

V83.0093, Fall 2009

PHIL APPS OF COG SCI PAPER TOPICS

Due Dates October 5th, October 26th, November 9th, November 30th, December 17th, at 9.30 AM.

Late papers will be penalized one grade increment (e.g., from an A- to a B+, or from a B to a B-), for every day or part thereof that they are late.

Length Either 5 to 6 pages or (for expanded versions) 10 to 12 pages. See the syllabus for details.

Plagiarism All work submitted for this class should be your own. Any words quoted from other sources should be attributed explicitly to those sources. If you are unsure whether your use of someone else's work is legitimate, please ask me. The penalties for plagiarism include failing the class and worse.

Topics Answer one of the following questions. Don't go past the due date for the paper. But earlier topics remain on the table: for example, for the fifth paper you can answer any of these questions at all.

1. Is magenta a real color? What kinds of considerations, if any, would decide the question?
2. What, according to Kant, creates the impression of causality? In the light of modern psychological research, is anything at all right about Kant's view?
3. To what extent does Leslie's research on causation prove Hume wrong? Is there any prospect of rescuing Hume's views on causation so that they fit with Leslie's results?

Stop here for Oct 5th paper <

4. On Locke's theory of concepts, what would it take to acquire the concept 'just war'? Can it be done?
5. Can you tweak either Locke's theory or a prototype theory of concepts to fit the data produced by Keil's "transformation" studies?

6. What's wrong with the pure essentialist theory of concepts (as defined by Strevens, "The Essentialist Aspect of Naive Theories" §2 and §5.3), if anything?
7. How is our naive physics mistaken (according to Clement and others)? How do we get by in life if we make these mistakes? Why don't we get eaten or fall off cliffs much more often than we do?
8. How can children be so good at reasoning causally, if their naive physics is seriously mistaken?

Stop here for Oct 26th paper ◀

9. Why does Locke give the answer that he does to Molyneux's question? What answer do you think Kant would give, and why? In the light of modern cognitive science, whose understanding of the problem (if either) seems to be the more correct?
10. What, according to Poincaré, is the role of spatial thinking in cognition? Why do his views on the psychology of space lead him to the conclusion that space is not real? Is he right? (It might be useful to spell out the exact sense in which Poincaré thinks that space is not real.)
11. Does space have the properties we see in it? In particular, do we have reason to think that space is three-dimensional? Is the three-dimensional layout of some spatial representations in the brain relevant to answering this philosophical question?
12. What are enantiomorphs? Explain why "handedness" is not an intrinsic geometric property of an enantiomorph. What reason is there to think that we might (wrongly) see it as an intrinsic property anyway? (You may well want to discuss the Tenejapans here, though it is optional.)
13. Who is right about the representation of spatial relations, Lakoff or Jackendoff and Landau?
14. Make up your own question. But you must clear it with me first.

Stop here for Nov 9th paper ◀

15. Benjamin Lee Whorf suggested that the way we represent the world depends heavily upon the language we speak. In particular, according to Whorf, the way we individuate (divide up) the world into objects and categories of objects, and the way we organize objects in space and time, will be strongly influenced by the way in which our native language performs these "metaphysical" tasks. Evaluate this claim in the light of some results from cognitive science. (Discussing one of objects, space, or time is enough.)

16. What is Quine's view on the nature of our concept of an object? What, for Quine is the point of having object concepts? How does the empirical work on object perception conducted by Spelke and others bear on Quine's view?
17. The world around us is full of physical objects. Could we nevertheless get by without object concepts? What would we use in their place? How, if at all, would we be disadvantaged?
18. What is the relevance of Wason selection task to the claim that modus tollens is a good or reliable rule of deductive logic? (Important: your story should reference the thesis that a part of what makes a rule of logic good or reliable is the meaning of our "if/then" constructions.)

Stop here for Nov 30th paper ◀

19. Is there some kind of universal basis for certain aspects of the human moral makeup? What evidence is there for and against such a basis? (Be selective; discuss a couple of points thoroughly rather than composing a list.)
20. Explain how evolutionary considerations might help to explain some particular part of human morality (i.e., choose an aspect of morality and sketch an explanation of it). Then discuss: do these explanatory stories have any significance for the philosophical study of morality?