Phil 1301 Guidelines for the Midterm and the Final Paper . Goal: To write a short (1200 words or more, double spaced, standard font) philosophy paper on a topic of your choice in consultation with the instructor. You will be graded on clarity of thought and the ability to illustrate an understanding of the topics and themes of one (or some) of the major authors we’ve covered in class. One element of this understanding will be the appropriate use of textual support. That is, the use of quotations from the primary texts, and the ability to assimilate that information in your own words, with your own examples. I do NOT want to see merely regurgitated lecture notes. Some notes about philosophy papers: Students often find philosophy papers difficult to write since the expectations are different from those in other disciplines, even from those of other disciplines in the humanities. What follows is some general advice about how to go about writing short (1000 words or more) philosophy papers How to conceive of and write your paper: Philosophy papers usually involve both exposition and evaluation. In the expository part of the paper, which in such a short paper should be brief, your task is to explain the view or argument under consideration. Make sure that your explanation is as explicit and accurate as possible. The evaluation part of the paper is your chance to do some philosophy of your own and the key component of the paper. It is not enough merely to state whether you agree or disagree with the philosopher’s conclusion. You should engage with the reasoning. Some questions you might consider: does the argument succeed in getting to the desired conclusion? Which premises are the weakest points of the argument? What objections might be raised to these premises? Are there any ways that her argument could be bolstered to defend against such objections? As you write, think about your intended audience. You should write your paper as if you imagine your audience as someone who is intelligent and interested in the subject but has not studied it. (Think of yourself, before taking this class, or perhaps a friend in college with some interest in the subject.) Philosophical Thesis: In philosophy papers, your thesis will state a position or claim. Think of the thesis as a roadmap that guides your reader in advance of where the argument will go and how you will get there. Of course, this requires actually having an argument to begin with which is one of the main challenges for novice philosophy writers. One informal litmus test is that if the paper reads like a biography or merely a report, then it likely does not have an argument and thus not a thesis. Another suggestion is to try to avoid announcing what you will do and preview more directly how you will do it. We will be discussing several sample theses in the upcoming lessons, but as always if you have any questions as you get started on your paper, please let me know. The thesis is the most important part of your paper; it tells the reader what your stance is on a particular topic and offers reasons for that stance. Since the rest of your paper will be spent defending your thesis--offering support for the thesis and reasons why criticism of the thesis may not be valid--it's crucial that you develop a strong thesis. A strong thesis will: answer a question; be engaging; it can be challenged or opposed, thus also defended; pass the "so what? why should I care?" test; be supported by your paper; not be too broad nor too vague. When you use an unfamiliar or “technical” term (i.e. a term that we have given some specific meaning in this class) be sure to define it. Whenever you make a claim about what is said in the text, it is appropriate to provide a specific reference to back up your claim. Do not make claims like “Socrates believes that …” without supporting them. For short papers using class texts, footnotes are not necessary; it is sufficient to make parenthetical references, such as (Republic 77b). Write until you have said what you need to say, not until you hit the page limit. (Incidentally, if you find that you don’t have enough to say to reach the word limit, you’re probably missing something. The problem should be to confine your paper to the page limit, not to stretch out your paper to the minimum required.) You may end up with a first draft that is too long, but at a later stage you can go back through your work and see whether there are sentences or paragraphs that are not really necessary or that can be made more concise. The point is that you will be better able to evaluate what is truly important if you have included everything on your first draft. Finally, do not try to compose your paper, from start to finish, in one session – especially not the night before it is due. Make sure that you have the chance to write a first draft and then let it percolate for a while. Very few people are able to dash off a good paper in one sitting! How to write an introduction: Do not begin with a very general opening statement: “Plato was one of the world’s greatest philosophers…” or “The definition of virtue is something that philosophers have debated for centuries…” Do briefly tell your reader what your paper is about and what your main thesis is. Notice that there is a difference between telling your reader what you are going to talk about and telling your reader what you will argue. Compare: In the Meno, Meno presents Socrates with a paradox about inquiry. There is no way to inquire into something that you don’t know, since you don’t know how to begin, but there is also no way to inquire into something that you already know, since you already have the knowledge in question. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that inquiry is impossible. Socrates attempts to unravel Meno’s paradox by presenting his theory of recollection. In what follows, I will discuss Meno’s paradox and Socrates’ criticism of it. In the Meno, Meno presents Socrates with a paradox about inquiry. There is no way to inquire into something that you don’t know, since you don’t know how to begin, but there is also no way to inquire into something that you already know, since you already have the knowledge in question. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that inquiry is impossible. Socrates attempts to unravel Meno’s paradox by presenting his theory of recollection. In what follows, I argue that Socrates does not adequately defend his theory of recollection. This is so because he fails to establish the intermediary steps needed to arrive at his conclusion. In addition, I also suggest that even if we were to accept the theory of recollection, this would not provide an adequate answer to Meno’s paradox. The second of these introductions is superior to the first. Notice that only the second presents an actual thesis statement. Sometimes you will be in a better position to write an introduction after you have written the main body of your paper, for you will then have a better idea of what your argument really is. How to write a conclusion: Do not end with a hedged claim like “Though Socrates’ argument is strong, his opponents also have good points.” Also try to avoid the temptation to end with an empty prediction about continued debate: “Though Meno’s definition of virtue is a good one, the philosophical debate over what it means to be virtuous will no doubt continue.” Do find some nice way of wrapping up your essay. This does not mean that you should claim that every facet of the issue has been addressed. Sometimes a conclusion sets out problems that still remain. There is nothing wrong with defending a qualified conclusion, such as “Socrates’ theory of recollection can be defended against this criticism,” rather than an unqualified conclusion, such as “Socrates’ theory of recollection is entirely correct.” In fact, you will probably not have argued for the latter conclusion in your paper, since it requires that you have shown not only that some criticisms fail, but also that there are not any other criticisms that might succeed against Socrates’ theory. Make sure that you do not claim that you have shown more than have actually shown in your paper. (It is especially tempting to exaggerate your accomplishments in a grand-finale-style concluding paragraph; resist this temptation.) For example, here is a conclusion that avoids exaggeration: As Socrates’ discussion with the slave suggests, it is plausible to suppose that someone can discover, without being taught, a geometrical claim that they did not already know. However, as I have argued, we cannot generalize from the case of geometrical knowledge to knowledge of other sorts of facts. Thus, Socrates fails to provide an adequate reason to believe his claim that all learning is recollection. [Notice that the conclusion does not say that Socrates’ claim is shown to be false, but only that Socrates has not adequately defended it.] Once you have a draft: The principal virtue in philosophical writing is clarity. As you reread each sentence of your draft, ask yourself: “Is this point expressed clearly?” Your prose should be simple, direct, and to the point. As you re-read your paper, think about whether it is organized in the best way. Would it be more effective if this paragraph went here, and that one went there? Very often, our first efforts need a rather serious structural overhaul. Also, look for opportunities to improve your paper, such as adding an example here, rewriting an awkward sentence there, and so on… Proofread your paper carefully. Spelling mistakes and grammatical errors can distract a reader and divert her attention from your argument. It may also give her the impression – a false one, perhaps – that you simply don’t care enough about your work to run it through a spell-check program. Very often, what distinguishes an excellent paper from a merely decent paper is the depth and quality of the explanations. The decent paper may not make any obvious mistakes or omit anything crucial; it often just does not communicate its message as clearly and effectively as the excellent paper does. Thus, always try to find ways of strengthening your explanations. Examples will help here. Almost all philosophy relies on the use of examples, both for illustrative and persuasive purposes. Grades: Remember that the grade that you get on the paper represents my judgment of the quality of the results – not what you meant to say, but what you actually said. ANOTHER NOTE: DO NOT GET A PAPER OFF THE INTERNET. I TAKE PLAGIARISM VERY SERIOUSLY AND WILL FOLLOW THROUGH WITH INVESTIGATING ANY SUSPICIOUS WRITING. Possible topics: Again, please do not feel limited to these topics. You are encouraged to write on what interests you that is related to the general themes of philosophy and ethics. Discuss Plato’s Myth of the Metals or Noble Lie. What does it illustrate about justice in the city and in the individual? Could Plato’s suggestions be implemented today? Why or why not? Discuss the allegory of the cave at the beginning of Book VII. Does the allegory allow us to understand some phenomenon better than some alternative explanation? If so, in what ways? Or for what reasons? How can the cave illustrate the role of the philosopher? Discuss Aristotle’s views on virtue and how they relate to the good life. Be sure to give some specific examples. What is the value of Aristotle’s notion of virtue today? Contrast Plato’s views about Ethics and Philosophy with those of Aristotle, focusing on the theme of vulnerability. Which approach do you find more plausible and why? Watch the video about Education in Finland and think about the video we watched earlier about the United States and their rankings in the world in terms of education. Would the Finnish model work here? Why or why not? How does this relate to Plato? Contrast the ideas and archetypes of the role models/heroes presented thus far. How does the Classical Greek hero differ from Plato’s hero? Why is this significant? Be specific in your approach by using examples where appropriate. Discuss The Divided Line metaphor found at the end of Book VI. What does this say about Plato’s approach to Epistemology? Do you agree with Plato’s approach? Why or why not? Be sure to include a discussion of the Forms and how one grasps them. Discuss and critically evaluate Descartes’ proof that God must exist. That is; fully explain the responses and replies to this ‘proof’. Is the critic successful in his efforts to refute Descartes? Why or why not? Discuss and evaluate the major differences between Hobbes and Rousseau. Try to be specific when possible. Rousseau also writes, “…it was necessary to show himself to be something other than what he in fact was. Being something and appearing to be something became two completely different things…” How does this observation relate to what society in essence “trains” us to become? Give examples where appropriate. Ok, I couldn’t resist. Discuss the “dumbassification” of America and what contributes to this ever increasing problem. Relate your response to the contemporary hero/role model concept in some way. Discuss the theme of alienation and self-identity as it relates to the definition of manhood in the Hip Hop documentary film we watched in class. OR Discuss the theme of becoming desensitized to violence and sexism as it relates to the portrayal of women in the film. Does music reflect on a culture or contribute to the culture? Do role models or people of power or influence have any moral obligation to those they influence? Discuss at least one person of influence that has “done the right thing” in your mind that as a result, has perhaps had a damaging effect on their image or persona in some circles. What did this person do, and why do you think they “did the right thing”? (This topic can be modified in a variety of ways to fit your interests while still maintaining a discussion of the central question) Is Affirmative Action justified? Discuss the arguments for and/or against affirmative action policies? Which approach do you think is more reasonable and why? Discuss Wollstonecraft’s thoughts on the education of women and the impact that can have on relationships. What does she envision the future to be like? Are we there yet? If not, why not? Discuss Nietzsche’s critique of Plato and Christianity, emphasizing his thoughts on how the value systems hold us back. What is the function and purpose of a State? What do the ancients (Plato/Aristotle) think the state should do? How is this similar or different to considerations of the early moderns (Hobbes/Locke)? Discuss the impact of role models as it relates to music (or some other related field) What messages do current mainstream acts promote and detail how this is problematic? Develop a topic of your own, with approval and write an argumentative essay that explores and defends some moral issue within that topic.