

PHILOSOPHY 101 | HUNTER COLLEGE | FALL 2017

FIRST WRITING ASSIGNMENT

BASIC INSTRUCTIONS

ASSIGNMENT: Answer one of the questions below in a short essay, drawing on the knowledge you've gained from the relevant readings.

DUE DATE: Thurs., October 12th. Hand in a paper copy in class.

LENGTH: Approximately 750 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 QUESTIONS

You should choose just one of the following questions to answer with your essay.

1. Describe an ethical dilemma that either a real person or a fictional character from a novel, a movie, or a TV show has faced. The person could be you or someone you know (feel free to anonymize), it could be a public figure, or it could be a character from a work of fiction. The dilemma you describe should be one in which the individual in question has at least two options for what to do, and it should be one that meets the following condition: utilitarianism and Kant's ethical theory would offer conflicting advice about what ought to be done. Describe what each theory would recommend, and why. Finally, give your best argument that one theory or the other gives the better advice in this case.
2. Describe an actual social policy that has recently been proposed, and argue that Rawls and Nozick would disagree about whether it would be just to implement it. You have two options about what to argue: (a) Rawls would say that the policy would move us closer to a just society and Nozick would say the opposite, or (b) vice versa. You must choose an actual policy proposal that has recently been proposed by an actual politician who occupied, or who was running for an elected office that governs over you. (It could be a candidate for president, or for senate, or congress, or mayor, or city counsellor, etc.) By a policy proposal, I mean something with some actual implementation details (like an actual policy about how to deliver health-care), not a vague, general idea (like the idea that health-care is a right).

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 though just getting them to reconsider or weaken their position is quite good too. In this case, since you're arguing that certain theories apply to a certain case in a certain way, you should imagine that you're trying to convince someone who disagrees with you about what the theories would say about the case you've chosen.
- In order to do this well, you have to demonstrate a clear understanding of the theories you're talking about.
- And all of this requires writing 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.
- Obviously, this all requires writing clearly and in grammatical English. Although spelling and grammar mistakes aren't the top priority, they are an important means to your end, since they can get in the way of clarity.
- 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.