

ASSESSMENT REPORT 2020

PHL315118 - PHILOSOPHY

General comments

The 2020 Philosophy exam was somewhat altered to account for the effect of a global pandemic upon our students' education. Rather than writing four essays in three hours, students were tasked with writing three essays in three hours, effectively granting them an additional 15 minutes for each response.

Papers that articulated a contention clearly in response to the question fared better than those that listed as much information as they could recall, without an appropriate attempt at analysis and evaluation.

Stronger responses demonstrated an assured grasp of the subject matter and proposed a reasoned position. Effective essays often offered lucid and detailed explanations, as well as critiques of relevant examples and arguments presented by a wide range of philosophers.

Less able responses provided less detail, less range, and less argumentation. Some responses revealed a touch of naïve belief in "science" as the sole and impartial source of all truth, neglecting the philosophical problems occasioned by so dogmatic an approach.

SECTION A

General comments

In 2020, Section A covered content on the major metaphysical enquiries of the course – Mind/Body and Free will – which have historically constituted Sections A and B of the exam. Questions 1, 2, and 3 primed students to respond to the Mind/Body problem, whilst questions 4, 5, and 6 asked them to analyse the problem of Free will. Section A was assessed against four criteria: 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Mind/Body

Question 1

Question one directed students to describe and explain at least one position relevant to the mind body problem and evaluate at least one major critique of that position. Given the general nature of this question, and the appropriate opportunities it allowed for students to show what they know, responses were quite varied in their selection of content and students embraced the opportunity to convey their contention with conviction and in detail. Stronger responses critiqued their chosen positions by explaining specific weaknesses of argumentation, or offering stronger contrary evidence, and arriving at an evaluation on this basis; weaker ones offered generalised dismissals to non-preferred positions and arrived at unsubstantiated or apathetic ambivalent conclusions.

Question 2

Question two asked students to explain and describe the strengths and weaknesses of a relevant thought experiment and discuss how it relates to the complexities of the mind body problem. Responses to this question engaged with thought experiments such as Jackson's Mary and the Black and White room; Nagel's What is it like to be a bat?; Chalmers's philosophical zombies; and Searle's Chinese room. Stronger responses concisely articulated the thought experiment, analysed the implications for the mind body problem, as well as raising and then evaluating the significance of critiques or counter arguments. Weaker responses either misapprehended the implications of the thought experiments, or simply recited them as if they were stories to be retold, rather than 'intuition pumps' that should be analysed and evaluated. For instance, many students had some difficulty articulating the purpose of David Chalmers's 'philosophical zombies' thought experiment. Chalmers is not using the thought experiment to raise the problem of other minds and solipsism; rather, his argument is designed to test intuitions about the *logical possibility* of a world physically identical to our own but without subjective experience. If such a world is possible, Chalmers argues, then there must be something non-physical about consciousness. A relevant critique of this might be that Chalmers is begging the question in presuming that consciousness has non-physical attributes.

Question 3:

Question three offered students the opportunity to express their understanding of qualia. The question sought a definition and explanation of the complex concept, and implicitly asked students to take a position upon whether qualia is an illusion. Stronger responses to this question dealt adroitly and thoughtfully with the complexities of the 'what-it-is-likeness' of human experiences whilst evaluating the Reductive Physicalist or Functionalist claim that qualia is an illusion. Weaker responses tended to conflate qualia and consciousness and listlessly leaned towards a Mysterianist claim, without actually articulating the relative strengths and weaknesses of the position.

Free Will

Question 4

Question four asked students to engage with arguments surrounding the definition of free will, a contested concept, defined differently depending upon the position. The reference to the contention that free will is merely an illusion directed students to analyse a position, such as Hard Determinism, that would support such a claim. Stronger responses outlined and evaluated arguments from introspection/subjective experience seriously before reaching a reasoned conclusion about free will. Weaker responses often hastily dismissed free will as an illusion on the grounds of absent/insufficient evidence without actually analysing arguments for Libertarianism or Compatibilism. Indeed, there was a consistent erroneous conflation of free will and libertarianism – which are not necessarily synonymous; Classic Libertarianism is not the only position that argues humans have free will as precisely what constitutes free will remains itself a contested matter of debate.

The experiments of neuroscientist Benjamin Libet – which appear to show our brains make some decisions prior to our conscious awareness of them – whilst used by some Hard Determinists as evidence for their position, do not themselves constitute unchallenged confirmation of determinism. Indeed, if analysed in greater detail, these can be seen to confirm Compatibilism, as Libet himself argued we can consciously will against a decision reached by the brain once we become consciously aware of this. The final act may be inevitable, because from a reductive perspective it is caused by brain activity, but the conscious deliberation that alters the initial decision plays a direct causal role in the eventual act.

Question 5

Question five directed students to explain and evaluate Compatibilism in response to the critique that it is an inadequate theory attempting to preserve belief in free will in spite of the deterministic nature of the physical world.

Weaker responses often failed to correctly define Compatibilism, which is closer to Hard Determinism than it is to Libertarianism, rather than a middle ground or synthesis. Although Compatibilism, often also called Soft Determinism, tends to agree that the physical universe is governed by causality, and that humans are subsumed within such a structure, it yet argues humans have free will as a matter of degrees, on the basis of our evolved capacities, the strength of our internal causes, or our socialised attitudes towards our relations with others. Furthermore, some candidates presented Compatibilism as position that is only defended out of a dogmatic unwillingness to accept determinism – which dramatically oversimplifies the position.

Strong responses acknowledged that Compatibilists take seriously the question: ‘what does it mean to be free?’ This question is one to be taken seriously in philosophy – the common sense ‘could-have-done-otherwise’ conception is not self-evidently the best/only way to think about the concept of freedom. Students who used either Spinoza’s rock or Schopenhauer’s water examples to explain Hard Determinism, might effectively contrast these analogies by analysing such non-sentient matter against the sentience of nonhuman animals (e.g. Dennett’s sphex wasp) and humans to clarify the distinct definitions of free will held by Hard and Soft Determinists.

Question 6

Question six presented students with the opportunity to discuss the legitimacy of punishing human actions if they are not ‘free’. There was a tendency to argue for hard determinism and then continue to make ‘ought’ style arguments about how prison systems and judicial practices should be reformed without acknowledging the implication that we are determined to judge/punish as we do. This is understandable as thinkers such as Sam Harris do the same; however, sophisticated responses acknowledged this problem. Hard Determinism dismisses moral, but not legal or social responsibility. Punishment can and does make sense without moral responsibility as it can act as another (potentially inevitable) determining factor. Students who contrasted the degrees of responsibility models of punishment supported by the Compatibilist position against the either/or approach of Libertarianism and some Hard Determinists, tended to offer nuanced and detailed justifications in support of their contention.

SECTION B

General comments

In 2020 Section B covered the elective content of the course (Units 4.1 and 4.2) with questions 7 and 8 relevant for Contemporary Conflicts in Moral Theory, whilst questions 9 and 10 related to Life the Universe and Everything. Section B was assessed against three criteria: 1, 4, and 5.

Contemporary Conflicts in Moral Theory

Question 7

Question seven directed students to select and outline a contemporary ethical issue, apply at least one ethical framework to it, and evaluate this theory against a contrasting position. The open nature of the question allowed a vast

variety of approaches, frameworks, and issues to be explored, which gave markers a sense of students genuinely engaged with important contemporary challenges who have developed an impressive grasp of the relative strengths and weaknesses of many different ethical frameworks, principles, and models of value. Striking an appropriate balance between explaining the foundations and principles of the ethical framework and how this might be applied to an issue is a difficult task, but one which most students took to with enthusiasm, clear commitment, and admirable passion.

Weaker responses tended to begin with an opinion in regards to the issue at hand and attempt to force philosophers' arguments and principles into alignment with their beliefs, without really analysing the latter. Conversely, some responses spent too long on the foundations and principles of the theories and failed to adequately apply them to issues that were tacked on the end, almost as an afterthought, and upon which no position was taken. Another consistent feature of weaker responses lay in their tendency to list information about the ethical frameworks and issues, but shrug their shoulders at the conclusion, both in regards to what theory is stronger, and what should be done about the issue itself. Criteria 4 and 5 requires students to use evidence and apply frameworks in support of a contention and a position in relation to the issue.

Question 8

Question eight is effectively the same as question seven, although with more explicit instruction to discuss two frameworks and evaluate their merits in relation to their effectiveness when applied to a contemporary ethical issue.

Stronger responses analysed a clearly defined and focused ethical issue. Some candidates' ethical issues were less well defined, and this led to overly general analyses and prescriptions. Students who acknowledged both personal and social implications of their arguments about ethics were rewarded on Criterion 5 for clearly demonstrating how doing philosophy can affect the way one lives.

Weaker responses spent too much time relating their frameworks to the trolley problem thought experiment rather than applying these theories to the contemporary issue at hand. Some essays on environmental ethics covered anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric attitudes towards the natural world, which is undoubtedly an important aspect of ethical frameworks, but these alone do not constitute frameworks in themselves – inclusion of this material can definitely strengthen a response, but specific theories and principles need to be included in addition to the discussion about who and what is morally considerable.

Life, the Universe, and Everything

Question 9

Question nine asked students to contrast faith based and scientific accounts of the origins of the universe, specifically how traditional cosmological arguments have been challenged by the Big Bang Theory. In this section students are also expected to apply philosophical concepts to contemporary issues (Criterion 5) however, this was not explicitly articulated in the wording of the question, responses were marked with this in mind. Most candidates did a good job of addressing the question.

Stronger answers were able to use their introduction to introduce the main areas they would write about and draw those threads together. This showed a sophisticated skill in a section where candidates are required to somewhat artificially move from comparing and discussing answers to the question of the universe's beginning to the question of what contemporary issues arise from the contrasting explanations which now exist. Better answers included explanation and analysis of a cosmological argument, acknowledgement of the author of the argument or identification of a modern day philosopher who uses the argument. Many candidates were able to explain some evidence for the

Big Bang. e.g. Red shift/Hubble and this allowed them to meaningfully engage with the requirements for Criteria 4 and 5 as this, in some cases, lead them to write about the epistemological issues around both faith and scientific discovery.

There were two main approaches to addressing Criterion 5, which were both employed to good effect. Some candidates explored the contemporary issue of how Judeo/Christian/Islamic theists respond to the challenge to their faith that scientific discoveries provide. Better answers explored the idea of, for example, Catholics who read the Bible metaphorically and can therefore claim the scientific theory of the Big Bang is compatible with God as the creator of the universe. The position adopted by some Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christians were used to good effect as a counterpoint, namely as theists who reject the scientific theory of the Big Bang as being less reliable than the infallible word of God contained in the Bible. Other students tackled Criterion 5 successfully by exploring the epistemology of scientific discoveries as a way to get secure knowledge contrasted with the epistemological advantages and disadvantages of faith as a way of knowing. Some students used the work of Thomas Kuhn or David Hume to critique science as a way of gaining 100% certain knowledge. Others were able to use Popper's claims that scientific theories should be falsifiable, or make risky predictions, as a method of evaluating both cosmological science and in the case of some answers, faith-based creation stories.

Question 10

Question ten asked students to contrast faith-based and scientific accounts of the origins of human life, specifically how traditional teleological (design) arguments have been challenged by the theory of evolution. Once more, the marking of this question considered the fact that the expectation for students to apply philosophical concepts to contemporary issues was not explicitly articulated in the wording of the question. Nevertheless, there were some strong responses that conveyed a good knowledge of the content and how they might use it. Few used the same content, but all made serious efforts to evaluate both theological and scientific arguments, whilst some articulated that Darwin's theory of evolution via natural selection need not be a serious impediment to religious belief by including discussion of evolutionary theists.

SECTION C

General comments:

In 2020 Section C assessed *The Good Life* with a question and appropriate quote from each of the four philosophers studied: Montaigne, Beauvoir, Nietzsche, and Thoreau. Section C was assessed against three criteria: 1, 2, and 5.

As with Section B, striking an appropriate balance between explaining the foundations and complexities of the philosopher's ideas and how these might remain relevant for contemporary quests for meaning and purpose in life was a challenging task. Nevertheless, students exhibited a clear appreciation for the ideas and ongoing importance of their chosen thinkers and offered reasons to refine and build upon their work in order to make them appropriate to contemporary challenges. Candidates are encouraged to strike an even balance between explanation/analysis (Criterion 2) and evaluation/application (Criterion 5) so that they may be rewarded on both criteria.

The Good Life

Question 11

The best responses made good use of Montaigne's recommendation that we try for complete self-understanding, including how we might die well; the irony of the quote seeing that Montaigne was quite a sociable being and lived for his friends; and the realism or honesty that he prefers when understanding our physical and psychological infirmities. These students made some reasonable evaluation of his script for the modern world. Weaker responses did not delve deeply into his philosophical approach prior to discussing modern concerns about social media usage and body image.

Question 12

Strong responses to the question about Beauvoir ably expounded her existentialist philosophy and its feminist conclusions, before then denouncing continued examples of deplorable inequality, and pointing out ways in which her views can be critiqued and furthered. Less able responses did little more than reference her as a feminist before instancing cases of societal devaluation of women, with little reference to philosophy, missing the opportunity to explain, use and critique her insights to support overcoming gendered inequality and oppression.

Question 13

Responses to the question about Nietzsche profited from their use of his philosophical arguments, and better answers presented a range of these, before both critiquing them and also utilising them to examine contemporary issues. Not all were able to link Nietzsche's prescription for a good life to the quote. Many wrote rather a lot on Noble and Slave morality but were not able to connect the dots. Better answers explained Nietzsche's reasoning for why the slave morality was not the right formula for a good life. Other answers focused on various significant Nietzschean concepts such as amor fati, the role of suffering, the pitfalls of comforts like Christianity and alcohol.

Those who fared better answered the question by using the quote as a stepping off point to discuss other parts of Nietzsche's (often changing) ideas and even to suggest (correctly) that Nietzsche was doubtful that most of us could live a good life because it is too difficult. Most candidates were able to successfully address the question. Some better answers briefly discussed whether Nietzsche believed that a 'good' life, in so far as a good life is a 'happy' life is possible at all. Better answers also briefly discussed what sort of life can properly be called a good life and Nietzsche's likely views regarding this. Stronger answers were also able to choose a specific issue in modern society, e.g. incels, Christianity, refugees, to name a small selection. This approach enabled candidates to make specific links to Nietzschean concepts rather than general statements about Nietzsche being relevant or otherwise in modern society.

Question 14

Responses to the question about Thoreau were best when they elucidated his views of the natural world before then critiquing and extending them when applying them to the world of today. On the whole, the reading was positive as the vast bulk of students had prepared, were clearly well taught and most attempted to answer the question. Those who were really successful were flexible in using details (i.e. they had not memorised an essay) and they made significant efforts to analyse and evaluate the ideas by contrasting them with thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Hannah Arendt, or by advocating a decolonisation of Western attitudes towards the wilderness and acknowledging the significance and holistic environmental practices of traditions informed by First Nations' eternal ecological knowledge.