

Texts and Ideas: What is a Good Human Life?  
**Textual Analysis Paper Prompt**

**Paper Assigned:**

Saturday, October 2<sup>nd</sup>

**Paper Deadline:**

Thursday, October 14<sup>th</sup> at 11:59pm

Response Paper Prompt: Textual Analysis and Comparison

There are two possible prompts, which both involve considering and comparing the views held by two of the thinkers we've covered in class:

**OPTION 1:** The two film versions of Prospero in the versions I made available differ greatly in how the character is portrayed. Even if you set aside the most blatant difference (that the 1980 film's Michael Hordern is a man and the 2010 film's Helen Mirren is a woman), there are many significant choices made in how the characters are acted and how the directors depict them. For example, Hordern's Prospero seems outwardly self-assured while Mirren's Prospera openly struggles with indecision.

Your assignment is:

- (1) Choose a single character from *The Tempest*, and choose a single of portrayal of that character from an adaptation of the *Tempest*. You can either use one of the two films we've talked about in class, pick one of your own. NOTE: If you pick a different one, the adaptation must use Shakespeare's original text (or a direct translation of it, if the adaptation isn't in English) for its dialogue. What about the depiction of the character in the original text of the play do the portrayal you chose get right/wrong?
- (2) Explain Aristotle's account of virtue. In particular, his account of virtue as being the intermediate between two extremes, which are vices (like how bravery, a virtue, is the intermediate between the two vices, cowardice and self-destructive overconfidence), and his account of how virtues can be cultivated, like habits, by acting as if you possessed that virtue.
- (3) What kind of a person do you think this character is? Using Aristotle's account of virtue, describe at least one way in which the character you chose is virtuous/vicious. Explain how the character's behavior in the play matches this vice/virtue, and explain whether you think they "really possess" that vice/virtue or if they are acting out of character during the play. Justify your claim with examples from the text.

**OPTION 2:** Prospero's original revenge plot gradually softens over the course of the play, *The Tempest*. By the end of the play, Prospero has forgiven all of his betrayer, Antonio, and has celebrated the engagement of his daughter to the son of King Alonso, who was complicit in his coup. Some have interpreted Prospero as easily swayed by those around him, while others have thought his changes were reflective of deep personal growth.

Your assignment is:

- (1) Describe what you think Prospero's original plan for the riders on the ship. How does it differ from what ends up happening during the play? What causes Prospero's change in plan/attitude/character? Use examples from the play to justify your responses.

- (2) Choose ONE of the views we've discussed earlier in the class (e.g. Socrates in the Apology and Crito, Socrates in the Symposium, Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics, Montaigne in his essays). Explain what the author's theory is about what makes for a good human life (with a focus on views relevant to answering the question in Section 3, below).
- (3) Using the view you've chosen in Section 2, describe whether Prospero's change reflects an improvement in his character or not. Is he, by the end of the play, going to be living a better life (by the lights of the view you've chosen)? Use examples from the readings to justify your claims.

### **General Advice for Answering the Prompts:**

- (1) Lay out the arguments as clearly and concisely as possible.
  - a) Present the argument in plain language prose. Identify its premises and conclusion, then list the former and explain how they imply the latter.
  - b) Make explicit and presuppositions or principles which are not mentioned but must be accepted for the argument to go through.
  - c) Finally, explain what broader theory the argument is supporting or criticizing. Explain how the truth of its conclusion is supposed to support or (partially) refute that view.
- (2) When analyzing the reading and making comparisons, focus on the ideas presented...
  - a) That is, the specifics of Socrates's wording won't be as important as making sure you have a clear and concise description of what he's trying to communicate.
  - b) When comparing one reading to another, you should identify major points of agreement, and only focus on disagreements that are relevant to answering the questions in your prompt.
- (3) If you describe an objection to an argument, or decide that the argument should be rejected...
  - a) Explain how the objection works. That is, explain what premise or suppressed presupposition the objection conflicts with.
  - b) Explain why and how the rejection of that premise or presupposition means that the remaining premises are no longer enough to ensure the conclusion's truth (that is, explain why, if the premises targeted by the objection are rejected, then the truth of the conclusion is no longer guaranteed, even if the other premises are true).
- (4) Do not over-use quotations! Since you are comparing texts, you will likely have to cite certain parts to justify your claims. However, you should focus on giving a *\*clear\** and *\*concise\** explanation of the views presented in the relevant parts of the readings, rather than just quoting them. For the non-philosophical works, you should feel more comfortable including quotes, but you should explain their significance in your own words.
  - a) **WHENEVER** you use a quote, you must immediately follow the quote with an explanation, entirely in your own words, of what this quotation means and how it relates to the point you're trying to make in that part of your paper.

### **Formatting and Length requirements:**

- Pages: 3 to 5 pages (hard limit). If your paper is shorter than the minimum, you probably haven't explained your points thoroughly enough. I will stop reading at the end of the maximum

number of pages, so if your paper is longer than the maximum, then the last parts of it won't get read by me (and I will grade your paper based only on the parts I read).

- Double-spaced, 1" margins (all sides), 12 point font (Times New Roman, Calibri, Liberation Serif, or some other inoffensive, normal-proportioned, font). Letter-sized or A4 paper formatting.
- No excessive introduction or conclusion. You do not need any "hook" or other extra sentences at the beginning to lead up to the argument you're discussing. You should immediately start your discussion, without any unnecessary scene-setting.
- Must be in .pdf, .doc, .docx, or .odt format.
- There are no requirements for citation formatting. However, you should make it clear whose views you are discussing and, if you do choose to use quotes or otherwise reference parts of a paper directly, you should indicate what reading and what sections you're referring to.
  - When referencing translations of Plato, don't use page numbers (if you can help it). Instead, you can use the numbers and letters in the margins of the main text to refer to specific segments of the reading. Here's how that works: You should use the closest number and the closest letter that is *above* the line you're quoting. For example, in the Apology, Socrates says "the unexamined life is not worth living" around 38a ('38' because it's below the '38' and 'a' because it's above the 'b'). The paragraph where Socrates describes the charges recommended by the prosecution, and then instead suggests the "punishment" of free meals at the Prytaneum runs from 36b to 37a.

In your paper, you would cite this as: (Apology 36b-37a)

## Who is Your Audience?

- *NOT* me (I know too much about the material).
- *NOT* a layperson who hasn't taken any philosophy (they know too little about how philosophy papers work to understand what you're doing).
- Rather, consider your audience an old roommate of yours, who was a philosophy major, but who never took this particular class.

This roommate knows what words like necessary and sufficient mean, and understands what arguments, premises, and conclusions are, but they probably don't know what is said in any of the readings.

Moreover, this is a roommate whose seen you in embarrassing situations in the past, and so won't be impressed if you write using high-falutin language to make yourself sound fancy and smart (or to disguise when you're not sure about what you're saying, which is what that language is usually used for). Rather, you should just explain everything as simply and clearly as possible, so they won't have anything to make fun of you about.

# Grading Standards

The prompt is on the previous pages. What follows are my grading standards (so you know what to aim for in your assignment). These are the exact standards I will use to grade your paper.

## **Minimum Requirements to *Pass*:**

- A) Your topic should be one of the two prompts provided, above.
- B) Your paper should engage actively with the readings, but not be either a self-contained argument or a stand-alone part of a series of arguments for a specific positive view advocated for by the author.
- C) Your paper must answer all of the questions indicated in the prompt and must do so in a clear and easy-to-follow way.
- D) Your paper should avoid using excessive quotes, and avoid using very long quotes. Every quotation should be accompanied by a prose explanation of what that quote says and what its significance is for the point you're making in that section of the paper.

## **Requirements to Get a *Good Grade*:**

To get a good grade (rather than just a passing one), you must follow the prompt in a clear and organized way. Specifically, you must explain yourself clearly, thoroughly, in a focused way, and in a way that's accurate to the content of the reading or of the argument you're considering.

### **These conditions are listed in order of importance:**

- ***Clarity*** is the most important feature I'll be looking for. It must be evident to your reader what each sentence means, and what purpose the terms you are using are playing.
- ***Thoroughness*** is the second most important feature, and it also contributes to clarity. Your paper should explain your point in sufficient detail and with sufficient care that the connections between, e.g., the premises of the argument and the objection, are as explicit as possible.
- ***Focused writing*** is the third most important feature, though it also contributes to clarity and thoroughness. Your writing should not bring in irrelevant details or extra information or technical terms which do not contribute to your reader's understanding of the argument, objection, or response. You should come into each paragraph or sentence knowing what point you want to make and remove any excess or rhetorical flourishes.
- ***Accuracy to the content*** of your reading, and of your chosen argument is the last thing I'll look for. While it is important to get the material right, it's *much* more important to be clear, thorough, and focused in your explanation. Indeed, your paper will be better (and receive a better grade) if you openly acknowledge that you aren't sure how to understand a certain step in an argument or objection, but can hazard two or three possible understandings, and then clearly, thoroughly, and in a focused way explain those possibilities and what their significance is.

A note on what's ***NOT*** important to getting a good grade: At no point will I evaluate whether you, in your paper, "won" the debate. There are no points awarded for showing that an objection to your preferred view is false and confused, or for showing that the objection to a view you disagree with absolutely demolishes it. Philosophy is not about winning arguments, it's about clearly and carefully laying out the logical relations between certain claims, and using those connections to better understand the world. If your paper "wins" the argument, but does so by ignoring or under-

playing the significance of a legitimate point which would be inconvenient for your preferred view, then your paper is sacrificing all four of the above virtues in exchange for a meaningless feeling of victory, and will be graded accordingly.

**(1) Lay out the argument in the passage as clearly and concisely as possible.**

- a) Does the paper present the argument in plain language prose? Does it identify the argument's premises and conclusion?

*What are they?* \_\_\_\_\_

- b) Make explicit and presuppositions or principles which are not mentioned explicitly in the reading?
- b) Does the paper explain how the premises and presuppositions together imply the conclusion of the argument?.
- c) Does the paper explain the significance of this conclusion for the broader theory that this argument is supporting or criticizing?

*If so, what is that broader theory?* \_\_\_\_\_

- c) Does the paper explain how the truth of the conclusion, or the success of this argument, makes a difference to that broader theory?

**(2) Describe how an opponent might object to this argument.**

- a) Does the paper present the objection in plain language prose? Is the objection plausible? Does the author make a case for why one should be tempted to accept this objection (regardless of whether they later say we should ultimately reject it)?
- b) Does the paper explain how the objection works? Does it explain what premise or suppressed presupposition in the original argument the objection conflicts with?

*If so, which one?* \_\_\_\_\_

- b) Does the paper explain why and how the rejection of conflicts with that premise or presupposition? Is it clear from the paper how the loss of that premises would mean that the argument is no longer able to ensure the conclusion's truth?

*Why does the objection conflict with that premise or presupposition?* \_\_\_\_\_

**(3) Evaluate the argument in light of this objection**

- a) Does the paper present a possible answer that the proponent of the original argument could present? Do they explain why that answer could (perhaps) allow the argument, or at least its conclusion, to avoid the worries raised by the conclusion?

*What is the possible answer?* \_\_\_\_\_

- b) Does the paper clearly explain why the response does (or does not) work? Does it explain why the proponent of the original argument can (or cannot) avoid the objection discussed?

*In one sentence, what is the reason that the argument can (alternatively: can't) avoid the objection?*

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Response Paper: More Detailed Breakdown of Prompt

This might be useful while writing and revising your paper. It's a more detailed part-by-part breakdown of the paper prompt:

### **Part 1: Argument**

- Lay out the argument that is your topic as clearly and concisely as possible.
- You should present that argument in premise-conclusion form. What is the conclusion that the argument is supposed to show? What are the premises that the author accepts, which they think imply the conclusion?
- Explain what the premises are, what they mean, and give reasons why we should think they are true. Your explanation should be understandable by someone who has not read the paper you're discussing.
- Make explicit and presuppositions or principles which are not mentioned but must be accepted for the argument to go through.
- Explain why, if you accept the premises (together with the implicit presuppositions), the truth of the conclusion is guaranteed.
- Finally, explain what broader theory the argument is supporting or criticizing. Explain how the truth of its conclusion is supposed to support or (partially) refute that view.
- Any terms in this argument that are vague, ambiguous, or unclear are defined or explained early in your paper. A reader should be able to think of example situations and determine exactly what your thesis says about them.

### **Part 2: Objection**

- Describe how an opponent might object to this argument. You should pick the \*best\* objection that you can think of.
- It may be that this objection is from that reading, another reading, or in class. In that case you should make clear its source. It may be that the best objection you can think of is a different one, not already in an available reading or discussed in class.
- An objection to an argument is not merely the rejection of the conclusion, or an expression of disagreement. An objection must pick a part of the argument that isn't the conclusion to critique or reject (this may be a premise or a suppressed presupposition of the argument).
- You should explain what premise or suppressed presupposition the objection conflicts with.
- You must explain why and how the rejection of that premise or presupposition means that the remaining premises are no longer enough to ensure the conclusion's truth (that is, explain why, if the premises targeted by the objection are rejected, then the truth of the conclusion is no longer guaranteed, even if the other premises are true).

### **Part 3: Response and Evaluation.**

- Describe how a fan of the original argument might respond to this objection. You should pick the \*best\* response you can think of.
- It may be that this response is from that reading, another reading, or in class. In that case you should make clear its source. It may be that the best response you can think of is a different one, not already in an available reading or discussed in class.

- A response to this objection isn't just an expression of disagreement with the conclusion of the objection (where the conclusion is "this part of the argument is wrong"), there must be a specific, independent reason for accepting this response, or a specific reason why one should doubt part of the objection.
- You should explain what the motivation for this response is. Justify why the response should seem plausible (EVEN IF you ultimately will say we should reject it)
- You must evaluate the argument as a whole, given the objection and response. Is the argument one we should accept? Or does the objection you describe successfully refute it. Your evaluation SHOULD NOT include criticism of any specific author's writing style, or way of presenting their views. The success (or failure) of an argument, or the truth (or falsity) of a theory, doesn't care about how people write about it. You should treat the arguments and views discussed here as their own topic, independent of who first discussed them, and explain the logical relations between those arguments, views, and claims.