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Philosophy 1171

PHIL3 Key Themes in Philosophy

Report on the Examination

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PHIL3: Key Themes in Philosophy

General comments

The overall standard of the exam was similar to last year, and the great majority of the candidates showed a good general understanding of the issues raised by the different questions, so that it was rare to find responses employing large amounts of irrelevant or tangential material. It was also encouraging that the majority also showed a good appreciation of the assessment objectives and made efforts not just to show their knowledge of different theoretical positions and arguments, but also to explain and analyse them, and, significantly, to assess them and to develop a critical line. Most responses made genuine efforts to reach reasoned judgements about the question and so were able to score well on Assessment Objective 3.

Despite improvement on last year essays remain prone to some of the following general weaknesses which centres may want to address:

- It was not uncommon for responses to reach a conclusion at the end which contradicted the one advocated in the introduction so that the argumentation was not sustained and coherent.
- More common was to introduce a new theory in the conclusion and then side with it, even though it hadn't been discussed at all in the body of the essay. ('Given the problems with utilitarianism, virtue theory is the best guide to action'). Such conclusions would often provide some basic description of what the theory claims (AO1), but this could not, on its own, justify the judgement being made (AO3).
- Weaker responses often wasted valuable time elaborating rather general introductory remarks about the great antiquity and/or controversial nature of the problem concerned, ('this is a problem which has been hotly debated by philosophers for many centuries'), but which didn't advance the cause. It would be better to get down to the issue itself.
- There is always the risk of essays becoming overly descriptive rather than analytical and evaluative, and such essays tend not to offer a clear view, often introducing the essay with phrases like 'In this essay I am going to consider arguments for and against the view that…' and ending with 'so there a different views on this topic'. Obviously it would make for a stronger essay if the candidate were able to make a clear case for one or other position, or to make an assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different positions.
- Also typical of scripts where candidates tended to describe rather than evaluate was the inclusion a lengthy concluding section which simply reiterated what the views were of the philosophers discussed in the essay ('so we've seen that Rawls says… whereas Locke says… On the other hand Nozick says…'). This ultimately doesn't add anything to the essay and the time would have been better used to evaluate throughout the essay – taking just a minute or so after each view is discussed to make a judgement about what the discussion makes the candidate think about the issue in question ('Rawls says… I think this is unconvincing given that…').
- As we saw last year, again a good many of candidates approached the tasks by working through a series of theoretical perspectives outlining how each would answer the question. The appropriateness of this approach depends largely on the nature of the

question (see below), and it clearly provides some candidates with a useful framework with which to structure their essays. Nonetheless, it also leads many candidates to lose sight of the question and in the weakest examples means that responses may discuss relevant material, but without making clear precisely how that material addresses the issue raised in the question.

- A large number of candidates made repeated use of rhetorical questions without offering answers to them. ('How can the mind interact with the body?' 'How can I know anyone else has a mind?' 'How can you know something that isn't true?', 'How can we know anything without using the senses?'). Such questions take the place of argument and amount to asking the examiner to provide the answers for the candidate.

Notes on questions:

01

A great deal of material studied for this unit could be brought to bear in response to this question, and candidates had to select the arguments they judged most appropriate. Many of the stronger responses were well focused and examined arguments for and against the view in isolation from the theories they are typically associated with. Others, which could also score highly, relied on structuring the essay around examination of reductive and non-reductive theories. However, such an approach ran the risk of leading candidates astray from the core issue, as they worked through general criticisms of (typically) dualism, behaviourism and identity theory. This approach also meant many candidates failed to examine any arguments in sufficient detail since they had given themselves too much ground to cover. There were also some recurring weaknesses concerning the content that are worth a mention:

- There is a tendency merely to ask the question 'how does a physical body interact with a non-physical mind?' in order to explain the problem of interaction. This, at best, is a question of interaction and candidates would do better to try to give reasons why such an interaction cannot take place (e.g. that interaction takes place between common properties of objects, i.e. extension, and that substances of a fundamentally different nature share no properties in common, and therefore would not be able to interact. Or, that all observed causation has taken place between physical substances, and there has been no observation of interaction between non-physical substances, so we cannot apply our concept of causation adequately.) It is only when they do this that, it becomes an argument.

- A common mistake regarding Descartes was the assertion that he claims the mind and body are related as a captain and a ship are related – this is precisely the opposite of what Descartes says.

- Candidates sometimes countered the argument from indivisibility by saying that the mind can be divided, citing distinct mental faculties such as memory and imagination as evidence. Descartes addresses this sort of objection in the *Meditations* and a more convincing discussion can be had of brain bi-section in epilepsy patients and the 'division of consciousness' that results. Cases such as those discussed by Nagel, Parfit etc. can be found in this article: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity/#DisUniCon

02

Around half the number of candidates chose to do this question as chose question 1, and the statistics suggest it was marginally less well done. A surprising number of candidates chose to work through different theories of the mind and assess how each would address the problem – an approach which is not well suited to the question. However, there were a good number of strong responses often able to deal with some complex material, (e.g. Ryle's dispositional analysis, Wittgenstein's private language argument, Strawson on persons) with precision and in detail.

- One common error in weaker responses was to misrepresent Wittgenstein's beetle-in-the-box analogy as an attempt to represent our true condition, rather than as a *reductio* of the Cartesian picture.
- Logical behaviourism was also quite often misunderstood as the view that our mental states are 'reflected' or 'expressed' in our behaviour.
- A surprising number concluded without any apparent misgivings that it was obvious that theirs was indeed the only mind. This is a legitimate philosophical position for them to defend, but some awareness of why it is problematic would have been helpful (e.g. why am I bothering to try to communicate my thoughts in this exam?).

03

This was one of the best scoring questions on the paper. The great majority of candidates identified the view with Locke and/or Nozick and were able to outline and evaluate some of their arguments in varying degrees of precision and detail. Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example figured prominently, although it was often misconstrued, some candidates using it to argue that redistribution was unjust since it would make Wilt rich at the expense of the spectators. Rawls often appeared as the principal critic of the view in the question, although weaker responses became bogged down in a general account of Rawls, e.g. lengthy discussions of the original position which failed to explain why we would choose the most equal distribution of resources and so were poorly focused on the issue. Rawls' difference principle was often mentioned, but not always accurately understood. Common again with this question was for candidates to work through different ideological positions (liberalism, conservatism, anarchism, Marxism) and discuss what each would say about redistribution. Such an approach could score well, but tended to lead the candidate into a descriptive response and the better policy was to keep focus on examination of the arguments. At the weaker end it was common to find rather general discussions of the benefits of social provision paid for through taxation which lacked philosophical detail.

04

This was the less popular of the two Political Philosophy question and was a little less well done than Question 3. Candidates tended to focus on the instruction to discuss the limits of freedom, rather than examine the quotation, but this didn't necessarily make their responses any less effective, and most were able to develop relevant considerations, often centring on discussion of Mill. Broader responses looked at Hobbes, anarchism and Marxism, although there was often confusion about, or conflation of, communism and socialism. Candidates often treated command economies as examples of how Marx believed human freedom was best realised.

05

Epistemology and Metaphysics is the least popular option, and both questions this year were less well done than the other questions on the paper. Although there were some strong responses to Question 5 it was also notable that there were many opportunities for candidates to become confused as they tried to explain why each of the conditions might be considered necessary and/or sufficient. For example, Plato's discussion in the *Meno* of the difference between justified true belief and knowledge was often referred to, but explanations of the point were often very vague, (e.g. saying Plato says knowledge needs a 'tether' but without explaining what this might mean) or muddled. Also common was to give a Gettier example which failed the truth condition ('Jim believed that Bill was hidden under the bed, it was a justified true belief, but it turns out Bill was hiding behind the curtain and it was his twin brother Ben that was under the bed'). Others claimed that such examples failed the justification condition and so were not knowledge, and so missed Gettier's point. Having said this, the majority did grasp how Gettier-type examples work and the strongest responses were able to move beyond Gettier and examine possible responses.

06

This was a very open question and possibly for this reason was the less popular of the two Epistemology and Metaphysics questions. Although many different avenues could have been explored, it was most common for candidates to focus on the philosophy of perception and scepticism about the external world. However, a good number took the narrow approach of exploring how we can acquire knowledge from sense experience, rather than whether we can have knowledge of what lies beyond sense experience, and many such candidates relied rather too heavily on material from the AS Reason and Experience module and failed to develop their responses beyond discussion of the sources of knowledge and whether innate knowledge is possible. Where candidates did talk about knowledge of what lies beyond sense experience, they often struggled to explain why the material they had selected might be relevant. So, for example, while discussions of Plato were common they tended to be descriptive and poorly directed and arguments for the possibility of knowledge of the forms were rare. Despite this, there were some strong responses which were able effectively to use both synoptic material and material from this unit; most commonly Kantian or empiricist considerations leading to scepticism about knowledge of the external or noumenal world, arguments for and against phenomenalism and verificationism.

07

Many candidates saw the question as an invitation to discuss a theory that they saw as involving the claim that moral values cannot be derived from facts (typically emotivism, prescriptivism or relativism), and then offered a critical discussion of that theory. Better versions of this approach were able to direct the material well to the question by focusing on the arguments which concerned the fact/value distinction, but others tended to be narrow or partly tangential. This question was also another that attracted the approach of working through different positions and theories - most commonly Platonism, Kant's rationalism, Utilitarianism, virtue ethics, relativism, emotivism, prescriptivism – discussing how each would regard the question. This approach risked becoming repetitive, tangential or insufficiently detailed and, once again, the best responses tended to be those that kept an eye on the precise issue and focused on the key arguments. Many of the more sophisticated responses examined complex

positions new to the specification in some depth, such as the idea of morality is based on relational properties and the notion that moral properties supervene on natural properties.

08

This was the most popular question on the paper and more than twice as popular as the other Moral Philosophy question, and yet statistically candidates did less well than on Question 7. This may be because some candidates failed to address all aspects of the question. For example, it was not uncommon for candidates to give a generic critical discussion of utilitarianism, without attempting to explore a moral problem. Also, a surprisingly large number chose examples, such as Jim and the Indians or a healthy patient killed and harvested for organs, as their moral problem. These are examples specifically designed to reveal a flaw in utilitarianism rather than moral problems. The question expected candidates to use a practical problem to explore difficulties with utilitarianism as a guide to action, and so full responses did need to show some knowledge of how utilitarianism can be applied to a genuine practical moral issue. Better responses showed candidates had studied a particular moral problem in good detail and succeeded in making their critical points exclusively through the problem they chose, rather than by resort to other illustrative examples. Candidates who examined more than one problem were not penalised, but credit was awarded according to the detail with which they were able to explore difficulties for utilitarianism through its practical application.

The following more specific points may be of interest:

- Candidates discussing euthanasia or abortion often resorted to using the Jim and the Indians tale to make the point about integrity, when a similar euthanasia or abortion situation could have done the same work and retained focus on the moral problem (a doctor asked to euthanase a patient in order to utilise his or her organs for others, or a mother asked to carry a baby to term to satisfy adopting parents. Both may be morally objectionable to the agent, and thus serve the same purpose as Jim and the Indians).

- There was much confusion about what Rule Utilitarianism is and how it works. Some candidates seemed to suggest it works in the way that Hare's 'Two-Level Utilitarianism' does, probably confused by the criticism that Rule ultimately *should* collapse into Act if maximising happiness was really what it valued, making it null and void as a theory. There was also very little explanation as to how the rules are arrived at – many candidates suggested that these were simply 'the rules already in place' and a smaller number tied them to the legal rules in society.

- Candidates routinely introduced Preference Utilitarianism without explaining why maximising preferences/interests, rather than happiness, might be advocated; in some cases, the same sort of unexplained move was made from Act to Rule, but less frequently.

- Discussion of Mill's distinction between higher and lower order pleasures was frequent. The relevance of this distinction to any significant moral problem is always likely to be limited – stronger candidates may be able to direct this material, but more often than not it was simply included by weaker candidates as 'the reason' Mill thought it necessary to advocate Rule Utilitarianism.

- A number of candidates turned the question into a comparative one – Utilitarianism vs Deontology vs Virtue Ethics – which made for typically general accounts, lacking in detail. If these other theories are to be made relevant it is important that they are used to show the inadequacies of utilitarianism as a guide to conduct. An alternative is at best an implicit critique and so tangential.

- Where Virtue Ethics was introduced, a common, undeveloped criticism was that it does not give specific guide to action. Teaching Anscombe on the notion of 'V-Rules' (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/) would be useful here, and allow candidates to avoid simply dismissing Virtue Ethics as 'useless'. This is important given that many candidates tended to make moves toward advocating Virtue Ethics as 'best' (probably because of the order in which they have been taught the theories) and yet still included this claim, undermining their argument.

09

This question attracted some of the stronger responses on the paper and most candidates were able to outline more than one version of the argument and accurately explain a range of difficulties with it. The level of detail and precision was the main differentiating factor between responses.

- Most candidates acknowledged that the argument is *a posteriori* (although more appropriately the premises should be described in this way), but also suggested that the Cosmological Argument is inductive; this is only true of Swinburne, and is precisely what makes *his* argument different to the other, (allegedly) deductively valid arguments. Some work on the difference between inductive and deductive will have been done in *Reason & Experience*, and it might pay to revisit this before teaching the material on the Cosmological Argument. In particular, looking at the notions of validity and soundness might make responses to questions such as this more focussed and structured: Are the arguments valid? Even if we grant this, are the premises true?

- Candidates also routinely reject the conclusion to the Cosmological Argument rather too hastily. It was frequently claimed that the various versions of the Cosmological Argument include the conclusion '…this first cause is God' 'for no reason', or 'randomly'. In fact it is precisely *because of* the attributes of the classical theistic God that it is inferred that he is the first cause/unmoved mover. Swinburne, in particular, points out that this is the *best explanation*. This inference can, of course, be challenged - why does the first cause need to be *omnipotent*, when just enough power to create a universe would do? If God is *omni-benevolent* and *omniscient*, then why did he create a universe in which he knew evil deeds would occur? If he is *transcendent*, then how does he interact with the universe as a creator/sustainer? etc. There are numerous responses to these questions that the candidates could consider to fully develop a point about whether or not the inference is justified.

- A large number of candidates opted for one of either Cause or Motion when recounting Aquinas' arguments (adding Contingency later). This in itself is both understandable and unproblematic, given the range of arguments that could be considered here. However, candidates too frequently asserted that 'they are essentially the same argument, but Aquinas just substitutes the word 'cause' with the word 'motion'.' This is not a fair representation, and the better accounts of Aquinas discussed the argument from Motion with reference to potentiality and actuality, detail which was missing from the accounts given by candidates with the aforementioned tendency.

10

This was the least popular option on the paper. However, while responses to this question scored a little less well than the other Philosophy of Religion question, they were of an average standard compared to the rest of the paper. On the whole candidates showed a good understanding of the principal issues, with most responses devoting a good part of their discussion to Hume's arguments. Better responses focused their points on the issue of the *rationality* of belief in miracles and so addressed the nuances of the question. There were, however, some misunderstandings that may be worth mentioning.

- It was common to regard Hume's claim that testimony regarding miracles comes from people who are from 'ignorant and barbarous nations' as mere name-calling from Hume. This led candidates to reject it with similar *ad hominem* attacks, often accusing Hume of 'racism', or his Scotland of barbarism. The point Hume is making by calling these nations 'ignorant and barbarous' is that they are *pre-scientific*. In the same way, we would consider explanations of the weather as a result of rain-dances as ignorant of the real, scientific facts which explain weather patterns. It isn't 'racist' to say such a thing, nor should it be considered groundless.

Hume's argument that competing religious claims cancel each other out was often not understood or rejected out of hand. Hume's point is that the major religions claim *exclusive* truth, and invoke miracles to support their claim. So, the miracles of other religions cannot have happened if the definition of a miracle requires the intervention of a deity to break the laws of nature, as there is no other deity than God (from a Christian standpoint). Furthermore, since there is no difference between the quality of evidence of the Christian miracles and those of other religions, then there is really no reason to suppose that one set of miracle stories has any more credibility than a rival set. If Christians dismiss Hindu miracles on the grounds of insufficient evidence, then they simultaneously concede that the evidence for their own miracles is *equally* insufficient.

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