

# Philosophy 350

Pelletier

## Suggestions for Paper Topics

Papers should be 8-10 double-spaced pages (in Times 12 point font, or equivalent). They are due *in class* on April 6<sup>th</sup>, the last day of class. Since these are not required, there will be no late papers accepted. Most of these topics are ones we will not cover in the lectures for this course, or else will just mention obliquely. To answer the questions put here, you will have to read the relevant portions of whatever text is mentioned (sometimes this will require library work). You might find secondary sources (commentators) helpful, but they are not required. (The questions mostly ask you to investigate some particular piece of reasoning – something you can do yourself without outside help). If you do use outside source material, please indicate what you used – paraphrases and quotations should be given appropriate citations. Not to do so is plagiarism; plagiarism is not nice and will be dealt with accordingly. If there are other topics in Greek philosophy you wish to consider, please see me well in advance and we will work out some appropriate question.

Questions which ask you to "sketch" or "reconstruct" or "evaluate" an argument want you (a) to ferret out the various reasons the author relied on for his conclusion, (b) to re-state these reasons explicitly in terms of premises that the author would use to lead to his conclusion, (c) to give reasons for thinking that the author really believed what you claim to be the premises (one usually cites passages for this), and (d) to investigate the validity and soundness of the argument (validity: the conclusion follows from the premises; soundness: the premises are true). It should of course be noted that not all questions lend themselves to answers of this form.

1. What is the argument for the immortality of the soul in *Republic* Book X? Is this argument convincing? Why or why not?
2. In the early parts of the *Meno*, Socrates presses Meno for a definition of *arete*, claiming that it is a precondition of answering such questions as whether *arete* is teachable. Where else do we encounter this sort of insistence on definitions? What can be said for or against such an attitude? This first proposal of Meno's posits one *arete* for men, one for women, etc. Socrates objects. Why? What feature of a true definition has Meno missed? Meno subsequently offers a definition of *arete* in terms of "justice". What is Socrates' objection here? Is it good?
3. What is the hypothetical method that Socrates and Meno adopt to further the exploration of the question of the teachability of *arete*? Where would this discussion fall on the divided line of Book VI of the *Republic*? What is Socrates' argument in the *Meno* to show that *arete* is "a kind of wisdom"? A "contradiction" is seen between the results of the arguments and the facts of the case. How is this dilemma resolved?
4. How and why are the stories about the gods and heroes to be censored in the good state of the *Republic*? Why does Socrates distinguish between imitation and narration in story-telling? We talked a bit about this in class, but here you should go beyond what was said in class.

5. At 473c of the *Republic* Socrates presents his famous and controversial pronouncement about philosopher kings. How does he distinguish the true philosopher from the "lover of sights and spectacles" in the remainder of Book V?

7. To which, if any, pre-Socratic theories does Plato's theory of Forms bear a resemblance, and in what ways? Try to be careful in saying why you think so.

8. Explain how the following philosophers used a principle of vortex motion to account for the formation of the world: Anaximander, Anaximenes, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus. You might find that the different philosophers used different versions of such a principle. Try to bring out the important differences.

9. In the following passage from Plato's *Meno*, an argument is presented to the conclusion that learning is not possible. Reconstruct and evaluate the argument.

Meno: How will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?

Socrates: I know what you mean. Do you realize that what you are bringing up is the trick argument that a man cannot try to discover either what he knows or what he does not know? He could not seek what he knows, for since he knows it, there is no need of the inquiry, nor what he does not know, for in that case he does not even know what he is to look for.

10. In Plato's *Cratylus*, Cratylus defends the view that no one can say anything false:

Socrates: Are you maintaining that falsehood is impossible? For if this is your meaning I should answer that there have been plenty of liars in all ages.

Cratylus: Why, Socrates. How can a man say that which is not – say something and yet say nothing? For is not falsehood saying the thing which is not?...

Socrates: If a person saluting you were to say: "Hail, Hermogenes, Athenian stranger, son of Smicrion"...these words, whether spoken, said, uttered, or addressed, would have no application to you but only to our friend Hermogenes, or perhaps to nobody at all.

Cratylus: In my opinion, the speaker would only be talking nonsense.

Socrates: Tell me whether the nonsense would be true or false....

Cratylus: I should say that...his words would be an unmeaning sound like the noise of hammering at a brass pot.

Reconstruct Cratylus' argument here, and say whether you think it is any good (and why).

11. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates tries to reduce to absurdity the position of an opponent who has declared that he holds these two doctrines:

A. Pleasure is what is good

B. When a man does evil, knowing it to be evil, it is because he is overcome by pleasure

Socrates' argument is contained in the following remarks. Sketch the argument he is giving and discuss it critically.

"If what you say is true, then the statement is absurd which affirms that a man often does evil knowingly when he might abstain, because he is seduced and overpowered by pleasure. ...That this is ridiculous will be evident if only we give up the use of various names, such as 'pleasant' and 'good'...Let us say that a man does evil knowing that he does evil. But someone will ask: "Why?" "Because he is overcome" is the first answer. "And by what is he overcome?" the inquirer will proceed to ask. And we shall no longer be able to reply "By pleasure", for instead of 'pleasure' it has taken another name, namely 'the good'. "By the good" we shall have to reply...But our questioner will rejoin with a laugh: "That is too ridiculous, that a man should do what he knows to be evil when he ought not, because he is overcome by good."

12. The following two quotations represent a dispute between Plato (Socrates?) and Aristotle. Take one side or the other and argue for it. Do *not* merely give examples.

Socrates: No man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To pursue what one believes to be evil rather than what is good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he may have the less. (Plato *Protagoras*).

Aristotle: The incontinent or morally weak man does wrong, knowing it to be wrong....But how could he be said to show incontinence, if he has a correct apprehension of the fact that he is acting wrongly? Some thinkers maintain that he cannot, if he has full knowledge that the action is wrong ...Socrates to be sure was out and out opposed to the view that we are now criticizing, on the grounds that there is no such thing as this moral weakness we call 'incontinence'. For, said he, nobody acts in opposition to what is best – and the best is the goal of all our endeavors – if he has a clear idea of what he is doing. He can only go wrong out of ignorance. This reasoning, however, is clearly in contrast with the notorious facts. (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII)

One way of formulating the question to which Aristotle and Plato (Socrates) give opposed answers is: Can a person intentionally do what s/he believes to be not the best thing to do, all things considered? Whatever answer you choose to argue for, it must be compatible with these three claims. (1) If there is incontinence, the incontinent agent knows that what s/he is doing is wrong, (2) The agent is not insane, and (3) The agent is blamable for what s/he does. If you argue against the Socratic/Platonic position, you should sketch Socrates' argument and show that this argument does not really demonstrate that no one can intentionally do what s/he knows to be wrong.

13. In Plato's *Protagoras* at 328c-334 and 349a-351b, Socrates (Plato?) presents a series of arguments designed to show "the unity of the virtues". What is meant by 'unity of the virtues'? Sketch the various arguments that are employed.

14. It was Heraclitus, not Parmenides, who said "...it is wise to acknowledge that all things are one." How did Heraclitus' view differ from Parmenides' view in saying "all things are one"?

15. Pick some of the topics in list (a), explain the problem Parmenides raised about it, then explain how some of the philosophers from list (b) attempted to meet the problem.

List (a)

Language and the world  
One vs. many  
Appearance vs. reality  
Generation and perishing

List (b)

Empedocles  
Anaxagoras  
Democritus

16. In the *Gorgias*(480) Socrates says that it is "a man's duty to denounce...any of his family or friends who may do wrong, bringing the crime out of concealment into the light of day...He must be the first to accuse himself and members of his family..." But in the *Euthyphro* Socrates professes moral shock when he learns that Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father for negligent homicide. Explain the issue posed by this ostensible contradiction. Is Plato (Socrates) inconsistent? Can the fuller context of these (and other) dialogues provide a resolution of the contradiction?