

The idea behind this assignment is to introduce you to the methods and aims of the History of Philosophy. History of Philosophy is not the same as History proper. Historians care about what happened and why it happened (i.e. who fought whom, and why). When we do History of Philosophy we care about who thought what, why they thought it, why it matters to philosophy today, and whether they were right.

For this assignment I want you to explore the thought of a particular historical figure, explain their significance, and give a critical account of an argument they give for a key philosophical position related to the theme of the course. It's up to you to choose which figure, and you are welcome to use any of the scientists and philosophers we will encounter before the midterm (up to Week 8).

Here are some detailed guidelines for this assignment. The first part will be research driven. You will first present your work as detailed notes written in response to the guidelines below. Once you have these notes ready, part two of the assignment will involve writing an essay of 1500-2500 words about your chosen author.

1. Read a primary source (i.e. a book or treatise written by your chosen author) in more detail. The further readings I have posted are a good place to start but feel free to email me for other suggestions or to check you have made a good choice. You will need to read further than just the brief extracts given in SZE.
2. As you go, highlight key claims and try to identify the arguments for those claims. You will be looking for an argument that has philosophical significance (ask me if you are unsure what this means) and can be easily given in premise-conclusion form.
3. Try to understand the historical context of the author. Who influenced his views? Who were his opponents? His allies? What was the work you are reading intended to achieve? You will likely need to read some recent secondary scholarship to be able to answer these questions.
4. Identify a key conclusion that is argued for in the text. Explain why the conclusion is compelling: (e.g.) what it explains, what it relies on, what role it plays in the author's work. Explain why the conclusion is important historically (i.e. in the context in which the author was writing) and why it is significant today. Who, historically, opposed this conclusion? What arguments did they offer against it?
5. Now present the argument for this conclusion in premise-conclusion form and give a logical analysis of the argument form. If you think the conclusion is true, check whether the argument is valid and sound. If you think the conclusion is false, explain why the argument is invalid, and/or which premises are false.