First Paper Assignment

Write a paper, following all of the instructions below. E-mail it as an attachment to david.braun@rochester.edu by 9:00 am, Friday, September 28. Late papers will be strongly penalized. Please keep an electronic copy of your paper, for your own protection.

Format Instructions

Your paper must be a Word (.doc, not .docx) or pdf document. It should be about 4 pages or 1,000 words long (upper-level writing students and graduate students: 5 pages, 1,200 words). It must be produced in 12-point font, double-spaced, with one-inch margins on all sides. Its pages must be numbered by your word-processor. Your e-mail address must appear on the first page. Upper-Level Writing students must mark their papers with the phrase “Upper-Level Writing”.

Content Instructions

Write your paper about the selection by Robert Stainton on the following page. Follow the instructions below.

0. Provide required citations (see the Citations handout).
1. Write your paper so that it can be understood by an undergraduate philosophy major who is not in this class. It should have a standard essay format, except for a displayed argument with numbered premises and conclusion. It should have at least one introductory sentence. Make the introductory sentence (or sentences) brief and to the point. Do not begin your paper with a sentence like “Since the dawn of time, humans have wondered about the nature of meaning.” Instead, begin with something along the lines of “This paper critically examines an argument by Robert Stainton against a certain ideational theory of meaning.” Your paper should also have sentences that connect together the paragraphs in which you extract, explain, and evaluate the argument.

2. Describe the theory that Stainton is criticizing: state the claims of the theory that are relevant to his criticism (and only those claims).

3. Extract an argument from the selection (concentrate on the last paragraph, except for the last two sentences inside parentheses), and display it in numbered premise-conclusion form. The argument should be valid. It may (but need not) have subconclusions. Every simple argument in it should have one of the forms given on the Arguments handout (MP, MT, etc.). There should be no idle premises. The main conclusion must be a sentence of the form “X is false” or “X is not true”, where “X” is the name of the view you described earlier. It would be wise to make the argument relatively short and simple.

4. Explain the argument line-by-line. That is, explain the technical terms (if any) that occur in it, and give reasons in favor of each of the premises (Stainton’s, if he offers any). Write your explanation in ordinary paragraph form: do not number its parts or display it. However, be clear about which line you are explaining at all times.

5. Evaluate the argument. First, for each simple argument in your argument, state whether it is valid and name the form that it exemplifies. (Each should be valid and exemplify one of the forms: see (3) above). Next, present exactly one objection to the argument, even if you think it is sound. Present the strongest objection to the argument that you can
think of. (It may help to imagine how a defender of the idea theory would respond to the argument.)  Be sure to specify which premise you are criticizing.

6. Briefly describe how Stainton might reply to your objection.

7. After considering the above objection and reply, give a concluding evaluation of Stainton’s argument: is it sound?

Some Advice
You can choose between two strategies when extracting an argument from the following text:  (1) You can try to state all or most of the author’s argument in the numbered premises and conclusions. The resulting argument might be rather complex.  (2) You can state only the highlights or main points in the numbered premises and conclusions, and state the rest of the author’s argument in your line-by-line explanation of the argument.  It may be wiser to follow the second strategy.

The Author and the Selection
Robert Stainton is a professor of philosophy at University of Western Ontario.  He has published numerous articles in the philosophy of language.  The following selection comes from:


Stainton refers to the following book.


Here’s a different view: linguistic meaning comes from pairing expressions with something “in the mind”.  This is the Idea Theory of Meaning.  In this section you will encounter three versions of it.  According to what I’ll call the mental image version, meaning derives from (something like) pictures in the head.

. . . Taking mental images–and not just visual images–to be meaning-givers yields the first version of the Idea theory of Meaning.  Here’s an example, culled from Martin 1987, 22:

I assume that right now you are not having a pork chop dinner, but you are perfectly able to understand (or meaningfully say) the word ‘pork chop’, because the word calls to mind the sort of sense experiences that you have had when a pork chop was actually before you.

The suggestion is that there are mental images associated with actual pork chop encounters.  It is these which, collectively, give meaning to the term ‘pork chop’.

The mental image view is obviously inadequate . . . [E]ven if association with mental images is meaning-giving, only some associations count.  Certain associations between words and mental images are accidental.  That is, they are not a matter of meaning.  Take Martin’s example: there are lots of “mental images” I associate with the word ‘pork chop’.  I associate it with a stomach ache I once got from an undercooked pork chop; I associate it with sights from my Aunt’s kitchen (she always makes pork chops), and so on.  But these remembered sensations–despite their association with the word–aren’t part of the meaning of ‘pork chop’.  Nor is there any obvious way of separating associations like these, which aren’t meaning-giving, from those images that purportedly do give the meaning.  At least, not without presupposing the very thing being sought: an account of meaning.  (Also consider that if, for some peculiar reason, I mentally picture a banana while saying ‘Hand me an apple’, what I request is nevertheless an apple, not a banana.  In which case, it would appear that my world ‘apple’ means APPLE regardless of what image I token while saying it.)  [Stainton 1996, pp. 100-101: ellipses and editing due to David Braun.]