

Sample Paper Topics, Paper #2

Here are some sample paper topics. You may write on anything we have covered since Descartes, you don't need to write on any of these topics. You may also discuss arguments that were in the readings but that we never got to in class. Also, if you're really ambitious, you may discuss arguments in other works by these same authors.

1. According to Spinoza, why is it impossible for one substance to cause another substance to exist? You will want to both explain Spinoza's argument and explain the relevant concepts (e.g. how Spinoza thinks of substances and causation) as well as the relevant axioms/ definitions/ propositions Spinoza uses in the argument. Why is this claim, that it is impossible for one substance to cause another substance to exist, important for Spinoza—for example, how does he use the claim in proving that God exists? Is Spinoza right that one substance cannot cause another to exist? If he isn't, explain where he goes wrong. If he is, explain why you think so.

2. Spinoza's proposition 5 states "In Nature there cannot be two or more substances of the same nature or attribute." Spinoza also has another argument for the same conclusion on p161, paragraph 4ff. Choose one of these arguments. State what you think are the two best objections to the argument you've chosen. Now fix the argument. What additional axiom could Spinoza introduce so that he could escape your objections? How would the new argument go? Is the axiom you've added a plausible one?

3. Locke on the origins of ideas: Locke claims that all ideas derive from sensation and reflection, but there are several problematic cases for him: abstract ideas, ideas of what Locke calls "powers", ideas of substances, ideas of numbers (you might think you never experience numbers), etc. Pick the cases you think are most troublesome for Locke and describe how he handles them (or how he would handle them if you choose cases that he doesn't discuss). Can the empiricist program be saved? Do all ideas really come from sensation or reflection? Explain your answer.

4. Locke vs. Leibniz on Nativism: Locke claims that the only argument for innate principles is the Argument from Universal Consent. Why does Locke believe that the argument is a bad one? Leibniz replies to Locke in his *New Essays on Human Understanding*. What are Leibniz's main criticisms of Locke's criticisms of the Argument from Universal Consent? Are Leibniz's criticisms any good and do they help to make a plausible case for the existence of innate principles? Do you believe in innate principles? Explain why.

5. Locke vs. Berkeley on Primary and Secondary Qualities: Locke argues that there is a distinction between primary qualities, properties of objects that resemble our ideas of those properties, and secondary qualities, properties of objects that do not resemble our ideas of those

properties. State Locke's argument that 'heat' for instance is a secondary quality (the "bucket" argument, in Book II, Chapter VIII, Section 21). How does Berkeley, in his *Principles* use Locke's reasoning to argue that size, shape, and motion are not primary qualities? Are Berkeley's arguments good ones? If not, why not? If so, is there really no distinction between properties like color, sound, texture and heat on the one hand and size, shape, and motion on the other? Do you think all properties are secondary qualities?

6. Berkeley vs. Abstract Ideas: We didn't talk about this much in class, but in the introduction to the *Principles* (as well as in the text itself, for example, in Section 5), Berkeley spends a lot of time arguing against abstract ideas and the faculty of abstraction. For example, in Introduction Section 13, he argues that the abstract idea of a triangle contains inconsistent properties: it is neither equilateral nor not equilateral. Furthermore, says Berkeley, when one conceives of triangularity separated from other particular qualities, one is thereby conceiving of triangularity existing apart from such other qualities; but triangularity must always exist in a particular object that (of necessity) has other qualities—that is, triangularity can never exist apart from other qualities. And one cannot conceive the impossible. (There are lots of other arguments in against abstract ideas in the Introduction, but obviously I can't describe them all here.) Explain what you take to be the best argument(s) Berkeley presents against abstract ideas, and then state whether you think Berkeley has succeeded in discrediting the notion or not. Make sure to defend your position.

Here are a few more ideas from Berkeley, in case you're interested (sorry for so many Berkeley topics, but he gives lots of arguments):

7. Present Berkeley's arguments that only ideas can resemble ideas, §§8-14. Then argue that Berkeley is wrong, or argue that he's right (but make sure to say more than Berkeley does about why he's right.)

8. Present Berkeley's arguments that you cannot conceive of something that cannot be perceived, §7, §23. Then argue that Berkeley is wrong, or argue that he's right (but make sure to say more than Berkeley does about why he's right.)

9. Present Berkeley's arguments (or some of them) that if idealism is true, then God exists, §§28-30, (and you may want to look at §§145-156, though these weren't assigned). Then argue that Berkeley is wrong, or argue that he's right (but make sure to say more than Berkeley does about why he's right.)