

SECOND PAPER: Suggested Topics

Papers are due by Lecture 18 and should consist of at least six typed pages. (Once again, figure 320 words/page and either count the words yourself or use a spell-check program to help you out, but in any case do not put me off with a shorter paper bulked out by enormous margins and triple spacing.) PLEASE NUMBER THE PAGES; IT WILL HELP ME WHEN I WISH TO MAKE REFERENCE TO YOUR ESSAY IN MY COMMENTS. For reasons that I cannot fathom, some of you did not number the pages of your first paper despite my request that you do so. The following questions and topics are meant to be suggestive. You may modify them or invent a topic of your own, but the object of the discussion should nonetheless be one (or more) of the texts read and discussed so far this term and should deal with issues centrally relevant to both the text and to the subject-matter of our discussions in class.

Please remember that you are writing an essay, not a book-report. Your assumption must be that your reader has read the book and does not require a rehearsal of its contents. What an essay does supply is some reminder of the contents in the context of an argument about those contents; the reminder is offered in the course of explaining how one should understand or interpret those contents. Any good, short, coherent essay will be arguing something. It will help you to write the essay if you have in mind some point that you are trying to make. Such a point should not be self-evident; you should be able to state an opposing point (the one that you are denying) which is not so obvious or so silly that no one would be able to argue against it.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

Linnaeus says at one point (p. 10, bottom right) that Providence made nothing in vain (i.e., everything has a function) and also takes several occasions to rebuke us for taking a “specie-ist” view—i.e., of imposing a human viewpoint upon everything. Just so, when we see creatures whose purposes or appetites offend us and cannot grasp their function in the scheme of things, we ought to reflect that nature was not constructed to gratify the human sense of fitness. At the same time, he argues (p. 11, top right) that all things were intended for the sake of man. Is there a contradiction here?

Throughout Linnaeus’s text, there is an idea of “economy” in the everyday sense of “economical”—that the arrangement of things has been managed to avoid uselessness or waste. Comment on some examples and discuss how appropriate or inappropriate such an idea is to a conception of the natural world.

“Linnaeus seems to regard the ‘system of nature’ as a homoeostatic machine--i.e., a machine each whose parts serve a definite function the closed cycle of activities that keep the machine going. One can grasp its general nature but not all its specific features (because it was made by a Workman far superior to humans in intelligence and capacities) and we are supposed to contemplate it.” How well does this description Linnaeus's text fit it? How does it fit the Machine in Forster's story? Could the Book of the Machine be anything like Linnaeus's “Economy of Nature”, which was, in fact, meant as a secular version of a religious text?

Thoreau, in *Walden*, has a moment that seems to recall Linnaeus, when he argues (p. 92 in our edition) that the rain that waters his beans is good for him. “Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far more worth than my hoeing. If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground and destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on the uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me.” Thoreau does not eat the grass in the uplands or keep cattle, but he seems here to regard the system of nature as a good thing because he has a place in it and what destroys his crop is therefore, nonetheless, “good for him.” How close is this to Linnaeus’s view? Mankind, for

Linnaeus, has the best place in the system and has not only the license but also the obligation to tame wild nature and make it increasingly subservient to human uses, for which, he thinks, it was obviously intended. At the same time, Linnaeus draws upon the notion that the system of nature must have been created by an infinitely wise designer, because all the parts are (as we might say) so wonderfully fine-tuned. How do you suppose that would Linnaeus confront the objection (it is a very modern objection and would never have occurred to anyone before the twentieth century) that either nature was not “fine-tuned” to begin with or that the course of human progress is bound to upset God’s “fine-tuning” sooner or later.

Linnaeus did not, in fact, think that his conceptions challenged the essential spirit of Judeo-Christian religious convictions, although they do not accord with a literal reading of the account of creation in Genesis. How do they accord with the spirit of the temptation-story in Genesis, with its curse upon the ground and the expulsion from the Garden?

Outline the course of discussion in Hume's *Dialogues*. (This is quite distinct from providing a summary. Who speaks? What do they stand for? How does the discussion proceed? What are the major topics and why are they raised in the order in which Hume presents them?)

More simply: Cleanthes argues for the existence of God. Philo, under the guise of supporting Demea, employs a variety of arguments to make his position look absurd. Yet Cleanthes sticks with his position nonetheless. How would you characterize Cleanthes's view? Is it a sensible view? Philo, at the end, denies that he meant all he said and generalizes about the nature of the quarrel between them. In the concluding passage of the book (not included in our excerpt) Hume has the narrator say that there was much to be said for Philo’s assault on belief but that Cleanthes had the best position. Most modern commentators on this text suppose that Hume (a well-known skeptic about the possibility of arriving at absolute truths of any kind) must have been on Philo’s side and that he put this into the *Dialogues* (which he withheld from publication during his lifetime) because he did not want to offend or anger the religious sensibilities of his readers. What is your view?

What is the force or validity of Cleanthes’s claim that without anthropomorphism, the worship of God is atheism unaware of itself? What is the force or validity of Philo’s counter-claim that if we must think of God as an engineer, he (or she or it) may be a blundering one or one indifferent to the happiness of the living things that he created?

Two issues provide starting-points for the arguments in Hume’s *Dialogues*. (1) The first concerns the distinction between truths that are established *a priori*, that is, prior to empirical investigation, and truths established *a posteriori*, that is, as a result of empirical investigation. The former are “prior” not in the sense that we know them without experiencing anything but in the sense that we cannot validate them by experiment because we must assume them when we establish truths of any kind by experiment; to attempt to prove them by appealing to the results of experience is therefore to argue in a circle. We may not be aware that we assume these truths when we argue *a posteriori*, but if we try to deny them, we fall into a contradiction. Because most of us are casual in our thinking, it often requires a philosopher (like Socrates or Descartes) to bring the existence of *a priori* truths to our attention. (Descartes offered the most famous example: He argued that you cannot think that you do not exist because you cannot think that you are not thinking—in Latin, *cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am). (2) The second issue concerns the notion of a *functional arrangement* between or among things, referred to in the text by the Aristotelian phrase “the order, arrangement, or adjustment of final causes”. Cleanthes maintains that ideas, or mental things, have this functional arrangement inherently or of themselves and that material things do not; for material things to have this functional arrangement, it must be impressed upon them.

Choose any part of the text (e.g., Part III, in which Cleanthes offers the examples of a voice in the heavens and of a library that reproduces itself, as if its contents were a collection of plants in a hothouse,

or Part VIII, in which Philo revives Lucretius's theory that the earth came into existence by mere chance) and discuss the place of one or both these issues in the background of the argument.

Robinson Crusoe has several meditations on the notion that certain things useful in society have no utility in the state of nature—money is the major example. A similar distinction between the natural and the artificial is drawn by Rousseau. Do they square with each other? Comment.

Later in his career, Rousseau wrote a novel called *Emile*, which largely concerns the education of a young man at the hands of an educational reformer, who was modeled in many respects upon Rousseau and whose ideas about education the novel is meant to advance. One of these ideas is that an ideal pupil will have only one teacher (modeled after Rousseau himself—who else?) and read only one work of fiction: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Comment. In the light of his essay on inequality, why, do you suppose, did Rousseau admire this book so much?

Rousseau argues that previous authors describing the natural condition of mankind have simply projected the capacities of civilized mankind into their picture of it. How relevant is this criticism in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*--a book that Rousseau did not have in mind when he made it? Not to put too fine a point on it—Rousseau's text was one of the first (if not the first) to argue that many capacities of human beings come into being only in connection with the development of certain kinds of rule-governed behaviors practiced by members of a population, like the capacity to reckon with numbers, the capacity to grasp the meaning of various abstract conceptions (like *reputation* and *authority*), even—in a passage that we did not read in our abridged text—the capacity to use speech itself. Previous writers saw nothing particularly wrong with endowing mankind by its nature with some limited abilities of speech and calculation, some feelings of pride and self-importance; but Rousseau will have none of it. Defoe saw nothing wrong with talking about Robinson “reduced to a state of nature” when he was surrounded by all the apparatus of civilization; but we have to puzzle about this, in good part thanks to Rousseau. Comment in any way that seems appropriate to the text or texts in question.

Compare Rousseau's natural man with Montaigne's “Cannibals” in a way that shows up the differences in the conception and comment upon them. Many of Rousseau's contemporary detractors thought that an absurd conclusion would follow from Rousseau's argument—namely, that we all ought to go back into the forests and live on berries and nuts. Rousseau had contempt for those who read his text in this way. Was he right or wrong about this? Can we force a similar implication on Montaigne? Rousseau speaks often of “artificial man” (meaning, of course, civilized man, as opposed to “natural man”). His concluding paragraphs describes the reaction of a “Caribbean savage” to the life that is lived by a European “minister of state”—which is to say, those at the highest reaches of government and authority in advanced nations of the world, who are here presented as the epitomes of artificial humanity. What is the essence of the “artificial” as Rousseau understands it? Forster's Kuno speaks disparagingly of life in the Machine, with its “artificial air, artificial life, artificial peace”. Does Forster's “Machine Stops” depict artificial people? How do the assumptions behind Forster's text agree with or differ from Rousseau's conception?

Again, in connection with the contrast between the “Caribbean savage” and the European man of authority: As he traces the course of civilization, Rousseau says that it all ends up with “man becoming a tyrant over himself and over nature.” What do you think Rousseau meant by this striking phrase? Does he mean that some men tyrannize others? Or that as a member of civilized society, one becomes a tyrant over oneself? Or both? And what of tyranny over nature? What is this condition and how does it relate to self-tyranny in Rousseau's argument?

Exposit the course of Rousseau's argument and say something about the relationship (or lack thereof) linking the major points that Rousseau wishes to establish. One result of the text was that it became a byword among those calling for revolution to effect the abolition of royalty, nobility, all inherited wealth and property. Rousseau was appalled at this appropriation of his argument. Comment.

Wordsworth writes much about how his early years exposed him to the formative powers of nature: "Fair seed-time had my soul, fostered alike by beauty and by fear..." Taking some examples, discuss how Wordsworth believes that the fostering of nature and the natural landscape affected his course of development and tie this in with any other aspect of the poem as a whole.

Consider *The Prelude*, Book Three, lines 170-190. A good deal of the import of the whole poem is in this passage--here the insistence that extraordinary things were done by every soul (and so why aren't they ordinary, if everyone does them?) to themselves, that we are all heroes, that heroic verse should celebrate this kind of heroic action, that to tell most of what was done is beyond the power of language, that each of us lives alone, and that poetry puts us in touch with what we can't say about ourselves. There is much along these lines, elsewhere--most particularly in the frequent insistence upon the extraordinary nature of ordinary sights and readily accessible experiences. (E.g., Bk I, ll 586-8: "...the earth and common face of Nature spoke to me rememberable things..." A good deal of what Wordsworth is about gets carried as well by lines 312-22 in Book II as well. Comment upon the relation between this collection of ideas and the poem as a whole.

At the very end of the chapter on "Spring", Thoreau argues for the need to have human habitations in close contact with wilderness. One reason he offers is that it is good to see that "Nature is so rife with life that myriads [i.e., uncountable numbers] can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another." (This thought returns at length on p. 211, with talk about a dead horse.) Compare with Linnaeus on this theme. Alternatively, isolate four or five moments when the value of using nature as a refuge from civilization is elucidated by Thoreau and discuss their relation to the text in general.

Analyze any three images or passages from Wordsworth, showing their differences and similarities in respect of their relation to the overriding themes of his poetry. Or: Compare in point of similarity and difference Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* and Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight* in any way that seems profitable for understanding them.

Compare Thoreau's remarks about cooperation and living together in "Economy" (starting on p. 53. in the Signet edition) with the view taken of the value of solitude in the chapter of that name and elsewhere in the text. What would Thoreau make of the kind of isolation in Forster's "The Machine Stops"? Since the opposite of "isolation" in these two text would be designated by a different word, is the notion of isolation the same?

The words in which Thoreau described his reasons for his two years of life in the woods are famous: "I went to the woods because I wished deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not live." Comment on how well the book does this. Taking Thoreau's comments on housing in "Economy", compare his view of habitation with what *Robinson Crusoe* implies about them. Compare Thoreau's insistence on building your own house, his recommendations for hands-on education, and his invectives against the division of labor in modern society (all found in the chapter on "Economy") with the need that Robinson Crusoe had to perform all labors--e.g., as in bread-making--for himself. Could Thoreau have simply distributed copies of *Robinson Crusoe* in place of writing his own book in order to communicate the results of what he calls "his experiment"? How do Thoreau's professed reasons compare with the benefits that (so far as you can tell) Defoe thought his readers might derive from reading *Robinson*?

Compare the attitudes of Rousseau and Thoreau towards nature in the light of Rousseau's remark: "Granted that nature intended us to be healthy, I dare almost affirm that a state of reflection is a state against nature and that the man who meditates is a depraved animal."

Compare Wordsworth's idea of "solitude" in Bk IV, lines 354 onwards with Thoreau's; or Wordsworth's sense of the incommunicable nature of our inner thoughts with Thoreau's quarrels with conversation, neighborliness, interest in news and so forth, or Wordsworth's sense of passiveness in receiving the care of nature (various parts of the Prelude, but also the short poems in the handout discussed in our introductory class) with Thoreau's sense that (p. 79.), he "grew like corn in the night". How (if at all) do you reconcile Wordsworth's sense of the unity of the self, despite "discordant elements", with Thoreau's notion of the "doubleness" of his self (pp. 94-4.).

"Both Wordsworth and Thoreau conceive of Nature as something in relation to which mankind can find something that civilization (or modern civilization) cannot offer. Yet they think of nature differently, imagine encounters with it differently, think of nature has having effects in childhood differently and want something different from it in adult life." Comment.

Thoreau says that in cutting down the pines to make his cabin (p. 33.), he became a friend to them. Elucidate in the light of his attitude towards the natural world and humanity's place in it. Could Robinson Crusoe have made this remark?

Take any five "sayings" from Thoreau (almost every page is awash with them), use them as the occasion to say something about Thoreau taste for epigram and paradox, and tie them in with the theme of the book. E.g., Thoreau says of not having a doormat: "It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil." (p. 50.) Why is a doormat evil? Or: "A man may sit as many risks as he may run." (p. 106--this comes from a passage that you weren't assigned, but the point of this question is to get you to say something about the style of the text, not to elucidate these passages in particular.) Or (of buying a farm and then selling it back again): "I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to my poverty." (p. 60.) Or (of a circling hawk): "It was not lonely but it made all the earth lonely beneath it." (p. 210.) Or (of a rainstorm): "Take shelter under a cloud and be everywhere at home." (p. 141; this actually collapses two distinct sentences into one.) Or (of a share-cropping farmer): "An honest, hard-working, but shiftless man plainly was John Field." (p. 139.) "Men have become the tools of their tools." (p. 30.) Or (the most famous): "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." (p. 10.)

Compare the two longish passages on the railroad in Thoreau (roundabout pp. 67 and 84 in the Signet edition) and discuss the apparent contradictions in Thoreau's use of the railroad as a symbol for issues in his overall position.

Wordsworth spends a good deal of time talking about farmers and shepherds, the chief inhabitants of the rural landscape of his childhood and youth, and he obviously views the domestication of nature (which may, perhaps, be opposed to the *conquest* of nature by science and industry in today's world) as right and proper for mankind, opposing the life of the rural population to the "unnatural" life of cities. Thoreau, in contrast, doesn't care for farmers and farming--and not only Irish farmers, but all farmers. His model is the sojourning Indian, who live by a subsistence economy, not the cash-crop farmer--who even tries to harvest the ice on Walden pond! How does this difference relate to other differences in their respective ideas of Nature?

Compare the long passage in Ch IV, "Sounds" in *Walden* (p. 87, our edition) with Gilbert White's account of echoes and use this as an opening into discussing the differences and similarities of Thoreau's and White's sense of nature.

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