

Sample Essay Topics for Ancient Philosophy

Richard Lawrence

Summer 2015

1. In the *Meno*, Socrates asks Meno what virtue is. Meno proposes that virtue is “to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them” (77b). Socrates argues that the first part of this definition is not distinctive of virtue, and the second part is incomplete. Drawing on the text in 77b–79e, reconstruct Socrates’ arguments in your own words. How does Socrates show that desiring good things is common to both virtuous and non-virtuous people? Meno attempts to complete the second part of his definition by adding that it is only virtuous to acquire good things when they are acquired *justly and piously* (78d–e). Why does this addition make Meno’s proposal an unsatisfactory answer to Socrates’ original question?
2. In *Republic* IV, Plato argues that reason and appetite are different parts of the soul on the basis of the observation that “some thirsty people sometimes refuse to drink” (439c). Reconstruct and evaluate his argument for this distinction between reason and appetite, drawing on the text in 436a–439e. Why does Plato think it is important that “the object of thirst as such is, in the nature of things, simply drink as such” (439a)? Consider what this claim implies about ‘thirsty people who don’t wish to drink’ and how it affects the status of Plato’s conclusion.
3. In *Physics* II, Aristotle offers a definition of nature and a theory of the types of causes that operate in nature. Like Plato, Aristotle thinks that *form* is one type of cause in nature, but he also thinks that *matter* and *motion* are types of causes. Drawing on the text in *Physics* II.1–3 and II.7, explain what these three types of cause are, and give examples of how each can be used to explain something in nature. (You do not need to discuss final causes.) How might Plato object to the idea that matter and motion are causes? Formulate a problem for Aristotle’s theory of causation based on Plato’s discussion in the *Phaedo*, drawing on the text in 96e–99b and 100d–101c. How do you think Aristotle should respond to this problem?