

Philosophy 370: Final paper topics

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Below are four topics for your final paper. You are welcome to come up with your own topic, though you must get my approval first. If you do this, the question that I approve should be on the first page of your essay. The paper should be approximately 5-7 pages in length.

The final paper is due on the last day of class, which is Tuesday, November 30. A late penalty of 3 points per day, including weekends, will be assessed for any papers which are handed in later than Tuesday, December 7. Papers can be handed in either to my office (919 Leacock) or to my box in the Philosophy Department (908 Leacock). If no one is around, you can slide them under the door of my office.

I am happy to give you comments on your final paper. If you would like comments on the paper, hand in, with your paper, an envelope addressed to you, so that I can send the paper to you with comments on it. The envelope need not be stamped.

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1. The 'paradox of analysis' can be stated as an argument for the conclusion that every analysis of the meaning of an expression is either trivial and uninformative, or incorrect. It goes like this:

Suppose that an analysis of some expression is correct. Then the analysis must capture the meaning of that expression. Since we understand the expression, we already know its meaning; hence it will be immediately obvious to us that the analysis is correct. But this makes the analysis uninformative.

Does this paradox, in your view, pose a challenge to the explanatory ambitions of any of the analyses which Russell offers (of numbers, or of material objects, for example)? Why or why not?

2. Russell claimed that his theory of descriptions solved the problem of negative existentials. Explain the problem and his solution to the problem, and explain why that solution requires analyzing ordinary proper names as disguised descriptions. State and evaluate at least one objection to the view that ordinary proper names can be analyzed via the theory of descriptions.

3. Explain the view of thought and language which results from the combination of the sense datum theory of perception and Russell's principles about thought and acquaintance. Is this a plausible view? What challenges does it face, and what advantages does it have? If you think that it should be given up, which part of the view should be given up?

4. Ayer held that only sentences which have some close connection to experience (like verifiability or falsifiability) can have a meaning. Is he right about this? If you think that he is right, then say what relation to experience a sentence must have to be meaningful. If you think that he is not right, then say how you think a sentence could acquire a meaning, if not from experience.