

TERM PAPER TOPICS

Remember that you can always come up with a topic of your own. If a specific philosophical issue particularly interested you this semester, or if you want to incorporate some of your other outside interests into the paper, then by all means go right ahead. Just make sure to clear the topic with me before you jump right in. Your essay will be graded on accuracy, grammar, comprehension, logic, clarity, and originality.

1) Imagine that you are an astronaut working on the international space station, and that an alien spacecraft makes contact with you. The aliens want to destroy all life on Earth but are willing to listen to your pleas. If you are able to convince them with an argument, then they will spare all life on Earth. Pick one of the philosophers we have covered this semester and write an argument to the aliens which utilizes the views of the philosopher you have chosen.

2) Imagine that you are in a crowded market in India, and you see an assassin heading straight for Gandhi with a pistol in his hand. You happen to be armed with a rifle and have a very clear shot of the assassin's head. Also, assume that you are an excellent marksman (or woman) and that there is no chance of harming any innocent bystanders (also no chance of pinning the assassin down before he takes his shot or of injuring him non-fatally). What do you do? Would you shoot the assassin? Would you jump into the path of the bullet? Or would you just stand by and watch? What is the right thing to do?

3) Imagine that a ship is sinking and that the seas are very rough. All but one lifeboat has been destroyed. The lifeboat holds a maximum of six people. There are ten people that want to board the lifeboat. The four individuals who do not board the boat will certainly die. The ten people are made up of one woman who thinks she is six weeks pregnant, one lifeguard, two young adults who recently married, one senior citizen who has fifteen grandchildren, one elementary school teacher, two thirteen year old twins, one veteran, one nurse, and the captain of the ship. What should be done in this situation? Who should be saved, and why? Assume that there is NO WAY for all of them to survive, and that at the very least there will be four people who will NOT survive. Pick at least one philosopher we have studied this semester, and explain how they might address these questions. What do YOU think should be done? Why?

4) One of the reasons Socrates gives for not escaping from prison is that it would be a violation of the law. Is Socrates correct in holding such a rigid position when it comes to following the law? Are there times when breaking the law is morally permissible? If you think the answer is yes, then provide at least one example of when it would be permitted and explain why it would be permitted. If you agree with Socrates, and think that one should never break the law, then explain how one should handle a situation where the law is in conflict with one's sense of morality.

5) Kant claims that a good will is "good without qualification"--that it is good regardless of the results of its actions. J.S. Mill, a Utilitarian philosopher who we did not cover, seems quite opposed to this idea and focuses primarily on consequences in his moral assessments (Aristotle takes a similar stance). Who do you think is correct? Should we only consider an agent's intentions when making moral judgments, as

Kant suggests? Or are results just as (or more) important? For example, can we praise somebody whose actions constantly fail to produce good results so long as they have good intentions? How far can we take this? What is more important in our moral assessments: intentions or consequences? Pick a side and defend.

6) Nietzsche claims that Christianity is a "slave morality" and that it is "nihilistic". Explain what he means by this and tell me whether or not you agree. Is he fair in his assessment? Where might he be coming from? Use historical or contemporary examples of particular Christians (or Christian movements) which fit (or fail to fit) the Nietzschean mold. Is Nietzsche right about Judeo-Christian morality being a slave morality for the oppressed masses (as Marx says "an opiate of the people")? Does Christian morality always have to be a reactive, vindictive, and resentful morality, as Nietzsche describes it? Or might there be other interpretations of Christianity that are less "nihilistic" and more life-affirming?

7) At the beginning of the second reading of de Beauvoir's (Ch. 3 from her *Ethics of Ambiguity*) she makes a qualified critique of technology. She says that if it attempts to make up for the "lack" which is at "the very heart of existence, it fails radically, but it escapes all criticism" if through it there is "an opening of ever new possibilities for man." What does she mean by this? What forms of technology would she approve of, and which ones would she condemn? You can focus on one particular form of technology if you like (the internet, cell phones, etc.). Does this form of technology attempt to "make up for a lack at the heart of being" or does it "open up new possibilities for man"? What do you think she would say about it? Do you agree with this critique? Why or why not?

8) In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates puts forth the position that one should never return a wrong with a wrong. He argues that his escape from the prison in Athens would be returning a wrong with a wrong, and so he decides to stay. Do you agree with Socrates that retaliation is always wrong? Be sure to explain his reasoning and your reasons for agreeing or disagreeing. If you disagree with Socrates, then explain when/where/why revenge or retaliation is ever permissible. If you agree, then explain how you would respond to a critic who thinks that "an eye for an eye" is a just, fair policy.