

PHIL 2000: Philosophical Tools
Instructions

Please write a paper on some topic related to the material in chapters 4, 5, and 6 in the course textbook. I'm very bad at coming up with theses for other people to defend ("paper topics"), so I'm not going to try it. Come up with your own thesis. I will lead by example a little: below is a bunch of contentious theses that strike me as worth defending, though I'm not convinced they're true. These are the things *I* would consider writing a paper about on the course material, if someone required *me* to do it: *you* don't have to write a paper defending any of these theses, but you can. Aim for about 1,500 words—between 1,000 and 2,000 is acceptable.

My advice is: have a thesis and be clear about what your thesis is. Don't try to prove beyond all possible doubt that your thesis is true: just provide one or maybe two arguments for it. Spend lots of time making your arguments clear. Give lots of thought to how people reading your arguments might object to them, and explain why those objections don't sway you. Start early, and re-write your paper from the beginning after you've finished. Students never do that but re-writing a paper after you know all the things you want to say (because you already wrote them), makes it much better. Finally, give your paper to a friend to read before you give it to me. If your friends can't figure out what you're talking about, how do you think I'm going to do it?

Final advice: do some additional reading. You don't have to throw yourself into the difficult philosophical literature: just have a look at *some* of the sections in *some* of these encyclopedia articles (the ones relevant to your thesis):

"The Analytic-Synthetic Distinction" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/analytic-synthetic/>

"A Priori Justification and Knowledge" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/apriori/>

The first 4 sections of "Descartes' Epistemology" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/>

Section 2.6 on synthetic a priori truths in "Naturalism" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/essential-accidental/index.html>

"Varieties of Modality" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/modality-varieties/>

"Essential vs. Accidental Properties" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/essential-accidental/index.html>

"Possible Worlds" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/possible-worlds/>

"Rigid Designators" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rigid-designators/>

Final matter of importance: Please don't put your name on the paper. Use your student number instead.

Theses Michael is Partial To (You Don't Have to Write on These)

There are no analytic truths, if analytic means true "in virtue of meaning." All truths are true in virtue of the actual facts.

(Relatedly, you could defend the thesis that 'analytic' should be understood in a different way, so that there are analytic truths, even if all truths are true in virtue of the actual facts.)

Evolution does provide us with synthetic a priori knowledge, even though sometimes it provides us with falsehoods, or not-fully-general principles.

Nothing is a priori. To know anything requires experience of the relevant facts, or experience of evidence for them.

Cartesian truths like "I exist" and "I am experiencing a red sensation" are contingent and certain, but not a priori. (What's interesting in this thesis is that things you are certain of are not the same as things that are a priori.)

Logic is not necessary. (There are two auxiliary theses that might be more interesting to defend: 1. Since logic is not necessary, possible worlds are not a good way to understand necessity 2. Since logic is not necessary, there are some possible worlds that violate the laws of logic. (Obviously you can't defend both auxiliary hypotheses.))

Your origins are not essential. You could have existed, and been born from different parents.

(I don't have any theses on this list that deal with the material in Chapter 6. I do have theses about rigidity, which you can read in Chapter 2 (p. 33) of my dissertation here: <http://michaeljohnsonphilosophy.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Dissertation-final-formatted.pdf> . I wouldn't really recommend writing on that stuff, but as you'll notice I don't even take my own advice.)