Philosophy
Course Code: PHL315113

Part A – The Good life

The questions in this section this year made answering in a succinct and articulate manner difficult for students. It does appear that it is inevitable that these five minute questions will be less effective than required for students to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. This is especially so given they are three five minute questions from an unknown topic in the course. It seems that if questions are too open it is difficult to write a short answer and if they are too specific then it is likely for students not to be able to recall appropriate information under pressure during the exam.

Question 1

Thankfully, most students ignored the difference between a happy life and a good life (as is covered in this course). The majority of students were able to articulate some basic features from a philosopher they knew well. Due to the open nature of the question students covered, between them, varied aspects of the four possible philosophers within the course. Often students were tempted to write more of an essay in response to this question rather than a short paragraph as each philosopher had a lifetime of ‘basic’ ideas and a large proportion of respondents were more than aware of this.

Question 2

This section was the only section that did not state that all questions were of equal value and the markers took this into account. Only a couple of students had a deep philosophical knowledge of Hedonism, a few had a guess talking about the pursuit of pleasure, and the majority just left it.

Question 3

It was clear from the answers that a number of students had focused mostly on one Philosopher. These students either could not recall rudimentary information about Schopenhauer or they only knew about Schopenhauer and had already conveyed their knowledge in question 1. A large proportion of students focussed on their assessment (as asked by the question) of Schopenhauer’s pessimism which meant they either left out important philosophical knowledge or outlined, in much more than a short paragraph, his ideas, the arguments he used (criterion 3), and their assessment (criterion 4).

Section B – Free Will

It was difficult to decipher some of the Students handwriting. I note that more competent students were able to clearly structure their responses to the questions and used appropriate philosophical ideas, logic and reasoning and arguments. However, many weaker students ignored the specific demands of the question and attempted to provide responses which focused on definitions. Indeed in some responses there is clearly an issue with students sources of knowledge, for example, responses that mentioned existentialism all stated that it began in France in the 1940s!

In summary, I had a sense there was a limited depth to students research of the topic or subject area. This I think is unfortunate as while students demonstrated a good knowledge of contemporary approaches many of these traditions are inextricably linked with ancient theories.
Questions 4 & 5

Marker 1
Criterion 1: The use of a stimulus quote: ‘If human beings are genuinely free to make choices, then they are outside the realm of cause and effect. But how is this possible?’ with a direct reference to the subsequent question proved to be very useful for most students. The majority of strong responses referred to it in framing their introductory and concluding paragraphs but weaker responses ignored it entirely. The majority of scripts addressed the question the theme of determinism and its associate objections, which supported the Marker in being able to reward students. Moreover, the majority of answers used the information from the prior question to answer Question 5. The responses that were poorly answered offer an unclear composition and minimally presented some ideas that did not meet the demands of the questions.

Criterion 2: The scripts that offered strong responses were able to demonstrate a sophisticated understanding and sound analysis of philosophical ideals and provide commentary on the points of similarity and difference between the two. Moreover, the robust responses were able to provide appropriate examples or illustrations to demonstrate their understanding of the different schools of thought.

Criterion 3: The impressive and noteworthy scripts were greatly improved by the use of evidence, appropriate examples, quotations and explanations. Many Students appear to have taken seriously the demands of this criterion and in particular, the need to refer to an authority whether it be a philosophical arguments or an extract quotation from a philosophical tradition. The quotes were in the main a support and not just an addendum to impress the marker. Unsupported opinions and argument were more characteristic of a weaker response.

Marker 2
Both questions 4 and 5 were rather too verbose, and needed to be made clearer and more concise. That said, students who confidently and correctly explained various philosophical positions on free will and moral responsibility were able to gain pleasing results in this section. Some also made fruitful references to other parts of the course. The list of past and present philosophers referred to was most impressive overall: John Searle, Peter van Inwagen, Daniel Dennett, Ted Honderich, Sam Harris, Helen Steward, Peter Strawson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Pierre-Simon Laplace, Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, Arthur Schopenhauer, John Locke, Werner Heisenberg, G. E. Moore, J. S. Mill, William James, Karl Marx, Isaac Newton, Immanuel Kant, Richard Dawkins, Richard Taylor, Robert Kane, Gottfried Leibniz, Erwin Schrödinger and Baron d'Holbach.

Section C

Question 6

Many of the responses were similar to those for Question 8, or had an emphasis on the cosmological argument. Credit was given to responses that selected a faith or science based argument (s) and demonstrated an understanding of the core ideas and an ability to outline the reasoning behind the position (s). In terms of addressing cr.4, strengths and weaknesses of a particular position, and/or providing an alternative position were given credit.

Question 7

This question required the student to address 5 tasks in 45 minutes including thinking time. The question of identifying a ‘best’ version is assuming that there is one and actually suggests a personal assumption on the part of the writer of said question. Credit was given to responses that outlined the general idea behind the design argument and explained an evaluated one or more versions.
Question 8

Many responses transposed the word religion for faith and some commented why the word religion was in the question in the first place. Fair question. Responses drew on a range of information to address the question. Credit was given to responses that explained and evaluated a faith based response and a science based response and could show the reasoning as to why they concluded whether science and faith were in competition or not. Responses as to whether they were in competition covered all possibilities from the affirmative, to the negative.

Section D

Question 9

A common problem in these answers was confusion about Induction and Deduction and how they sit viz a viz Empiricism and Rationalism. The spellings of “a priori” and “a posteriori” were creative, distinctive and, occasionally, correct. Some of the discussions of thought experiments (although to be applauded generally) were too often very long and at the expense of a more thorough discussion of the reasoning used by philosophers. However, the best answers showed a very good understanding of the material, were able to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of a range of arguments and they specifically answered the question about what issues/concepts might be difficult for Empiricists to explain. [JW]

Question 10

Quite a specific question and the marker rewarded those who stayed relevant rather than those who did a “data-dump” of all that they knew on Epistemology.

Almost all students knew the difference between inductive and deductive and explained how they differed. The problem of induction was a challenge to “C” students. Better answers explained it clearly and also showed how it was an example of circular reasoning and begging the question. Most stumbled with the final part of the question; many stating that it is irrational to believe that the sun will come up tomorrow but some very good answers disagreed mentioning Hume’s point that custom was the great guide to human life and that what was philosophically sceptical was not the same as normal everyday scepticism.

Question 11

Not many students really came to grips with the question and there were quite a few half-page or one-page answers. Many turned to Descartes, although there was a sprinkling of other philosophers such as Kant. Quite a few students equated sceptics solely with Rationalism and, as it is not in the syllabus, very few knew of philosophical scepticism per se and the marker did not expect them to.

It was a challenge for students to put together a substantial answer on this question. Many answers extrapolated from Descartes and used the coats and hats example or cogito ergo sum and that helped with criterion 3. Some used Kant effectively to show that there is “nothing higher than reason”.

Section E – Mind & Body

Responders to the final section of the exam overwhelmingly chose to answer Question 12. Indeed, of the 121 exam scripts, 78 found students electing to address the first question of this section. Significantly, Question 12 provided students with the scope to show their understanding of Metaphysics and the Mind/Body problem through a range of relevant philosophers, positions, problems and issues.
Question 13, which, whilst seemingly straightforward – due to the distinction between the mind and soul made in the statement – led to some confused responses and an emphasis upon religious concepts more appropriately addressed in Section C of the exam. Moreover, Questions 13 and 14 were the least attempted, with each eliciting 9, typically weaker, responses.

Question 14, in which a lengthy and wordy quotation from Bertrand Russell was utilised as a stimulus, was unduly difficult and verbose. Indeed, students had first to comprehend or interpret Russell’s statement in the context of Metaphysics, and based upon this proceed to mount an argument and evaluation of this area of Philosophy. The potentially confusing confluence of the mind, memories, mental habits, and the brain, which Russell puts forth, was an inappropriate ask of students in an exam situation and added a further layer of complexity, as well as yet another opportunity for their understandings to be miscarried.

Question 15 asked them to interpret a philosopher many were clearly unfamiliar with or whom they misunderstood; and, provoked philosophical analysis of Libertarianism and Hard Determinism through careless questioning.

The strongest responses across Section E contrasted a range of (at least two) often conflicting responses to the mind/body problem, whilst also analysing the logic and reasoning of the positions in addition to evaluating the arguments. Less successful responses, more likely to be in the B range, covered the relevant content of these philosophers, but without sustained analysis of their logic or evaluation of the arguments. Poorer responses failed to show significant understanding of the Mind/Body problem. Overall, there was a remarkable range of philosophers and arguments explored in the responses, and those essays that received marks mostly in the A range, were varied in their approaches and the content they covered.