

PHILOSOPHY (PHL315118)

General comments on the exam

The inaugural exam for this new course generally provided students with opportunities to exhibit their philosophical understanding and skills. Writing four essays in three hours across a breadth of complex philosophical debates presents a significant challenge, nevertheless, students took to the task with admiral enthusiasm and skill. The difficult nature of the externally assessed criteria was at times compounded by the wording of a few questions, creating some quite difficult tasks, however, students who engaged with the question, articulated relevant content, and exhibited the skills of the discipline were rewarded for their efforts.

SECTION A MIND BODY

General Comments

This section was particularly well answered. Students were able to demonstrate knowledge of the important concepts that comprise the mind body problem.

Question 1

Most students tackled physicalism/materialism as their form of monism. Some went further and were able to discuss identity theory or functionalism. A small number of students wrote about idealism. Arguments that students chose to use in favour of monism included a range of references to scientific investigations of the brain and anecdotal phenomena such as people suffering from mental illness, dementia, or brain damage. These examples were mostly effectively used by students to support the point of view of monists (C4). Candidates should note that it is very important to explain why and how an individual suffering brain damage (for example) and associated changes to their mental capabilities is part of an argument for (or evidence in favour of) physicalism. Most students were able to do this to some extent and this was a part of how C4 was assessed.

Those candidates who provided a more detailed explanation of concepts such as qualia (a challenge for materialists) and the problem of interaction, for example, were rewarded on C2. Students who wrote a lucid, well-constructed and clear essay received stronger marks on C1.

Question 2

This question was a challenge for candidates who had studied other forms of substance dualism but not Cartesian Dualism. Better answers were able to explore some of Descartes' own arguments such as doubt and divisibility. Many candidates were able to explore the problems with Cartesian Dualism, such as the 'problem of interaction'. Those candidates were rewarded on Criterion 2 in that they showed a good understanding of concepts and they could also be rewarded on Criterion 4 in that they showed how criticisms of dualism could support the point of view that lead to a final position of monism (or dualism if criticisms could be effectively responded to). Other candidates were able to use arguments such as introspection and privileged access and were similarly rewarded. Some candidates included a discussion of qualia and were able to make this work by showing how a possible immaterial property of mind could be used to support a case for Cartesian Dualism. Students who wrote a lucid, well-constructed and clear essay received stronger marks on criterion 1.

Question 3

Most candidates effectively explored qualia and at least one thought experiment which demonstrates the place qualia occupies in the debate. For instance, candidates discussed the knowledge argument, Nagel's bat, Chalmers' Philosophical Zombies amongst others. Strong answers were able to show how these thought experiments provide evidence (as an argument) to support the point of view of dualism and how responses to those arguments might form part of evidence (as an argument) for monism. One suggestion to take note of is that it would be useful to provide a definition of qualia along with examples, e.g. 'the feeling of what it is like to see the colour red'.

Many students were not familiar with the Dennett quotation but many made a good fist of incorporating it into their response.

SECTION B FREE WILL

General Comments

This was the first year in some time in which the topic "Free Will" required an essay and perhaps as a result of this and the new course criteria, many essays lacked evaluation and analysis as required under Criterion 3. Criterion 3 was a grey area for many candidates across the entirety of Section B, perhaps as the comprehension of the elements could be problematic for candidates; the title of CRITERION 3 is "describe and explain" as printed on the exam paper, yet the elements examined require evaluation and analysis. Generally, all candidates understood the Hard Determinist, Compatibilist (Soft Determinist) and Libertarian positions well. Many candidates towards the lower end of criteria ratings were unable to provide examples of philosophers or analogies to illustrate positions made within their responses and in turn this impacted Criterion 4. Many essays were quite short, considering the 45 min time frame and spanned only two pages or less, covering little material too briefly, and impacting upon Criterion 1. Those essays that were strong on all criteria engaged with a broad range of philosophical ideas and philosophers in appropriate analytical depth, including; Dennett, Kane, Reid, Hume, Leibniz, Laplace, Kant, Taylor, Moore, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Descartes, Sartre and Frankfurt. Examples of analogies provided were the garden of forking paths, the nefarious neurosurgeon, the sphex wasp, the Libet experiment, Locke's locked room, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the random movement of subatomic particles.

Question 4

Generally solid responses from candidates. Weaker responses were not able to name a philosopher. Other responses struggled to grasp what the "illusion" of free will was, and were unable to align this to Hard Determinism. Stronger responses were able to articulate this concept through appropriate evaluation of libertarianism or compatibilism in contrast to Hard Determinism. Whilst the question did not specify this was necessary, this approach was beneficial for candidates on Criterion 3 and 4. Again, Criterion 3 was weaker than Criterion 4 amongst candidates. Some candidates used outlined Indeterminism incorrectly in this section, aligning it with Libertarianism or Compatibilism, and would have been better served in these cases utilising it as a critique in itself of Hard Determinism.

Question 5

There were quite a few strong answers from candidates on this question and it allowed many students to demonstrate their knowledge across the board regardless of philosophers studied. Strong answers discussed examples such as Dennett's "Nefarious Neurosurgeon" and/or "Sphekishness", Churchland, the Libet experiment and the Garden of Forking Paths to name a few, as well as a range of philosophers from the Libertarian and Hard Determinist positions. Again, there was a trend here that candidates performed weaker on Criterion 3 than on other criteria, but generally Question 5 presented more evaluation in candidates' answers than other questions. It is advisable for students to analyse two to three arguments in more detail rather than offer a superficial account of four or more in order to lift their results on Criterion 3. This leads to 'sound bite' philosophy rather than an analysis and evaluation of arguments and reasoning, as required by the criteria. There was a tendency to overstate the requirements of libertarianism as requiring the absence of any other determining factors. Most libertarians argue for incomplete determinism (at least some choices are not determined) rather than the pure absence of external causes.

Question 6

This question was typically a refuge for weaker candidates, as it allowed them to articulate a position on a libertarian, compatibilist (soft determinist) and hard determinist positions with minimal reference to any philosophers or examples of punishment. For the most part, this question was answered accurately, however, candidates would have improved their marks against the criteria had they demonstrated knowledge of specific philosophers or examples of punishment whilst analysing and evaluating. In previous years, this may have included case studies such as Leopold, Loeb and Darrow, but this year there were very few examples in the candidates' answers. Even if examples had been hypothesised or fabricated by candidates and inserted for analysis, this would have strengthened any discussion in their responses. Overall, candidates were typically unable to analyse their own position or offer critique on any given position in this question. Perhaps as the question did not specifically require students to do so, it was to be expected, yet this made the criteria based marking difficult to award to a higher level on Criterion 3 and 4. Had candidates perhaps been more aware of what was expected of them under the criteria assessed, there may have been more examples, analysis and evaluation.

SECTION C

CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS IN MORAL THEORY

Overall the quality of these essays were high. The strongest candidates were students who engaged with the ethical frameworks in a critical manner and linked these reflections to the contemporary issues they had selected. Students tended to have a good grasp of the theoretical frameworks. There were a preponderance of answers that discussed Kant's deontology and Bentham's iteration of utilitarianism. Students tended to struggle with Kant's universalizability thesis which is to be expected.

There was a tendency for students to apply the hedonistic calculus to a single issue and then infer a universal rule from this (e.g. concluding that eating animals is wrong). This misrepresents utilitarians' concern for the particularities of different situations and the fact that there will be some circumstances in which eating animals is ethically endorsed. Students who did acknowledge this were rewarded for a sophisticated grasp of utilitarianism.

Many students interpreted utilitarianism as condoning any act that brings about more pleasure than pain. This is not strictly correct as utilitarian's analyse a range of possible acts and then declare the act that brings about greatest utility as being right. Students who did acknowledge this were rewarded for a sophisticated grasp of utilitarianism.

The majority of respondents compared Kantian deontology and Bentham's utilitarianism and did so by addressing Question 7. The next common theories covered were virtue ethics, deep ecology and Singer's utilitarianism.

Respondents that focused on two rather than more models/theories for the most part more effectively addressed the three criteria. The majority of responses drew from environmental issues and in general created sound responses. Better responses identified the complex nature of aspects of the issue, others noted the challenge of applying theories developed in earlier times to contemporary issues. Given that the requirement to apply the theories to a contemporary issue was less explicit in Question 8, Criteria 5 was less well addressed in Question 8 responses.

There was a cohort of students who answered Question 7 by discussing the ethical issue of gender equity in the workplace. On the whole, this cohort performed poorly. Firstly, there was a tendency to not describe the chosen ethical theories in a detailed or analytical manner. Secondly, students generally misapplied the theories in support of a position the logical propositions would have little rationale to take. For instance, by suggesting that utilitarianism would oppose gender equity initiatives such as affirmative action. The arguments in favour of this position were not well made and tended to distort the utilitarian view.

LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

Question 9

There was a full spread of results on this question, with many good responses and a few outstanding ones. Those philosophers named in the question were not 'required' for any level of result, as they were suggestions. Some reference to contemporary thinkers and debate was expected, nevertheless, for a rewarding result on Criterion 5. It is also worth noting that philosophical and scientific discussions of *the scientific evidence behind the Big Bang Theory* were equally well rewarded.

The Big Bang Theory was mentioned three times in the question, as was the Cosmological Argument. These are clearly a strong focus for this "theories for the origin of the universe" section of the course, and the Exam specifications are quite clear that this question "should address 'theories for the origin of the universe' and how traditional cosmological arguments have been challenged by the Big Bang theory". Therefore, it came as quite a surprise to the marker when a significant number of responses failed to present any knowledge or understanding of the Big Bang Theory and/or a Cosmological Argument. Fortunately, only one response failed to mention either, and nearly all demonstrated at least some understanding of the Cosmological Argument. Future candidates would be well advised to make themselves familiar with both the syllabus requirements and exam specifications for this section.

Question 10

There was typically a very high standard of answers from candidates on this question, regardless of the specific nature of the exam question. Some candidates were unable to demonstrate any knowledge on Dawkins and/or evolution but could still respond to the general nature of the question well and meet the standards of the criteria by referring to other philosophers and commentators such as Hume, Aquinas, Paley or the Pope. There were still some candidates towards the lower end of criteria awarded who were unable to articulate an adequate response regardless.

The strongest answers were able to discuss Dawkins (or the quote provided) to some extent regardless of their prior knowledge. However, some knowledgeable answers on Dawkins included further expansion on designer/designoids, his debate with Father George Coyne, and/or the God of gaps and applied these in relation to other philosophical and scientific theories. Better answers could discuss topics such as; Darwin's theory of evolution, the Fine Tuning argument, alternative universe theories (i.e. multiverse, oscillating universe), Michael Behe, the anthropic principle (F.R. Tennant), application of Occam's Razer with Swinburne and Douglas Adam's Puddle Analogy in contrast to Paley's Watch analogy. Candidates who were able to expand on their answers with reference to philosophical arguments and philosophers were generally able to achieve highly on Criterion 5, as through their discussion they were able to highlight the contemporary nature of the topic with its engagement in the current scientific community and faith based sectors. The strongest answers for Criterion 5 were able to compare the nature of the empirical teleological debate to critiques of faith based and scientific reasoning with reference to philosophers such as Kuhn and Popper. It should be noted candidates were not required to explain the scientific reasoning in detail, but rather apply the general principles of scientific positions to the philosophical nature of the teleological argument.

SECTION D THE GOOD LIFE

All responses were of a relatively equal standard across the questions. Better responses included some quotes from the relevant philosopher that were used to effectively support discussions around cr.3 and/or 4. Stronger students used biographical information in the context of explaining why the philosopher may have held those views and therefore could be seen to address aspects of Criterion 4 rather than describing biographical information as a standalone discussion. Attempts to address all aspects of the question and evaluate the philosopher's thoughts on the Good Life were also well rewarded. Responses that used considered language and illustrated critical thinking skills to evaluate performed much more strongly than those who followed the tone of the questions in uncritically labelling a philosopher as ignorant, pessimistic, a madman or an entitled dreamer. Generally speaking the responses to this section demonstrated a sound grasp of the philosophers as they are studied in this course. Candidates should try and write a little more in order to gain maximum reward for their knowledge and should avoid wasting time writing the question.

The syllabus is very clear about the focus of this section of the course and the exam specifications are quite specific about what the focus of the exam question will be. As this focus was linked to the quotations provided, those responses that primarily addressed the relevant areas of their chosen philosophers' work were rewarded.

There are of course many other aspects of these philosophers' thinking that are relevant to these core ideas. Future candidates should remember that they will be better rewarded if their understanding of the relevance of their discussion is made clear to the marker.

It was not considered necessary that a candidate's opinion be presented in the first person, and an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses or similar, was equally well rewarded this year. This may not always remain the case so future candidates and teachers should pay attention to communication on the matter of presenting 'own' viewpoint in Philosophy 3.