

Armstrong Arts and Humanities Essay Competition 2025

Essay Questions

1. **"If no one is truly responsible for their actions, then there is no justification for punishing people". Discuss.**

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Human, Social and Political Sciences, Law, Philosophy, and Theology, Religion and Philosophy of Religion.

2. **When should a judge have to withdraw from a case, if it is alleged that they are biased?**

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Human, Social and Political Sciences, and Law.

3. **"I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for?" (Franz Kafka, 1883-1924)**

What is the purpose of literature? Discuss in the light of the Kafka quote.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, English, and Modern and Medieval Languages.

4. **"The atheist staring from his attic window is often nearer to God than the believer caught up in his own false image of God." – Martin Buber (1878-1965)**

"If you comprehend it, it is not God." – St Augustine (354-430 AD)

Using examples from any religious or philosophical tradition, discuss the significance of 'knowing' and 'unknowing' in religious belief and unbelief.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Classics, History, Philosophy, and Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion.

5. **"Translation is entirely mysterious. Increasingly I have felt that the art of writing is itself translating, or more like translating than it is like anything else." – Ursula K. Le Guin (1929 – 2018)**

Reflect on your experiences of reading fiction in the original and in translation in the light of this quote.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Classics, and Modern and Medieval Languages.

6. **"Cars restructure topography by destroying the street as a place for gathering. Since the level of social interaction between neighbours in a given street is inversely related to the amount of traffic passing through it, cars undermine the cohesive social structures of the city by eroding shared social space. They require**

space to have essentially the function of permitting motion so that this space becomes meaningless unless it can be subordinated to free movement.”
(Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, 2009)

Should cars be banned from cities? Do cars make cities more or less human?
Answer either of these questions, or both together, with reference to the quotation above.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Geography, Human, Social and Political Sciences, and Land Economy.

- 7. “Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.”**
– Gustav Mahler (1860-1911)

Do you agree? Discuss the relationship between novelty and tradition in artistic creation, with reference to any area of the arts (for example: music, painting, sculpture, literature, or architecture).

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Architecture, Design, English, History, History of Arts, Music, Philosophy, or Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion.

- 8. ‘The state of a man’s mind is as much a fact as the state of his digestion.’ (Bowen LJ in *Edgington v Fitzmaurice*). What difficulties may arise with proving an individual’s intentions?**

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Law and Philosophy.

- 9. “...we fail to see the big wide real world at all because we are blinded by obsession, anxiety, envy, resentment, fear. We make a small personal world in which we remain enclosed. Great art is liberating, it enables us to see and take pleasure in what is not ourselves.”**

“Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love, and so art and morals, is the discovery of reality.”
– Iris Murdoch (1919-1999)

What role does art play in a well-lived human life? Are there connections to be made between aesthetics and ethics? Discuss with reference to the quotations above.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Architecture, English, History of Art, Modern and Medieval Languages, Music, Philosophy, and Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion.

- 10. “Writers make national literature, while translators make universal literature.”**
– José Saramago (1922 – 2010)

Discuss whether literature reflects the writer’s national identity and how.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, English, and Modern and Medieval Languages.

11. ***“The target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.” —***
– Michel Foucault (1926-1984)

What would we be refusing and why should we refuse it?

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in History, Human, Social and Political Sciences, and Philosophy.

12. ***“The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts...which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong” (Geertz, 1973).***
Discuss.

If you are interested in this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, History, and Human, Social and Political Sciences.