

## Final Paper Prompt

**Task:** Develop your own personal philosophy in 4-6K words. It should have four dimensions. A metaphysics, an epistemology, an ethics, and an aesthetics. Due March 9.

The questions in each of the four sections below are meant to stimulate your thinking. You don't have to answer them in some formulaic way, and there may be other questions that are more interesting and important to you. But these questions suggest the scope of what I expect you to think through.

**Metaphysics:** What is my theory of the meaning and purpose of the cosmos and the place of the human being in it?

- What is my cosmology? Is there a 'mythos' that you can embrace that is consistent with what you know from science? Or does your metaphysics exclude the possibility of any mythos? Or does your embrace of mythos exclude science as an essential legitimating source of knowledge. (See epistemology below)
- What meaning, if any, does history have? There are many theories: the eschatologies of the Abrahamic faiths, Hegel's and Marx's versions of the historical dialectic, the Hindu, Mayan, and Stoic Great Cycles, Nietzsche's Eternal Return, the random, impersonal processes described by the Big Bang and Darwinian evolution—and others as well. What makes sense to you?
- What is the destiny of the human being on the earth and in the rest of the cosmos? A lot depends on how you answer the preceding questions.

**Epistemology:** What is my theory of truth or knowledge?

- How does my metaphysics (or mythos) determine what is knowable? For instance, if it excludes, *a priori*, the existence of a spiritual dimension, then clearly other explanations must be developed to account for spiritual phenomena and experiences (See Wm. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*). On the other hand, someone like Kant believed in a spiritual dimension, but he didn't think anything in it was knowable. What do you think?
- By what criterion can I make confident judgments about what is true and what is delusional? Does feeling or emotion close off or open up possibilities for knowing? Does belief or faith close off or open up possibilities for knowing?

**Ethics:** What is my theory of right behavior?

- What kind of good life is possible for me and those I love? How does what's good for me relate to what's good for the larger community and society? Is there a necessary connection? Radical Libertarians define one end of the spectrum with radical socialists defining the other. Where do you fit on that spectrum?
- How do my metaphysics and aesthetics play a role in shaping what's possible or what's desirable? If you believe that the ultimate goal of human existence is to become liberated from the chain of reincarnation, that sets up one set of ethical guidelines. If you believe that history is an impersonal, cruel, random evolutionary process where it is eat or be eaten, that sets up another set of guidelines.

- How does my ‘epistemology’ help me to understand whether I am making sound judgments about the right course of action? Do the most important decisions need to be based on a rational analysis of data to determine the most probable positive outcome? Or do you trust your intuitions and heart or gut when it comes to making the most important decisions?

**Aesthetics:** What is my theory of beauty?

- What have been my most powerful experiences of beauty—and ugliness?
- How do or don’t such experiences shape my sense of what is metaphysically real?
- How do or don’t they shape my sense of what is good and bad—for instance good and bad art, or good and bad human environments—good and bad architecture, wealthy and squalid neighborhoods, etc.
- How do or don’t my experiences of beauty and ugliness obstruct or open up my understanding about how we know, what is knowable, and what we should seek to know?
- Is aesthetics irrelevant to any or all of these considerations? Is it just about what I enjoy?

The best papers will be tightly written, insightful, sincere attempts to develop as best as you can at this point in your life a foundation upon which you can stand with some confidence that you have at least begun the ‘examined life’ that is worth living. I hope that in your doing so you will have established a secure foothold to stand firm against the various forms of groupthink that will in their various ways seek to sweep you along at work, in politics, in your social and intimate relationships. Its value will further lie in its providing you with a foundation upon which you can build as you get more experience and learn more about the world and your life in it.

Because you are all bright, thoughtful people you have already put some thought into what your philosophy is. But this is an opportunity to think more methodically and rigorously about what you really think and believe, and to see how one aspect of your thinking about your thinking that might be more developed connects with other aspects that are not that well developed. Can you think things through to the point where it all works together fairly well?

And since the course is designed at least in part to provoke your thinking and to induce you to examine your assumptions, the paper should address those areas where the ideas presented in the course have either confirmed, challenged, or stimulated your thinking. In other words, there should be some evidence of your having engaged with the ideas presented in the course. The paper you hand in should be different from the one you might have written before you took the course.

When I read your paper, I have no philosophical agenda of my own by which I will measure the validity of yours. I will play devil’s advocate where appropriate, and challenge your assumptions if they are not well established, and I will also challenge you if I think your thinking is lazy and loose. Good, clear writing is important for a good grade. The diaries that you’ve been writing are ok in their looseness, but I expect something tighter and more clearly focused in the final deliverable on March 9.

I strongly encourage you to talk things out with me as you are thinking through what you want to write in this paper. Come to office hours or set up an appointment.