

PHILOSOPHY 101 | HUNTER COLLEGE | FALL 2017

SECOND WRITING ASSIGNMENT

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

ASSIGNMENT: Write an essay that answers the question below, drawing on the knowledge you've gained from the relevant readings.

DUE DATE: Mon., December 11th. Hand in a paper copy in class.

LENGTH: Approximately 1000 words.

LATE ESSAYS: Unless you have a valid excuse (that you tell me about before the due date), late essays will be penalized at a rate of one full letter grade every three days.

ESSAY QUESTION

Your job in this essay is to draw on one or more of the required readings from the second half of this semester in order to critique one of Descartes' theses in the *Meditations*. In your essay, you should make sure to do each of (i)-(v):

- (i) You should choose one of Descartes' central philosophical theses in *Meditations* 1-4. For example, you could choose any of the following theses:
 - That each person's mind and body are composed of fundamentally different, but interacting substances. ("Cartesian Dualism")
 - That God exists. ("Theism")
 - That each of us can be absolutely certain that we have a single, unified, thinking self.
 - That our ability to get knowledge about the external world through our senses depends on belief in God's existence.
 - That our knowledge is organized into a hierarchy, and that the most fundamental knowledge in this hierarchy is not justified by sense evidence. ("Rationalism")
- (ii) You should articulate a convincing objection to the thesis that you've chosen.
- (iii) You should clearly summarize Descartes' own argument for the thesis you've chosen, and explain why his argument is not convincing.
- (iv) You should explain at least one alternative to Descartes' thesis, and explain why it might be preferable.
- (v) Your essay should draw on at least one of the required readings by someone other than Descartes from the second half of the semester.

HOW TO DO WELL

- My most important grading criterion is the persuasiveness of your argument. The ideal is an essay that would convince someone who started out disagreeing with your position to change their mind, though just getting them to reconsider or weaken their position is quite good too. In this case, you might want to imagine that Descartes was transported forward in time to 2017, and that you're trying to explain to him one of the reasons that philosophers have given up on one of his ideas. So, one way to lose points would be if your objection to Descartes' thesis (ii), or your critique of Descartes' argument (iii), or your alternative to Descartes' thesis (iv) just aren't convincing.
- You must give both (ii) an objection to Descartes' thesis and a (iii) critique of his argument for this thesis. These aren't the same thing. The first is a reason to doubt his position, and the other is a reason not to be persuaded by his support for this position.
- In order to do these things well, you have to demonstrate a clear understanding of Descartes' thesis, his argument for this thesis, and the alternative to his theory that you are proposing. If you seem not to have grasped one of these correctly, your grade will suffer.
- All of this requires that you write clearly and concisely. The most common problem with philosophy essays I grade is that I can't tell exactly what the writer is trying to say. You should try to anticipate ways in which someone might be confused by what you write, and try to make it easier to understand.
- This requires that you write in grammatical English. Although pointing out spelling and grammar mistakes aren't my top priority when grading, such errors often affect my ability to understand what you're trying to say, and they also send me the message that you haven't spent enough time perfecting your work.
- If you have questions about how to formulate your argument, or if you'd like to test it out, visit my office hours or write me a concise email.