

Choose one of the two topics below for your paper

1. Knowledge & reality: nature

This essay track explores ancient ways of understanding the deep structure of the natural world, the ontological status of everyday objects in that universe, and whether (and how) we can know about these things. Note: picking this essay track means committing to the same investigative track which will be further developed in future essays as we cover later philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

Heraclitus and Democritus: whose view is preferable, and why?

Intro.

This paragraph should be a thumbnail, or summary, of the gist of your essay – and only the gist of your essay! Meaning, for instance, since you will assuredly not be discussing people from the dawn of time wondering what the nature of the universe is, this sort of sentence should not make an appearance in your introduction, please! This paragraph also must contain a thesis: the position you take on the question that precedes this very paragraph.

Section I: Heraclitus

You don't actually need a Roman numeral "I" to signpost this part of your paper, but this will be the first "part" of your essay proper, even if it's only 2 paragraphs long, in which you discuss Heraclitus. Give a paragraph explaining his view of what an everyday object is. Use an example in this paragraph to make his view clear. The example should accessorize, but not dominate, your discussion. Meaning: if your paragraph has 6 sentences, 5 of which discuss an example and only 1 discusses the philosophy, that is an instance where the example dominates. Show your reader that you understand the philosophical generality before bringing that understanding down to a case in point. If it gets to be a question whether the example is weighing too heavily – but you're really grooving on the example you discuss – that's all good, but try this: give the philosophical exegesis its own paragraph, so that it is grounded and stands alone, and then turn to a separate paragraph to focus on your example properly.

Second, and with a separate paragraph, explain the roles of reason and observation in coming to know the true nature of everyday things for Heraclitus. To what extent do our observations or perceptions match up with the outside world, and to what extent do they not? After focusing on the philosophy, return to the example you discussed above and apply your analysis here to that.

Section II: Democritus

Again, you won't need the Roman numeral, but now your paper should switch gears to consider a different philosopher. This section of your essay should structurally parallel the first section, but with coverage of Democritus instead of Heraclitus. Consider in your discussion whether and how Democritus's view may be seen as a critique and continuation upon Heraclitus's.

Section III: Compare, contrast, evaluate.

Compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of these two views. Do, and if so how, they mark an advancement over a Homeric worldview? Whose view do you think better able to withstand critique? Why? In judging these views' capacity to withstand critique, try and not side with either view because it more closely resembles how we believe the world is today. I challenge you instead to not privilege our own way of perceiving the world, but try to wrap your mind around what the world is like as conceived through Heraclitus's and Democritus's understandings. Try and put yourself inside those understandings, and look out at the world around you: how does it reveal itself to you, observationally and rationally? Is it too weird to be acceptable? Is it helpful? Somehow appropriate? Remember, try and not take our contemporary world view for granted as you consider why you respond the way you do. Think it through, and carefully explain your judgment to your reader.

A challenging alternative: Instead of either Heraclitus or Democritus (but not both), use Parmenides. This is more challenging because it will expect the writer to lean more heavily on primary sources (in the Baird and Kaufmann) and perhaps other secondary sources, as our set secondary source, Irwin, does not discuss Parmenides much.

2. Knowledge & reality: morality

This essay track explores ancient ways of understanding the deep structure of the universe as it admits – or doesn't admit – of an objective moral dimension, and to whatever extent morality does function, how we might know it. Note: picking this essay track means committing to the same investigative track which will be further developed in future essays as we cover later philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

Are conventionalism and moral skepticism an improvement over the naturalist and Homeric moral views?

Intro

This paragraph should be a thumbnail, or summary, of the gist of your essay – and only the gist of your essay! Meaning, for instance, since you will assuredly not be discussing people from the dawn of time wondering what the nature of the universe is, this sort of sentence should not make an appearance in your introduction, please! This paragraph also must contain a thesis: the position you take on the question that precedes this very paragraph.

Section I: Democritus.

You don't actually need a Roman numeral "I" to signpost this part of your paper, but this will be the first "part," even if it's only 2 paragraphs long, of your essay proper, in which you discuss Democritus. Give a paragraph explaining his distinction between appearance and reality regarding everyday things. Use an example in this paragraph to make his view clear. The example should accessorize, but not dominate, your discussion. Meaning: if your paragraph has 6 sentences, 5 of which discuss an example and only 1 discusses the philosophy, that is an instance where the example dominates. Show your reader that you understand the philosophical generality before bringing that understanding down to a case in point. If it gets to be a question whether the example is weighing too heavily – but you're really grooving on the example you discuss – that's all good, but try this: give the philosophical exegesis its own paragraph, so that it is grounded and stands alone, and then turn to a separate paragraph to focus on your example properly.

Second, and with a separate paragraph, discuss how Democritus's distinction between appearance and reality leads to moral conventionalism. In this paragraph, consider what it means, for Democritus, to say that something is morally right or morally wrong. Is it possible, on Democritus's understanding, for a state's law to be unjust? What if someone else disagrees with that judgment; what does that mean?

Section II: Protagoras and Gorgias

Again, you won't need the Roman numeral, but now your paper should switch gears to consider different philosophers. This section of your essay should structurally parallel the first section, but with coverage of Protagoras and Gorgias instead of Democritus. Consider in your discussion whether and how later workings that build upon Democritus's naturalism pave the way to moral skepticism. Reference the example you used before to help make your discussion clear.

Section III: Evaluate

What do the views of Democritus, Protagoras, and Gorgias mean for ethics and ethical knowledge? Do you think these findings superior to the views on ethics held by the naturalists, and by the holders of a Homeric view? Defend and explain.

Further details: The instructions have gone on rather nearly as long as your essays should be! I expect your paper to be no shorter than 3 and no longer than 4 full pages in length. The margins will be 1 inch all around. You should use a standard font such as Times New Roman or Helvetica, in a size of 12. The paper should be double-spaced. A separate cover sheet will be the sole location where your name appears.

You are encouraged to make direct reference to citations from our texts (Irwin, Baird and Kaufmann), but you should not use any long, block, quotes. For citations, use in-text parenthetical references (for instance, "blah blah blah," (Irwin, p. 24).) Do not use material – directly or indirectly – from the internet, period. This isn't to say you shouldn't consult outside readings to help with your

comprehension, but I do not expect any outside sources to appear in your text. If outside sources do make an unfortunate appearance in your text without attribution, rest assured that you will have earned yourself at a minimum, a grade of zero for the essay. If you are keen to use a secondary source not on our reading list, clear it with me first. If you are keen to write on a different topic entirely, I may be fine with that but you must clear your alternative with me first.

For further information such as writing tips, grading guidelines, the late policy and my policy on typos and grammar, see the syllabus.