The final piece of homework for this course is the long essay, a 4 to 6-page essay on one of the topics that we have addressed in class. There are still more topics to come, and you are under no obligation to select a topic we’ve addressed to date; still, it is never too early to start cultivating a long essay. Keep in mind that you will be asked to prepare a one-page statement of your paper’s thesis and a standard form representation of your paper’s argument, to be submitted in class on Tuesday, 27 November. That’s a bit over a month away.

To get things rolling, I have prepared a few sample paper topics. These include topics for readings we have not yet done. I strongly recommend that you select your own paper topics and do not choose a topic from this list—the more you identify with and care about your paper topic, the better your paper will be. But these are available for your use, and they should give you an idea of the grain size of the topic I’m interested in. These topic statements are not intended to outline paper structure; rather, they are intended only to call attention to thematic aspects that could make for an interesting paper. Please keep in mind that the papers you write should be argumentative, i.e., you need to make arguments in them for your own conclusions. It will not be enough just to engage in exposition of an author’s argument(s).

1. In your view, what are the primary facts of our mental life that a theory of mind must explain? Detail each of the facts you list, describing it as precisely as you can and arguing for its inclusion in the list. Should the theory that accounts for these things be a unified one? Why? Is there something about the elements on the list or about the reasons why they're there that forces a unified account?

2. Nagel argues that life is absurd for us because of capacities that are essential to human existence. This absurdity, however, should not drive us to rash action; rather, we should “approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair” (727). Write a paper in which you reconstruct his argument, criticize it, and then offer an argument of your own for the opposite conclusion. You can help yourself to insights from Taylor, if you wish, or provide an account of your own. Try to keep Nagel's voice in mind as you do this—how would he respond to your argument?

3. In “The Value of Philosophy,” Russell contends that “the true philosophic contemplation ... finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self, in everything that magnifies the objects contemplated, and thereby the subject contemplating” (4). What does he mean by this? Develop an argument in which you either build on this conception of philosophy or argue against it. (For
instance, you might be more inclined to agree with Smart about the role of philosophy in eliminating “nonsense”.

4. Gettier critiques the Traditional Analysis of Knowledge (TAK) with two cases. Discuss what these cases have in common and how exactly they work to undermine the TAK. What in particular do they target in the TAK? Do you believe the Gettier cases really are counterexamples? Supply an argument for your take on this situation; in particular, if you think Gettier is off target, defend that view, and if you think he is on-target, argue for a conclusion that you think a fan of the TAK should draw from this.

5. Explain Cartesian dualism. What is the view? How does Descartes argue for the distinction between the mind and the body? The argument for the existence of the body is a corollary of what argument? Name one problem for the view, develop it, and give the Cartesian response. Do you believe that the Cartesian response is effective? (This could be done with Ryle and Behaviorism or Armstrong and Physical-State Materialism.)

6. Armstrong argues that mental states are states of the central nervous system. Why does he adopt this view? What are his arguments for it? Develop the Identity Materialist view and at least one argument for it, and then consider at least one objection to it. How might a proponent of this view respond? Develop their response and then assess the quality of that response.

7. Hume is a compatibilist, which is to say that he believes one can affirm both universal determinism (i.e., necessity) and freedom (i.e., liberty) at the same time. Develop and discuss Hume’s view of the problem of free will. What is the problem he sees with typical formulations of this problem? What do you make of his solution to the problem?

8. Develop and defend your own theory of freedom and free will. (You must see me and talk with me if you select this topic.)

9. ____ Your Essay Topic Here ____