

HPS/PI 122 Fall 2012
Third Homework Assignment

Instructions: Write an argumentative paper of 1,500 to 2,500 words (3-6 single spaced typed pages). The general guidelines are as follows. First, your paper must critically engage one or more of the topics we have discussed in the first six weeks of class. Second, your paper should not *merely* summarize the position(s) of some of the authors you discuss or describe some factual or technical details; it should in some way locate ideas relative to each other, synthesize those ideas, criticize them, defend them against important objections, or develop them in your own way. Third, the topic of your paper should be of an appropriate scope given the length constraints.

Due Date: You must submit your paper to me by email before midnight on Thursday evening, December 13th. Extensions will be granted only in special cases.

Grading: This paper is worth 40% of your final grade, and will receive a numerical grade out of 40.

Collaboration: Collaboration on this assignment is encouraged. Students are free to discuss the topics with one another, read each other's papers, and offer suggestions. Any suggestions or ideas contributed by another student must be acknowledged just as you would acknowledge an idea taken from any other source. The only restriction is that each student must write their own paper containing their own ideas and words.

References: All sources used in the writing of your paper must be properly referenced. This applies to material in the course readings, other published material, lecture notes from this class and other classes, material 'published' on the internet, and ideas contributed verbally by other students. Information about proper procedures and formats for references is included in my handout "How not to get BOC'ed," which is posted on the course website. Further information is also available at <http://www.its.caltech.edu/~words/plagiarism/index.html>. Failure to follow these guidelines may result in a lowered grade or even an automatic F in the course; it may also lead to charges being brought before the Board of Control. If you have any questions about these issues, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Advice on Writing a Philosophy Paper: The course website contains several handouts on writing a philosophy paper, as well as links to websites on the topic.

Reading Drafts: I am happy to read drafts of papers, on a time-permitting, first-come, first-served basis. If you get a draft to me early on Monday the 10th, it is likely that I can get it back to you by Tuesday evening. Please indicate whether you would like to receive detailed comments, or only a general sense of whether you are on the right track. Please request the former only if you actually plan to make substantial revisions to your paper based on the feedback.

Topics: The topics offered below are given as suggestions: you may address one of them as is, you may modify one of these topics, or you may create your own topic. Whatever topic you may choose, your essay should have a title that clearly and accurately reflects what the essay is about. It is strongly recommended that your opening paragraph make clear what the conclusion of your paper is and give as much of the key argument for this conclusion as possible. For example, do not write a paper with the title “On Confirmation” and then proceed to simply talk about the confirmation relation. Better would be a title of “Why there is no such thing as objective confirmation” with an opening paragraph that explains why this is true. If you would like further readings that may be helpful in addressing some of these topics, I recommend starting with the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. I have also put up a number of additional readings that are directly relevant to the papers we have read in class, though it is not always clear exactly how they are relevant without some research. Asking me for advice for what to look at is also a very good idea.

Suggested topics:

Sober claims that when we have good reasons for assigning particular prior probabilities in a case, then we should be Bayesians about confirmation. When we don't, then we should be likelihoodists. Is this a good view?

Bayesian confirmation theory implies that it is possible for evidence to confirm a hypothesis in isolation. Likelihoodism claims that confirmation is fundamentally contrastive. What is the better view?

There are some reasons to think that in some circumstances, ideally rational Bayesian agents will converge on the same posterior probabilities even given very different priors. Can this lead to an appropriate kind of objectivity for scientific investigation?

Glymour claims that the fact that good scientists in the past have done good scientific work without using probabilistic notions of confirmation is some reason to think that scientific methodology can't require us to be Bayesians. Is this right?

Is simplicity a problem for probabilistic theories of evidence?

What is the status of the problem of old evidence?

Maher claims that we can have an objective notion of confirmation based on shared background assumptions of rational agents. Is this plausible?

Christensen thinks that measure S^* is a good quantitative measure of confirmation. Is this right?

Eells and Fitelson argue that the best measure of confirmation would exhibit Hypothesis Symmetry, but not Evidence Symmetry or Commutativity Symmetry. Is this right?

Should Sally Clark have gone to jail?

How should the court system use statistical inferences?

Looking back on the possible foundations of subjective probability, is there one view in particular of what subjective probability is that seems especially good or especially bad when combined with thinking about confirmation?