



General Certificate of Education

Philosophy 1171

PHIL1 An Introduction to Philosophy 1

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - January series

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Philosophy

AS Unit PHIL1 An Introduction to Philosophy 1

General Comments

This was the first examination of the new AS Philosophy specification and also the first time that a unit in Philosophy has been examined in January. Consequently, it is difficult to draw comparisons with any previous examination series in Philosophy.

Nevertheless, the best responses were extremely impressive and many more were highly competent. Many responses were surprisingly full and answers to questions frequently exceeded 1000 words. All four of the optional themes were attempted. There were few rubric infringements. Answers to questions were generally of an appropriate length although there was some evidence that occasionally too much time and space were devoted to Question 1 so that answers to the second question attempted sometimes appeared to be rushed. This was rarely the case with part (a) questions, although many responses provided unnecessary evaluative comments. Some candidates should be reminded that it is also important to provide an illustration when the question requires this.

Responses to part (b) questions were often very full, if not always detailed and precise, but the ability to analyse or subject philosophical positions to meticulous critical scrutiny was less evident. Analysis, where present, was often unconvincing. Some responses were entirely descriptive and many seemed content to juxtapose and summarise philosophical positions rather than engage in a genuine attempt to reach an evaluative conclusion.

Theme: Reason and experience

Question 1 (a)

This question was answered reasonably well, particularly as it is not an easy topic for those new to Philosophy. The majority focused on Kant, generally providing expositions that were clear and broadly accurate. Illustrations, when present, were often less clear and sometimes inappropriate. There were also occasional references to Sapir-Whorf, very rarely to Quine or, more generally, to cultural or linguistic relativism. Some responses blurred Kant and Sapir-Whorf together. A large minority focused tangentially on knowledge acquisition, generally via empiricism and the distinction between impressions and ideas.

Question 1 (b)

Again, there were many full and quite good discussions. Most candidates referred to a range of points: some provided lengthy expositions of the view that there is no such thing as innate knowledge before identifying possible examples. Others concentrated on arguments associated with innateness, generally including points concerning God, self-awareness, the identity of wax, mathematical and geometric relations, Platonic forms, conceptual schemes, deep grammar, etc. The better responses developed points selected for discussion so that argumentation and analysis were detailed and precise.

However, there were a large number of mid-band responses. Some offered a brief, descriptive account, lacking detail and precision, of some arguments and juxtaposed this with the notion that, at birth, the mind is a tabula rasa. Others provided a more general account of empiricism versus rationalism: this generally followed from an account of innateness as a priori knowledge

and examples of analytic propositions known to be true independently of experience. Once this had been argued it proved to be tricky to disentangle innateness, a priori knowledge, analytic propositions and necessity. So, it was occasionally difficult to see what was supposed to be known innately. On the other hand, some candidates maintained a focus on innateness but it was, at times, difficult to see what it was that was known.

Generally, there were still too many responses focused on instincts, eg babies breathing or suckling (without being taught) was presented as evidence for the rationalist cause – empiricists, in contrast, were occasionally seen as denying that babies are able to breathe or suckle.

A range of positions were adopted and, sometimes, supported by argument.

Theme: Why should I be governed?

Question 2 (a)

There were few good responses to this question. Many were unable to draw a distinction between authority and power, and wrote about power. Others drew the distinction accurately but then gave one example of each. There were responses in which a focus on authority was maintained but candidates frequently struggled to identify *two* ways in which an individual could possess it: some provided two illustrations of the same point; some provided two illustrations without explaining the point and some referred to numerous types of authority without illustrating any of them. The few top-band responses typically either drew a distinction between ‘in’ and ‘an’ or between a rational-legal process and tradition.

Question 2 (b)

Answers to this question were better. Most were informed and full responses, describing Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in detail. However, analysis was less developed and frequently consisted of a few simple, not very analytical, criticisms concerning, for example, how pessimistic or optimistic the accounts were. Other critical points, if present, tended to argue to the man (so that Locke’s view could be dismissed because he was religious) and, while Nietzsche was never mentioned, most philosophers were seen to be airing their own psychological prejudices. Some responses were completely descriptive, offering no analysis at all.

Argumentation supporting positions reached was typically brief, unconvincing and assertive. Some, having described the notion as hypothetical to begin with, dismissed all accounts on the basis that the state of nature has never existed; others, having criticised eg Hobbes for airing prejudices, were content to state that their own prejudices were in agreement.

Theme: Why should I be moral?

Question 3 (a)

Again, there were few good responses to this question. The tendency was to criticise contract theory rather than to relate criticisms to the view that morality is a product of a social contract. Moreover, where criticisms were related to the view that morality is the product of a social contract, they were rarely clearly stated and it was frequently difficult to identify two distinct

points. Also, as with some of the other part (a) questions, sometimes no attempt was made to clarify a point via illustration.

Question 3 (b)

The few good responses to this open-ended question were those that focused on whether a moral belief was sufficient to motivate action. The vast majority of responses, however, ignored the question and simply trawled through various answers to 'why be moral?' Typically, this took in everything from ethical egoism to virtue theory to Kant. Relevance to the question tended to be assumed.

For example, candidates frequently referred to Kant's view of what constitutes a moral maxim and/or a moral duty. However, there was almost no mention as to whether this might be too rigid to provide a motivation for action in some instances, or whether one could know that an apparently moral action was being performed for the right motives.

Theme: The idea of God

Question 4 (a)

This was a straightforward question but, surprisingly, there were relatively few good, clear, detailed answers. Many referred to both Anselm and Descartes but few provided a detailed treatment of either. Frequently two versions of the same argument were stated, attributed to Anselm and then to Descartes. Some were only able to provide one version of the ontological argument and some provided the trademark argument as a second version. There were a few references to either Plantinga or Malcolm as alternatives to Anselm or Descartes and these responses were generally more successful. Occasionally three versions of the argument were provided. In many responses more space was devoted to criticisms of the argument, which were not required, than to the argument itself.

Question 4 (b)

Answers to this question were generally informed and full. There was a tendency to describe the view as 'psychological' and/or 'sociological' rather than philosophical. Most candidates were able to provide detailed accounts, drawing from Hume, Freud, Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim and Dawkins – occasionally including all of them – demonstrating both an understanding of the view and the ability to apply relevant material. While a wide range of points was covered, detail and precision were sometimes lacking. As a particular example, there were some very crude accounts of Marx.

Analysis was more uneven. Some candidates were content to juxtapose these approaches with the view that the idea of God is innate – occasionally after ruling this out in Question 1. A few compared the strengths and weaknesses of these views so that the trademark argument was stated, 'causal adequacy' was questioned and 'sponginess' or 'matches that start a forest fire' were seen to afford support to the view in the question. Alternatively, some employed Popper's falsification thesis against any/all human construction approaches to reach the conclusion that the idea of God must indeed be innate!

More typically, however, responses were quite descriptive. Analysis, if present at all, consisted of generalised points about fear of death, insecurity and ideology.

Theme: Persons

Question 5 (a)

Answers to this question were polarised. Candidates either knew the argument or they did not. Consequently, some did well to produce a brief outline and illustration of a difficult argument in limited space while others either equated 'primitive' with simplistic – so that, now we're more sophisticated, we don't need the concept of a person anymore – or wrote down everything they knew about the characteristics of persons.

Question 5 (b)

The majority of candidates were able to identify numerous characteristics of personhood – although there was a tendency to treat each characteristic as individually necessary and sufficient for personhood – and some were able to relate the characteristics identified to the idea that being a person is a matter of degree.

Application was more varied. Many responses were focused on household pets – so there were numerous stories about the sociability, moral sympathies, autonomy and rationality of the family cat. Some were rooted in the philosophical literature – so that Locke's parrot, updated for 21st century purposes, appeared as a university educated TV host and general 'parrot about town'. Argumentation, in either approach, was seldom convincing.

Some responses did not see individual characteristics as necessary (so that some diminished persons were, nevertheless, still persons) or sufficient (so that the ability of chimpanzees to recognise number sequences and/or words did not make them persons). Argumentation here was often more convincing: some argued that there were sufficient characteristics present, in sufficient depth, to see *some* animals as simple persons; others thought that while this might be philosophically plausible our everyday conceptual framework couldn't be stretched to accommodate this.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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