*.) How, if at all, might the history of philosophy (moral philosophy or even philosophy in general) have been different if all or some of the great philosophers had been female? (Treat that last question with caution: obviously it's big and difficult. But it could potentially provide a good organizing thesis for the whole paper.)

7. Discuss the use of symbols and metaphors by the various authors and/or their characters—either in general (but then you had better give some particular examples) or with regard to a particular symbol/metaphor or symbolic/metaphorical opposition (examples: the sun, and/or the moon, and/or light in general, as opposed to darkness; inside/inner vs. outside/outer; a tower; a cave; a forest; war; high mountains; flying vs. remaining on the ground; a book or books; health vs. disease; blindness vs. sight; water and/or sinking or drowning in water; death and resurrection). Why do some authors/characters use certain symbols/metaphors rather than others? Or: why do some authors use symbols/metaphors extensively, and others much less so or not at all? (Please don't just say that so-and-so uses metaphors because he is writing literature or writing in a more literary or poetic way—not unless you think you can explain why he thinks that is the correct way, or at least a correct way, to write about moral issues.) Or: how do the different (or similar) uses which different authors and/or characters make of the same symbols/metaphors throw light on the differences (and similarities) between their theories or ways of thinking? (In at least some cases you could take the use of the same symbols/metaphors as evidence that one author is actually responding to another—either in agreement or in disagreement.)
8. Discuss the views of various authors and/or their characters about progress in human history. Are people in general, according to them, now (in some sense) better than they once were? Are philosophers better? (Note: the intention here, as usual, is to say whether the *authors* think philosophers have gotten better—not whether you think so.) Should we expect or strive for progress, and if so how and in what respects? Has progress (if any) been continuous, and/or should we expect it to be? Or has it been/should we expect it be a matter of

sudden transitions? In what ways does or should a new stage of civilization and/or of philosophy build on what came before, and in what ways does or should it reject what came before? What role does or can or should knowledge of history play in progress? (Is it necessary? Helpful? Detrimental? Or does it depend on what kind of progress, or what kind of “knowledge of history,” we’re talking about?) What is the relationship—again, according to the authors and/or their characters—between progress in whatever sense it happens (if any) and morality? Are people (or philosophers?) getting “better” in a *moral* sense (and, if so, is that good)? What does this show about, or what implications does it have for, their theories of or about morality? (Note: if you can’t answer that last part—if all you can produce is a list of who thinks what—then you should write about a different topic.)

9. Discuss the views of our authors and/or their characters on suicide. What counts as “suicide”? What would be typical motives for it—and are there other possible motives? Is it necessarily or possibly bad (in some sense of “bad”), or is it possibly good, possibly even a duty? Why? What do disagreements about these issues reveal or imply about general disagreements over the nature of morality, values, life, death, and the relations between them? (Note: if you can’t answer that last part—if all you can produce is a list of who thinks what—then you should write about a different topic.)