

Third Discussion Paper (Due Friday, December 14):

Write a five-page essay on one of the following topics.

1. Hume argues that, if one cannot trace an idea back to antecedent impressions, then the idea is fundamentally confused and meaningless and should, therefore, play no role in philosophy or science. First, explain why he thinks that this is true. Do you think that this is an overly restrictive “criterion of meaningfulness,” or do you find it a reasonable way to seek clarity?
2. According to Hume, the claim that a specific miracle occurred falls in the category that he terms “matters of fact” and therefore should be evaluated exclusively on the basis of the same kinds of evidentiary considerations that we apply in evaluating any other factual claim. Is this the right way to adjudicate claims about miracles, and is Hume’s skepticism about miracles justified?
3. Hume thinks that the age-old argument over free will versus determinism is merely a verbal dispute, that if we define the terms “necessity” and “free will” clearly, we will see that belief in both entails no contradiction. How does that argument work, and do you think that Hume is right?
4. If, as Hume argues, there is no certainty in science, can we, then, trust science?
5. According to de la Mettrie, mind is merely organized matter, or, as we might say in a more modern idiom, the pattern of functional organization of at least some parts of the material body, including the brain. What famous position on the mind-body problem is de la Mettrie opposing with his functionalist view of mind? Do you think that the functionalist view works? Explain why or why not.
6. Is there an evolutionary basis for human morality? If not, why would the moral aspect of human behavior not be shaped by evolution, when so many other aspects of our behavior are so shaped? If there is an evolutionary basis for morality, how, exactly, does it work? Can humans somehow transcend their evolutionary roots?
7. In what sense is the human species distinctive with respect to the rest of nature? Is there a sense in which the human species is “higher” than all other species?
8. Galileo argued that one should use well established scientific knowledge to help us interpret scripture. Should we employ evolutionary biology in that way? If not, why not? If so, what specific implications might there be for the interpretation of scripture?
9. We often speak of the “theory” of evolution. In what sense is evolution a theory? How would you compare the evidence for evolution to the evidence for, say, relativity theory or the “big bang” theory in cosmology, or Freud’s psychology?