

PHIL 371 - Social and Political Philosophy - Essay Topics

Instructions: Your essay should be about 2,500 words in length, double spaced, and typed. You must also submit (by e-mail attachment) an (identical) electronic copy of your essay.

You must inform me of your choice of essay topic by November 1.

The essay is due on Friday, November 15. It will count for 50% of your final grade. Late essays will not be accepted. Period.

Be sure to follow the essay guidelines posted on the web page, and take note of the University regulations concerning plagiarism and fraud. You must use the texts or editions supplied (in class or by me).

1. Is Hobbes's "Leviathan" a despot?
2. According to C. B. Macpherson (in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*), Locke gives us *two* different descriptions of the state of nature; one, which is "a state of peace, good will, mutual assistance and preservation" (sec. 19), and another, which is a state "full of fears and continual dangers" where the enjoyment of rights is "very uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others" (sec. 123). Explain this hypothesis. Do you agree with Macpherson? What implications does Macpherson's view have for Locke's conception of human nature and for the necessity of life in the state?
3. Is Locke a democrat?
4. Compare and contrast the conceptions of natural law and natural rights in Hobbes and Locke. (How are these conceptions justified by each? Which is more philosophically plausible?)
5. Is Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* genuinely revolutionary? (E.g., is it more than a call for better education for women?)
6. How is the notion of virtue central to Wollstonecraft's argument in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*? (What does this mean? What assumptions does she make? Is her analysis adequate?)
7. To what extent should the will of the majority take precedence over minority interests? Is there such a thing as the "rights" of the minority and, if so, in what does it consist? Discuss this question with reference to Bernard Bosanquet and J.S. Mill.
8. How far does Jacques Maritain's account of natural law allow room for rights to freedom of conscience and speech?
9. What does Locke mean by 'natural rights'? How would Locke reply to the criticisms of natural rights raised by Jeremy Bentham? Whose position is more plausible?