

The midterm test of Wednesday, Feb. 21 will and in-class test, taking the place of lecture that day, in our normal room at the normal time for lecture. It will be a closed book, closed note, exam consisting of essay questions, and will cover Descartes and Leibniz. You will write your answers in bluebooks provided. Do not bring any exam books into the class with you, especially if your method of studying for tests involves writing notes in exam books (of all things!). Bring a pen or pencil, and a couple of extras (in case).

Different students excel at test of different formats. To accommodate that, the midterm and the final exam will be quite different. For the final exam, you will be given well in advance of the final a list of questions from which the questions on the final will be chosen. For the midterm, by contrast, the questions will not be distributed in advance. You will be given some choice which questions to answer, so there will be more questions on the exam than you will be answering, and you will have to answer two questions. Your choices may be structured to prevent you from answering two of them that are too close to each other in subject matter. For instance, you may have to answer one Descartes question and one Leibniz question. So, for example, one possibility is that there are three questions on the test, and you are told to choose two of them to answer. Or perhaps there will be two Descartes questions and two Leibniz questions, and you are directed to answer one question about each philosopher. There are many possibilities, but what you know (well, insofar as such things about the external world – and especially about its future - can be known!) is that you will have to answer two questions (and that should give you an idea of how long your answers will have to be), and that you will have some choice.

What will the questions be like? They will focus on the same issues we have focused on in lecture. My goal in formulating the questions is not for them to cause you to think, "Wow! I never expected him to ask that!", but to think, "Well, of course, he would ask that!" They will ask you to explain the issues we have discussed in lecture. Some may also ask you to evaluate certain issues, and to defend the position you take. It will be important to read the question carefully, and provide just what it asks for.

Here is an example of the type of question you might be asked. (This particular question may, or may not, appear on the midterm.)

Sample Question. In Meditation III, Descartes gives an argument for the existence of God whose main premise is that Descartes has an idea of God. Explain that argument. What other premises does Descartes employ to reach his conclusion? Could Descartes use reasoning parallel to this argument to just as well establish the existence of things other than God from the mere fact that he has ideas of these other things, or does the argument apply only to God? Explain. At what point do you think this argument is most vulnerable to criticism? Critically evaluate the argument in light of that criticism.

Note that this question asks you not only to explain the argument in question, but to identify what you think is its greatest vulnerability, and then to evaluate the argument in light of that criticism: Does the argument succeed in the face of that criticism, or not? And why? Give a sensible reason or two to support your answer. But, given time constraints, remember that you will have to be brief. I think you will find this test to be a real sprint. Given time constraints, it would certainly not be best to compare the criticism you think is most pressing with other potential criticisms, in order to argue that the one you've picked is the most pressing. Rather, it seems best to just pick the one criticism you think is most important, and explain it as carefully as time allows. (Note that this should be possible even if you think there is no criticism against the argument that is cogent in the end: Even such a student should be able to identify, from among the several, according to them, weak potential criticisms, one that is less weak than the others.) Then make some intelligent-but-quick remarks defending the position you take on whether how the argument stands in light of the criticism.

Time constraints will force you to choose among the many points you wish to make. Excellent tests will be those that choose the points that are most important toward answering the questions well. Note that these should not just be the most insightful points you have to make in the rough vicinity of the subject matter of the question, but rather the points that best address the particular question you are answering. You will be evaluated on how well you answer the question, not generally on how much knowledge of the rough subject matter of the question you demonstrate.