

Suggested Term Paper Topics Philosophy 285

These are suggested topics. You may write on a topic of your own devising provided your clear your choice of topics with both instructors before beginning work on it.

Your paper should deal with some central course theme and should engage with two or three course authors. The paper is due on Monday of exam week. (Please negotiate with the instructors in advance of this deadline is going to unmeetable.)

1. In “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” John Rawls writes that “the problem of interpersonal comparisons in questions of justice goes to the foundations of a conception of justice and depends on the conception of the person and the way in which social unity is to be achieved.” In the light of this statement, explain and assess Rawls’s proposal that primary social goods—rather than capabilities to function in ways that are valuable, utility as happiness or desire satisfaction, opportunities for self-realization, well-being as attainment of items on the list of objectively valuable goods, or whatever one takes to be the most plausible rival accounts--provide the appropriate basis of interpersonal comparisons for the theory of justice.
2. A theory of justice inspired by writings of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum holds that a just society secures for each and every person the capabilities to function in all of the ways required for a sufficiently fulfilling human life. A closely related sufficiency ideal holds that justice requires above all that as many as possible of all those who shall ever live enjoy the capabilities to function at a threshold “good enough” level in all of the ways required for a fulfilling human life. Elaborate and assess some sufficientarian justice norm along this line. An objection to consider: when some individuals are extremely poor transformers of resources into basic capabilities, the sufficiency norm requires that resources continue to be channeled to such persons at any cost to above-threshold capabilities of any magnitude for any number of persons. Another possible objection: Why focus on capabilities rather than functionings?
3. Assess the argument in chapter 3 of *A Theory of Justice* to the conclusion that parties in the original position should adopt a “maximin” decision rule and thus be led to choice of Rawlsian principles of justice.
4. “Whatever a liberal must believe should be done in any given situation, she must hold that a certain type of person, and a society in which that type of person flourishes are superior to others. Liberalism rests on a vision of life: a Faustian vision. It exalts self-expression, self-mastery and control over the environment, natural and social; the active pursuit of knowledge and the clash of ideas; the acceptance of personal responsibility for the decisions that shape one’s life. For those who cannot take the freedom it provides alcohol, tranquilizers, wrestling on the television, astrology, psychoanalysis, and so on, endlessly, but it cannot by its nature provide certain kinds of psychological security. Like any creed it can be neither justified nor condemned in terms of anything beyond it.” (Statement by Brian Barry).--Can one avoid basing one’s theory of social justice on raw appeal to controversial opinions about the good as expressed in this statement? If so, how so? If not, why not? You might consider (a) Rawls’s “political liberalism” doctrine and (b) appeals to rationally nonrejectable judgments about the good as strategies for avoiding the objection that liberalism is after all a sectarian creed.
5. In “A Kantian Conception of Equality” Rawls writes that Kantian persons do not think of themselves as unavoidably tied to any particular array of fundamental interests; instead they view themselves as capable of revising and changing these final ends. They wish, therefore, to give priority to their liberty to do this, and so their original allegiance and continued devotion to their

ends are to be formed and affirmed under conditions that are free.” State and assess Rawls’s arguments for the priority of the equal basic liberty principle and the ideal of autonomy which is integral to it.

6. Do fundamental social justice principles require that we favor the interests of fellow members of our own national political community over distant strangers in the design of basic structure institutions or in public policy choices taken within a nation?

7. What do we owe, as a matter of justice, to people with disabilities?

8. “The fact that as Philippe Van Parijs observes the difference principle might best be implemented by the policy of an unconditional basic income grant set at the highest sustainable level shows conclusively that the difference principle is morally unacceptable. It fails to pick out the truly disadvantaged or worse off people (on any plausible conception of disadvantage) and fails to suggest a plausible norm specifying what we owe to these people. The difference principle selects for aid some who do not deserve it and fails to select for aid some who do deserve it.”— Explain the rationale of the Rawlsian difference principle and defend it against the objection suggested by the quotation.

9. What do we owe, as a matter of justice, to distant needy strangers? Does justice (1) require, (2) permit, or (3) prohibit special partiality toward local needy strangers or needy folk who are members of our national community?

10. Burton Dreben writes of Rawls’s “political liberalism” project that “the genuine problem is to see how one can set up a coherent conception of a constitutional liberal democracy.” Is the project so conceived successfully executed? Is Dreben’s view a reasonable interpretation of what Rawls is up to? Suppose someone responds, “Rawls’s idea of a constitutional liberal democracy might be consistent but is still normatively unattractive. We should aim at justice, which depending on circumstances might or might not turn out to recommend constitutional, liberal, or democratic arrangements.” Explicate and assess Rawls’s political liberalism doctrine.

11. Consider this proposed division of moral responsibility: What we owe to one another is to design and establish institutional arrangements that provide everyone a fair and just opportunity for a decent life. Within these institutions people have wide moral freedom to live as they choose provided they support the institutions and abide by their rules. Elucidate and assess G. A. Cohen’s writings as they bear on the moral status of this proposed division of moral responsibility between individual and society.