2014

340-01 Metaphysics

Timothy Quinn

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THEMES

Metaphysics or “first philosophy is that branch of philosophy concerned with investigating the “first things”: God, world, soul. It is metaphysics that investigates why things are as they are; whether there is a fundamental, rational order to the cosmos; whether there is a God; what it means to be. This semester we will examine three authors who have proved seminal to this sort of reflection. We will be guided by two goals: to discover the fundamental questions and alternatives posed for understanding the way things are; and to see the manner in which “ancient” and “modern” thought differ on these fundamental matters.

TEXTS

Aristotle  METAPHYSICS (Green Lion Press)

Descartes, Rene  MEDITATIONS, OBJECTIONS, AND REPLIES (Hackett Press)

Heidegger, Martin  INTRODUCTION TO METAPHYSICS (Yale U. Press)

In addition, you will be responsible for any material distributed in class.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

The course requirements are three take-home exams, a research proposal, and a research paper. All written work should be submitted to TurnItIn.com (details to follow).

Exams: The exams will be essay in format, and will cover issues in the readings and lectures. There will be an exam concerning Aristotle, one concerning Descartes, and a final exam, concerning Heidegger. Each exam is worth 20%.

Research Proposal and Paper: The purpose of your semester’s research is to develop an original insight into a issue raised by one or more of the readings. The papers may concern a problem in one of our authors, or involve a comparison between two of them (see below).
The research will be due in two phases. By Monday, March 10, you are to submit a two page proposal for your term paper, including the following information: your topic and its importance, the issues or questions you intend to raise, the primary sources you will be using, and an annotated bibliography of at least three secondary sources. The research paper itself, of approximately 10 to 15 pages in length, will be due Monday, April 22. The research proposal and paper are worth 40% of your grade: they are the principle assignment of the semester.

Class Attendance and Participation: Class attendance and participation are mandatory. Three unexcused absences drop your total grade by one letter grade; six unexcused absences result in failure for the course. It is not possible to receive an A in the class without regular participation in class discussion.

SCHEDULE

January 7--Feb. 115: Aristotle, METAPHYSICS: I.1--3; IV.1,2; V.7, 8; VI.1; VII, 1-9, 17; IX; XII.

Take-Home Exam: Monday, Feb. 17

Feb. 20--March 16: Descartes, MEDITATIONS

Proposal due: Monday, March 10

Take-Home Exam: Monday, March 24

March 19—April 27: Heidegger, INTRODUCTION TO METAPHYSICS

Term Paper: Monday, April 28
Take-Home Exam: Wednesday, May 7

TERM PAPER TOPICS

The goal of this assignment is to compose a term paper of approximately 15 pages that investigates some issue of philosophical importance in one or more of the writers we’re studying this semester. The paper can focus on one author; it could compare two authors (a comparison of all three would be too ambitious). The paper is to involve research from secondary sources (article length studies or chapters in books are best). However, the paper is not principally a research paper: your thoughts about the primary sources should retain the foreground.

Below are some suggestions for topics. You need not select from this list; however, your topic must be consonant with the themes of the course.
**Aristotle on God:** What is first substance? How does Aristotle arrive at a notion of first substance? Is Aristotle’s metaphysics a theology or an ontology?

**Aristotle on Wisdom:** Analyze carefully the arguments of *Metaphysics* A (1-2)/E (1): what does Aristotle mean by wisdom? What are the features of a science of wisdom? What is the rhetorical dimension of Aristotle’s argument on behalf of wisdom? How does the science of wisdom relate to other forms of human understanding or to other sciences?

**Aristotle on Evolution:** Is evolution of natural kinds compatible with Aristotelian metaphysics?

**Descartes on God:** Who is Descartes’ God? What role do his proofs for God’s existence play in the argument of the *Meditations*? In what ways does Descartes’ God differ from Aristotle’s?

**Descartes on Substance:** Explain Descartes’ dual substance doctrine? How is this doctrine affected by the “teaching of nature?”

**Heidegger on Being and Nature:** Explain Heidegger’s views of the relation between being and nature. Are his views similar to or different from Aristotle’s?

**Heidegger and the Greeks:** Explain Heidegger’s view of ancient philosophy. How does he evaluate traditional (Aristotelian) metaphysics? How does he evaluate Parmenides? Is Heidegger an ancient sort of metaphysician?

**Heidegger and Language:** Explain Heidegger’s view of the relationship between language and being. Why is language such a large concern for Heidegger? Compare with Aristotle.

**Heidegger: Metaphysics and Politics:** Are Heidegger’s thoughts about metaphysics inseparable from his political commitments?

**GRADING POLICIES**

The Philosophy Department has adopted the following standards for evaluation of all written work:

A= work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student, giving evidence of a deeper understanding of the material in question.
B=work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

C=work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

D=work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

F=work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. Cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or other’s written work without giving credit, must be given an F for the course.