2021 ASSESSMENT REPORT

PHL315118 - PHILOSOPHY

General comments

The 2021 Philosophy exam was undertaken by a diverse range of engaged thinkers and engaging writers who approached complex philosophical ideas with admirable enthusiasm. Students demonstrated understanding of an eclectic range of philosophers, positions, ideas, arguments, and evidence, and applied these to a myriad of ancient and ongoing issues in often powerful ways.
Essays that directly addressed the question, outlined a position, and supported this with analysis and evaluation of selected arguments and evidence were markedly stronger than those that opted to cover several positions in a summary manner. Good philosophical writing engages with the reasoning behind arguments in depth and, for this reason, it is advisable to focus upon 2-3 arguments in a 45-minute essay.

Students should avoid stating that arguments 'prove' a philosophical position to be true, especially based on a single criticism. All the philosophical questions studied in this course are still contested. Using more modest language, such as: 'I find this argument compelling because x', 'this example clearly supports the view that y' or 'this criticism is unconvincing for reason z,' is preferable as it conveys a greater complexity of understanding.

Section A – Mind / Body

Question 1

Question one was straight forward and required students to describe and explain one dualist or monist position on the mind/body problem. It was a scaffolded question asking for two major strengths and one major weakness. Students who structured their response in this way generally did a better job at evaluating the position they had chosen.

A majority of students wrote on substance dualism and Descartes, while a few wrote on property dualism or monist positions such as physicalism. Better responses described the position they had chosen, and its implications for the mind/body problem in some detail before beginning their evaluation of the position. Most students used an opposing position as part of their response e.g., eliminative materialism when critiquing substance dualism. The best responses were analytical and used philosophical terminology as part of a coherent philosophical argument with more than one point of view described, and clear explanations and examples included.

Weaker responses were vague, lacked detailed explanations and only included brief or unstructured argument. Some responses which included several ideas and examples did not go a step further and fully explain their relationship to the mind/body problem or a critique of their chosen position. It was apparent that some students did not fully understand all the terms they used and their relevance to the mind/body problem.

Question 2

Most students were able to explain one or more thought experiment in a general way. Stronger responses were able to capture important details about thought experiments. For example, that Thomas Nagel's 'What is it like to be a bat?' thought experiment is not really about bats but, rather, uses bats as a vivid example to demonstrate the (perhaps insurmountable) difficulty we face in studying the subjective experiences any other being (human or non-human).

Stronger responses also clearly articulated the purpose of the thought experiment. Often this involved explaining the philosophical position that the thought experiment was designed to refute. For example, Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment is used to argue that behaviourist/functionalist accounts of the mind leave out something important so that even computers that pass the Turing Test should not be considered intelligent.

Many responses hastily dismissed thought experiments as mere subjective speculation, which is a defensible view raised in the question; however, stronger responses also considered benefits of thought experiments before reaching a judgement about their value. For example, some students discussing Frank Jackson's Mary's Room thought experiment acknowledged that, because current scientific explanations of consciousness are not able to explain qualia, speculating about what a complete science of consciousness would enable one to know is valuable.

Question 3

Strong responses directly addressed the stimulus and included discussion around the themes it brought up throughout their response. They would then tend to address David Chalmers and his perspective on Qualia and consciousness directly, often discussing philosophical Zombies. They then moved on to address Daniel Dennett and his perspective on Qualia, critically comparing it to Chalmers. The strongest responses then evaluated these two perspectives in comparison to a few additional ones and drew some conclusions about their perspective on qualia based on this evaluation. Stronger responses frequently incorporated key terminology throughout their response.

Weaker responses usually still addressed the stimulus in some way, often skipping straight to Chalmers' Zombies thought experiment and would then say something about what they thought about qualia, but would neglect to discuss Dennett, or vice versa. There was little critical analysis and evaluation, but they attempted to discuss elements of the mind/body problem that they could remember, such as dualism and would link this into the problem of consciousness and qualia less directly. Weaker responses tended to use few key terms and instead talked around the concept to express their point, often using simple examples.

Section B – Free Will

Question 4

Stronger responses included a direct answering of the core of the question and associated philosophical discussion surrounding Libertarian positions and deployed Hard Determinism and/or Compatibilist arguments to evaluate their merits. Question 4 had multiple components and addressing all within 45 minutes was an unrealistic expectation; this was taken into consideration during the allocation of marks.

The focus of the question was on the presence of evaluation of Libertarianism and the broader free will debate. Whilst the Libertarian position was explicitly mentioned in the question, it was expected that in evaluating the "strengths and weakness", students could name other positions on Free Will such as various versions of Hard Determinism, Indeterminism and Compatibilism.

The question asked students to discuss why people believe they have a choice in the way they act, yet many responses remained purely descriptive of Libertarianism and did not engage with the core philosophical elements of the Free Will debate. Such students are encouraged to move beyond explaining Libertarianism and analyse arguments and evidence relative to the position.

Strong essays included positing an introduction to the question, an unpacking of the core components of the Free Will debate, then specific stances within Libertarianism contrasted against Hard Determinism, Indeterminism and/or Compatibilism whilst using philosophers and/or thought experiments as evidence. Numerous essays were lacking in appropriate paragraph structure, flow and a contention.

Some students memorised quotes, which was not always necessary and sometimes the usage did not align to the contention of their essays.

Strong responses included a thorough discussion of the core positions and associated philosophers for evidence. While an extensive range of philosophers were mentioned, not all philosophers were accurately applied. There also appeared to be some confusion regarding the different philosophical stances regarding the Free Will debate, especially with equating Fatalism with Hard Determinism. Likewise, Indeterminism and indeterminist concepts were often inaccurately aligned to either a Libertarian position or a Hard Determinist position in some responses.

Whilst Bentham and Mill no doubt have valuable underpinnings ethically and socially, neither articulate a direct philosophical stance toward the core Free Will metaphysical debate so attempts to align them directly to the concepts of Libertarianism were less successful. Thomas Aquinas and Anselm were also mentioned in some responses, but the responses typically presented more toward theology rather than philosophy where they were present. Furthermore, there was confusion evident in a number of essays surrounding Schopenhauer's position on Free Will – he is aligned with either a Hard Determinist or even a Compatibilist position, rather than a Libertarian position as was stated in numerous responses. A quote from Schopenhauer was frequently applied inaccurately. Students would benefit from understanding core philosophical stand points surrounding Free Will with their associated philosophers. The TASC course outline provides a suggested list and further supplementary theorists are suggested in past examiners reports. Nevertheless, some highly relevant philosophers were included that were specific and refreshing beyond the usual narrative on Free Will such as Thalia Wheatley, and these responses applied her ideas and arguments with precision and relevance. Other philosophers that were frequently well utilised in responses included Kant, William James, Kane, d'Holbach, Sartre, Leibniz, Churchland(s), Dennett, Harris, Strawson(s), Frankfurt and Reid.

There appeared at times some confusion regarding what was being debated in the Free Will section surrounding Libertarian positions and relevant evidence. Less relevant analysis for example used extracts from C.S. Lewis, psychology theorists and experiments, sociological unpacking of Karl Marx and an analysis of Australia's judicial system. Some students had learnt and reproduced quotes from a variety of historical figures, which offered no substantial weight to the evaluation of Libertarianism. Several responses focused on aspects of God's will, the soul and creationism at the expense of philosophical discussion and evaluation.

Accurate use of evidence was found in those examples provided by core philosophers, and specific, niche philosophers to particular ideas were included only where relevant.

Some thought experiments were used and incorrectly attributed to a particular philosopher. Students can use their own examples but should acknowledge them as such in some capacity rather than attribute them inaccurately. Strong examples to analyse Free Will as further evidence included Dennett's Sphex wasp, the Nefarious Neurosurgeon, Laplace's demon, the Libet experiment and even the Oedipus mythology. These were used well in some students' responses.

Question 5

Weaker responses went through each of the philosophical positions at length – e.g., Libertarians think A, Hard Determinists think B, Compatibilists are in the middle. This suggests a pre-planned essay addressing very general ideas.

Stronger essays talked about the felt sensation of free will and how freedom is incompatible with causality. Compatibilists believing in choice in a determined universe was core and well supported with philosophers such as Frankfurt, Dennett, and Churchland. Discussions around physics versus biology looked to find a compatibilist framework supporting freedom versus strict causality.

Interestingly no one looked to Dualism as a means by which we can circumvent strict causal phenomena. Cartesian metaphysics stipulate that substances are finite (the physical) and infinite (mind or soul), thus the res cogitans escapes the strict physical laws which Hard Determinists rely upon for their arguments, although this may have been more relevant for a discussion regarding Libertarianism.

Question 6

Most students were able to explain that, if Hard Determinists are correct, current punishment practices seem unjustified. While weaker responses argued that hard determinists argue criticise all forms of punishment, stronger responses acknowledged that non-retributive punishment could still be justified in a deterministic world. Sophisticated responses noted that, paradoxically, if hard determinists are correct, methods of punishment (however unjustified) are also causally determined.

Most students were also able to explain either a libertarian or compatibilist perspective on punishment. There was a tendency, however, to explain philosophical positions (often using an illustrative quotation from a philosophical, religious or literary text) without clearly analysing the reasoning and evidence used to support that position.

While many students were able to outline weaknesses/criticisms of philosophical arguments, very few critically evaluated how effective these criticisms were. To achieve the highest ratings on Criterion 3, philosophical analysis must move past the listing of criticisms, to assessing whether those criticisms may be overcome or whether they render an argument indefensible.

Section C - Contemporary Conflicts in Moral Theory

Question 7

There was a wide range of theories mentioned in question 7. Stronger responses analysed ethical frameworks and theories such as Paul Taylor, Indigenous ethics, Kantian ethics, Aldo Leopold, Deep Ecology (Arne Naess), Preference Utilitarianism (Peter Singer), Ecofeminism (Karen Warren), Contractarianism (Thomas Hobbes), Natural Law (Thomas Aquinas) and Thomas Regan. Often students were able to pair two contrasting theories, and these were typically well discussed whilst highlighting the core philosophical differences and what the application of these differences would look like in society. These theories were also applied to a wide range of contemporary topics such as the proposed cable car on kunanyi, endangered species, salmon farming, animal testing, sweat shops, covid-19 and associated ethics regarding individual rights, coal mining and the war in Afghanistan. Overall, this was a strong section in which most students were able to achieve well against the criteria.

Responses which focused specifically on religious frameworks and/or religious topics typically leant toward theology as opposed to philosophical ethical analyses, and this resulted in lower awards on criteria 1 and 4. Some responses did not have a depth of analyses, and therefore an understanding of the positions appeared rote-learnt as opposed to truly understood. For example, mentioning film titles in passing or briefly describing the plot of various pieces of literature was harder to award across all criteria. Some essays also focused on the legal, political, and social issues of their chosen topic without utilising the core frameworks. Whilst this addressed criterion 5, there was still a distinct lack of ethical reasoning for criterion 4.

Overall, it was wonderful to see a range of responses on a variety of topics and good use of theorists on question 7.

Question 8

Question eight presented students with the opportunity to exhibit knowledge of ethical theories and how rules or principles might be applied to a contemporary moral conflict of their choosing. Students who studied Ethics overwhelming chose this question, perhaps because the previous one directed them to focus upon the limitations of ethical frameworks, when they may have preferred to elaborate upon more constructive applications of moral principles to pressing contemporary concerns.

Essays which analysed and applied normative frameworks (e.g., various forms of Deontology, Utilitarianism, and specific Environmental, Feminist, or Political theories) tended to fare better than those which focused upon metaethical positions (e.g., Nihilism, Relativism, Existentialism etc.). Essays on the latter often struggled to precisely apply moral concepts, whereas the former – with specific tools such as Kant's categorical imperative or Bentham's principle of utility – appeared to lend themselves more readily to specific advice that could be analysed and evaluated. Nevertheless, there were some exceptional metaethical responses from students who had clearly thought deeply about the implications and applications of their chosen theories to contemporary issues, as well as many normative responses that misrepresented or misunderstood ethical principles and how they might be applied. Versions of Kant's categorical imperative, especially the 'universalizability' principle, were often inaccurately applied, showing a surface level understanding of the concept.

Similarly, Bentham's principle of utility whilst often effectively applied, was also a site where students revealed the limitations or inaccuracies of their grasp, for instance, focusing upon the greatest good for the deliberating moral agent in the circumstances, rather than considering the consequences for all of those the choice would impact. Similarly, the preferences of Singer's Preference Utilitarianism are more nuanced than simply identifying what the individual making the decision might themselves prefer – Singer's framework is designed to consider all the preferences the act will affect, with a scale of basic, serious, significant, and peripheral interests to adjudicate conflict between the affected individuals and overcome biases such as speciesism. Generally, it is important for students to develop a more nuanced and precise grasp of the ethical frameworks they are writing about, so that these are accurately applied to the issues they choose.

Other issues that arose in responses to this question included essays that covered too many theories, describing them in a list-like fashion, without enough time spent on analysis or application to the issue. Some essays spent too much time on abstract thought experiments (such as the trolley problem) without directly connecting this to how frameworks would be applied to the issue – this can be done well, e.g., COVID/Climate Change – but often undue focus on an imagined circumstance limited students' opportunity to address elements of criterion 5.

Some students wrote on thinkers and issues traditionally taught in the Studies of Religion course. Whilst there is some overlap (e.g., Deontology and Utilitarianism) the focus of these scripts was often overly centred upon religious frameworks and/or issues, the contemporary relevance of which, were unexplained.

The breadth and depth of ethical frameworks and issues engaged with by students was a particular strength of these responses. Frameworks and thinkers included: Utilitarians such as Bentham, Mill, Singer, Popper, and Epicurus; Deontologists such as Kant, Regan, Taylor, W.D. Ross, Nagel, T.M. Scanlan; Environmentalists such as Leopold's Land Ethic, Naess' Deep Ecology, various Ecofeminist positions, and the holistic nature of First Nations philosophies surrounding Care for Country; Feminists such as Beauvoir, Kristeva, Anne Manne, Julie Bindel, Alexandra Kollantai, Judith Jarvis Thompson, Claudia Card, Martha Nussbaum, and Judith Butler; as well as political theorists such as John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Contemporary issues students applied the relevant moral principles to included: Climate change, COP26, Emissions, Mining, Fast fashion, Factory farming, Fish farms, Water rights, Great Barrier Reef, Murray Darling, The Tarkine/takayna, kunanyi cable car, Anti-natalism, Overpopulation, Animal testing, Recreational hunting, sex work, childcare, Data surveillance, Terrorism, Whistle-blowing, Poverty, Imprisonment, Covid-19 (lockdowns, vaccinations and vaccine nationalism [hoarding/stockpiling], genetic engineering, abortion, Olympics, Euthanasia, Drug decriminalisation, Death penalty, Torture, Invasion of Afghanistan.

Section C - Life, the Universe, and Everything

Question 9

Students made use of a range of cosmological arguments including the Kalam version, Aquinas, William Lane Craig, contingent and necessary facts of Leibniz. Better answers concentrated on one cosmological argument and were able to show the reasoning behind that argument. Strong answers analysed the reasoning behind the argument, for example some students wrote about the principles of causation and about the need to avoid an infinite regress. Students included evidence in favour of the big bang e.g., Cosmic background microwave radiation and some problems with that evidence. Some students were able to point out that the big bang theory still fails to explain why there is something rather than nothing.

Some very strong answers looked at how an argument like the Kalam version of the cosmological argument can accommodate the big bang theory as the mechanism of creation.

Some strong criticisms of the cosmological argument were included such as: what caused god? The fallacy of composition, including examples to illustrate the point, as well as asking why must god be the first cause? Students should look to include classical criticisms of classical arguments. Hume is a good place to start for powerful criticisms of cosmological arguments for the existence of God.

Students and teachers could consider ways to address criterion 5. Consider the question, how does a modern-day person reconcile the alternate explanations provided by religious arguments and scientific theory? Very strong answers were able to provide critique of the scientific method via thinkers such as Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn. Another approach might be to acknowledge that some religious thinkers, such as the current Pope, accept scientific theories such as the big bang as being compatible with faith-based explanations of the universe, i.e., the big bang was god's mechanism of creation. Other theists reject the science, e.g., fundamentalist Christians whilst many atheists accept the science and reject the religious explanations, e.g., Christopher Hitchens.

Criterion 5 was somewhat neglected by some students, perhaps because there is so much to do in exam answers for this section of the course. Some students included William Paley's teleological watchmaker argument. This would be better included in an answer to question 10 on teleological arguments.

Question 10

Stronger responses began by outlining the origins of the Teleological argument and moved on to discussing the more modern analogy used by Paley. They would then address some criticisms of the teleological argument, such as multiple big bangs and the lottery fallacy. As well as discussing some additional supporting perspectives, such as Behe. Responses would then move onto a discussion on evolution and unpacking the basic principles behind it, often using examples and evidence from Darwin and later evidence, such as human induced evolution, such as elephants losing their tusks. They would then wrap up their discussion with some evaluation and comparison between the two, with the strongest responses concluding that the two theories were not mutually exclusive.

Weaker responses also tended to start with Paley's watch maker analogy but would often get caught up explaining it, without critically analysing it. They would attempt to provide some evaluation of the analogy and would move onto comparing it directly to evolution, usually without discussing evolution in much detail first. These responses also tended to believe the argument had been solved and that evolution was the answer but could not provide evidence to support their conclusions.

Section D – 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

The quotation, whilst powerful, was also problematic for some students in that Beauvoir's seminal distinction between sex and gender and its ongoing significance to contemporary issues appeared to some students to clash with the interpretation of the final sentence portraying the human condition as an essentialist binary/coupling of man and woman. Stronger responses came from students who engaged with Beauvoir's analysis of how patriarchal attitudes towards biology and gender oppress women. Most dealt well with (and ultimately dismissed) the 'difference feminism' critique that Beauvoir allows women 'only the freedom to be men' by emphasising the existentialist foundations of her work, and the necessary condition of freedom for anyone to live an authentic life, as Beauvoir wrote: "I am interested in the fortunes of the individual as defined not in terms of happiness but in terms of liberty."

Many students began their responses by engaging with philosophers whose ideas influenced those which Beauvoir went on to develop into her own. Students wrote about how Beauvoir engaged with and elaborated upon concepts such as Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Nietzsche's 'herd' mentality, or how the genealogy of moral and social norms reveals them to have no essential character, and Sartre's Existentialism conveyed in the phrase 'existence precedes essence'. These approaches worked well when students emphasised Beauvoir's insights and amendments to acknowledge gender oppression, and less so when too much of the response focused upon these foundations without due analysis or acknowledgement of why Beauvoir's work radically challenged the presumed androcentric nature of the human condition. As Beauvoir writes: "[…] what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she – a free and autonomous being like all human creatures – nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other." Stronger responses engaged with Beauvoir's specific analysis of the nature of how women are Othered under patriarchal structures, and how these circumstances are reinscribed even today. Furthermore, students did well to causally link these ideologies to the lived experiences of women's (and often their own) lives under patriarchy, their oppression as a class, and the many ways in which these continue to manifest in contemporary society, including such issues as the gender pay gap, women's reproductive rights, pink collar jobs, socially reinforced unpaid domestic labour, the Bechdel test, the treatment of Julia Gillard and other important feminist icons and/or groups/movements. Students tended to dispel the difference feminist critiques of Beauvoir as a misrepresentation of her project, however, feminists from latter waves, such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Angela Davis, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, bell hooks, and Kimberly Crenshaw Williams were used well to evaluate Beauvoir's legacy and what work remains to be done.

Question 13

Weaker responses constructed a biography of Nietzsche and either misunderstood his core ideas or omitted them entirely.

Stronger essays linked his work to Schopenhauer's influence in the "will to life" and before him, Eastern Philosophy where notions of suffering are central.

Nietzsche rebelled against Christian morality as a subjugation of humanity – his criticisms suggested that blind acceptance of this morality is wrong, and people become the 'herd' or 'sheep' if they do so. He believed that suffering was important in the flourishing of the individual and through hardship one becomes stronger, thus his "will to power" is highlighted. He believed in the self above all else and again disagreed with Christian morality in promoting weakness as virtuous. Nietzsche believed in embracing suffering and wrote his eternal recurrence as a tribute to the fact, also his 'amor fati' or the 'love of fate' echoes this sentiment.

There was confusion with the master/slave distinction. Originally this concept can be traced to the Hegelian dialectic, also influential in de Beauvoir's 'subject/other' distinction.

Stronger essays illustrated both the strengths and the weaknesses of Nietzschean thinking in 2021, essentially demonstrating a sound comprehension of his ideas.

Question 14

Most students effectively engaged with the quotation in the question and linked this to Thoreau's arguments about the importance of nature. Weaker responses overemphasised biographical recounts with the occasional quotation from *Walden*. Though both biographical details and quotations are valuable parts of essays on Thoreau, they should be accompanied by conceptual analysis. Strong responses were able to establish the connectedness of Thoreau's arguments about epistemology (gaining moral knowledge from nature) and ethics/politics (reassessing one's life based on this moral knowledge and disobeying unjust laws).

Some students moved from explaining Thoreau's philosophical position to criticising it and applying it to contemporary life too hastily – this tended to result in essays that achieved high ratings on Criterion 5, but lower ratings on Criterion 2. It is important to clearly explain Thoreau's position with reference to key concepts such as transcendentalism, ethical perception, simplicity, self-sufficiency and civil disobedience to satisfy the requirements of Criterion 2.

Different students successfully defended and rejected the claim that Thoreau's writings are now irrelevant using a range of contemporary examples. However, some who argued that Thoreau's writings are no longer relevant tended to present a 'straw man' version of Thoreau's position by claiming that he expected everyone to go and live in the woods forever – his argument is more subtle than this.