

# 2022 ASSESSMENT REPORT

## PHL315118 - PHILOSOPHY

### GENERAL COMMENTS

The 2022 Philosophy exam was undertaken by a cohort of critical minds who wrote interestingly about complex philosophical ideas both ancient and modern. Students conveyed comprehension of an impressively wide array of philosophers, positions, ideas, thought experiments, arguments, and evidence, and applied these to significant debates in meaningful ways.

Throughout the exam, the strongest responses offered detailed analysis and evaluation of one to three arguments. It is wise to avoid the ‘grand tour of ideas’ approach to structuring an essay, which tends to overemphasise explaining the views of others at the expense of personal evaluation of arguments. After explaining a philosophical position and reasoning that supports it, students should always present a reasoned personal view about how convincing that philosophical position is. It can be helpful to use first person voice to clearly signpost when you are transitioning from explaining the views of others, to making personal evaluative claims – for example, “I find this argument/objection unconvincing because x.”

A simple test you can perform when writing a philosophy essay is to ask: Will my conclusion be a surprise to the examiner? If you make clear statements about how convincing each argument and counter-argument is in the body of the essay, then your personal position will develop throughout the essay in a way that the examiner can follow. Your conclusion will not be a surprise and your evaluation of the arguments and philosophical problems will be more justified.

It is a mark of good philosophy to present the best possible counter-arguments to the position that you ultimately agree with and then demonstrate that these objections can be overcome. Many students presented robust criticisms of one position, but only superficially considered objections to their own view. As Peter Singer once wrote, “There is little satisfaction in gaining an easy triumph over a weak opponent while ignoring better arguments against your views.”

### Section A – Mind / Body

Most students were able to explain either one or two positions and their arguments, and a pleasing number of students engaged with the wording of the question and/or quotation, identifying which position it aligned with and indicating their contention in response.

Overall, the most common strategy was to describe one philosophical position, (for example, Cartesian dualism), discuss some of its weaknesses, (e.g., the problem of interaction, the pineal

gland etc.), and to then discuss a counter position, (e.g., physicalism) to some degree before concluding that both sides have their own strengths and weaknesses, but that we'll never really know the answer to the mind/body problem. Some concluded that a position is not supported by enough evidence, but that it would be nice if it were true; others simply concluded that it is true regardless. Weaker papers simply explained what a position believes, and may have included no evaluation beyond claiming that it cannot account for either qualia or why mental states seem dependent upon physical/brain states. The best responses offered a detailed analysis of the reasoning supporting one or two (occasionally three) philosophical positions and a detailed evaluation of their merit.

There were a few basic errors with thought experiments, e.g., overstating what passing Turing's Test would prove, or claiming that if Nagel had more information about bats in his paper then it would be possible to get close to experiencing bat qualia. Some essays listed or retold thought experiments without really analysing what they might imply about the mind body problem, or offering any kind of counter argument to what they were intended to show. Other basic errors occurred here and there, like:

- Referring to 'Desecrates' or 'Decrates', and calling him 'Rene'
- Calling something a 'compelling argument' simply because the writer finds it intriguing, not in the technical philosophical sense of 'compelling'
- Saying that a claim which contradicts another claim 'refutes' it
- Using 'position' as the subject of verbs like 'refute', 'critique', or 'argue' (e.g., "the position argues significantly").

Rhetorical questions were not too common, fortunately, but one essay consisted mostly of such questions. Students who did use them usually did not try to answer them.

Some students frequently appealed to their own personal beliefs in support of a position they were describing, as if their own beliefs count as evidence. One student went so far as to say that Descartes' dualism is strong because he "provides an argument based off of himself" which "conveys the importance of subjective experience", in a paragraph attempting to show that one person's personal belief on a position is sufficient reason for other people to believe it as well. Another student claimed that because there are many people in the community who agree with substance dualism, possibly because they believe in souls, substance dualism is thus more likely to be true. Some students simply claimed that if an argument is easy to understand, or seems plausible, then it must be strong.

Also concerning: several students disparaged science and the scientific method on the grounds of it (allegedly) being 'Western', as if that were self-evidently bad. One described science as "based on the bias of the West's echo chamber", apparently unaware of the contradiction involved in making such a claim as part of a (somewhat) logically reasoned argument.

A number of essays showed a misunderstanding and misapplication of Occam's razor, described in one instance as the idea that "we should not needlessly complicate things". Students explained it in various ways, like saying that it means "the simplest explanation is the

best”, while clearly misunderstanding what it would mean for an explanation to be the simplest. (Is ‘witches did it’ a simple explanation?)

Students should be cautious when accusing physicalists of ‘neglecting’ or ‘failing to address’ qualia, which is simply untrue. Almost all physicalists devote extensive attention to the issues concerning qualia (sometimes discussed in terms of ‘sensations’), but argue either that qualia can be explained in reductionist terms or that qualia is such a muddled concept that we ought to eliminate it.

Students should also be wary of simply stating that more scientific evidence will settle the mind/body problem because many positions argue that no amount of scientific study of physical brain states can adequately explain subjective mental experience. In order for more scientific evidence to end the debate, other philosophical (not scientific) issues must be resolved, such as the nature/ontology of consciousness.

Many essays became very vague towards the end. Even after saying a position has major flaws, and another one is better, many students would arrive at their final paragraph and say something like ‘both sides have their strengths, we don’t really know how things work, and either one could be right’.

The best essays discussed competing positions and/or thought experiments in detail, critically analysing their premises along the way, before devoting at least one paragraph to discussing the implications of taking those premises seriously. Their use of philosophical terminology was accurate, even though their written expression overall did not need to be overly sophisticated. They also offered a firm conclusion at the end that was supported by the analysis of the relevant arguments and evidence.

## Section B – Free Will

This section required students to either compare an argument for hard determinism and an argument for free will, evaluate the relative merits of compatibilism, or discuss whether we should punish people for their actions, if they are not entirely free.

Many responses used speculative/analogical examples (such as Laplace’s demon, the garden of forking paths, the myth of Oedipus, and Locke’s locked room) that are effective ways to *illustrate* libertarian or hard determinist positions; however, only the strongest responses took the extra step of asking: is the world really like this? Students who critically interrogated these speculative examples and presented arguments about their relationship with reality were rewarded on Criterion 3 and Criterion 4. For example, some used evidence from quantum physics to deny that Laplace’s demon could know everything about the state of the physical world in one instant and, therefore, that human behaviour is not predictable, even in principle.

Many students also used a range of other evidence to effectively challenge and defend philosophical positions including: studies from the natural and human sciences, first person

descriptions of the experiences of choosing, thought experiments, applications of Ockham's razor, and inductive arguments concerning successful reductionist explanations of previously 'mysterious' phenomena.

Some students defended a libertarian position mainly using the reasoning that they don't like the idea of lacking free will. This kind of justification should be avoided as it is arguably an unphilosophical refusal to interrogate one's existing beliefs and led to lower ratings on Criterion 3. Some essays were very thin on their description of/case for Libertarianism. While it's appropriate to note the possible practical consequences of abandoning a belief in free will, this is only one argument and probably not the strongest one. Better essays picked out one or two Libertarian philosophers (for instance Peter Van Inwagen, Helen Steward, or Jean-Paul Sartre) and set out their accounts in detail. Some of the Sartre ones were excellent – which is impressive as existentialist freedom isn't too easy to explain in an exam essay. A few students who referenced Kant and Sartre in Q3 ended up detouring a little into an ethics essay. As above, it's not like ethics/pragmatic consequences of one or other answer to the Problem of free will are irrelevant – but students should beware of derailing themselves.

There was also a tendency for students to argue that both positions were equally compelling, which is too indecisive to be a successful philosophy essay. Though students do not need to unequivocally agree with a determinist, libertarian or compatibilist philosopher, they do need to defend a personal philosophical position, even if it is expressed modestly. For example, one could argue that libertarianism is the most plausible argument given the arguments and objections considered in the essay.

Better responses ranged across several different philosophers (e.g., Dennett, Sam Harris, Peter van Inwagen, Peter or Galen Strawson, Hume, d'Holbach, etc.) and did not just briefly touch on their ideas but commented on the conflict between them, then evaluated where a strength or weakness might tip the balance. They also analysed the philosophers' actual arguments, often explicitly laying out a syllogism and discussing evidence for or against the premises.

Weaker responses outlined a basic version of determinism, and possibly libertarianism, before inaccurately declaring that compatibilism is the ideal middle ground, as it combines the best of both sides. They often covered positions and arguments in a vague way, maybe giving an oversimplified version of Dennett or Hume that was missing the most interesting parts of what those thinkers have written. The sphex wasp was a very popular figure, however, the poor wasp was usually offered as a simple metaphor for human behaviour without taking that any further.

More than one student claimed that quantum uncertainty completely disproves hard determinism. They didn't call it quantum uncertainty as such—there were references to Schrödinger's cat, and something similar to the double slit experiment—but it's what they meant.

## Section C - Contemporary Conflicts in Moral Theory

Although most students were able to explain one or more ethical theory and apply them to a suitable contemporary ethical issue, some offered a discussion of an issue without reference to a specific ethical theory. Even if these responses included discussion of strengths/weaknesses of different possible responses to the issue, they did not answer important parts of the question.

Students are reminded to write about a single, specific ethical issue and to avoid discussing multiple issues or very broad issues. For example, some students wrote about feminism or climate change in general and this led to superficial and imprecise writing. A helpful thing to remember is that you need to be able to assess one or more ways that moral agents can respond to an issue (e.g., should we do x or y in response to issue z?). More successful essays isolated a specific issue such as the defensibility of sex work or whether coercive population control is an ethically justifiable response to climate change.

Given the time constraints of the exam, it is also advisable to make all examples used in the essay relate to the chosen issue rather than, for example, writing about what Kant says about lying in an essay about vegetarianism. Using a broad range of examples helps to draw out the nuances of ethical issues, which can benefit ratings on Criterion 4 and 5.

Of the students who successfully explained an ethical theory and applied it to an ethical issue, some did not take the further step of evaluating the ethical theory by considering its logical strengths and weaknesses. Students who did evaluate their chosen ethical theory were able to do this in two main ways. One method was to present objections to an ethical theory (such as the problem of prediction as an objection to utilitarianism, although few students took that idea any further). Another way was to consider whether alternative ethical theories were stronger or weaker in their treatment of the issue (such as considering whether a deontological theory was superior to a utilitarian theory). Both were good ways to approach the question. The most important thing is that students considered arguments and objections and gave reasons to defend a personal position about whether an ethical theory prescribed a good response to the issue.

Some students discussed the ethical theory of nihilism, which is permissible, but tended to explain nihilism as advocating acting in one's own interest—this is more strictly an ethical egoist position. These students mainly used Friedrich Nietzsche as a proponent of nihilism, which is not accurate. Nietzsche often speaks of the need to avoid nihilism and defends a particular kind of ethical subjectivism, in which exceptional individuals create new values.

The stronger papers did several things well. They outlined an ethical issue that was not too general and not too specific, even though many of them were not exactly 'live' issues here in

Australia at this time. They explained an ethical theory accurately and in detail, and then applied it to their issue in a plausible and consistent way, regardless of whether or not it led to the students' preferred conclusion. And they arrived at an actual conclusion in which they stated exactly what they thought was the right way to resolve the ethical issue at hand.

However, most students did not even try to analyse the weaknesses of the ethical frameworks they were writing about. Of those who did attempt to critically analyse utilitarianism or deontology, nobody offered a valid criticism of the latter, largely because they appeared to have misunderstood Kant's arguments. Almost without exception, mid-range and weaker essays rejected ethical theories on the grounds that they led to conclusions the students evidently did not like. Better marks would be gained by offering reasoning and evidence for these as opposed to personal preference.

## 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? Other strong criticisms included 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, like human induced evolution, such as elephants losing their tusks. They would then wrap up their discussion with some evaluation and comparison between the two, and several strong responses came to the conclusion 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

While there was a range, overall, the quality of the essays on Beauvoir were impressive. There were some really genuine and strong scripts written by students who clearly had taken their study of Beauvoir seriously and came armed not just with set-piece critiques but with sincere and thoughtful engagement with the core ideas. Congratulations to those students and also to the teachers who clearly prepared them well!

As is often the case with this section some students' marks suffered on Criterion 5 through either ignoring contemporary application entirely, or (more commonly) making a very cursory reference to some contemporary issue (wage gap; abortion access in US) without applying any of Beauvoir's ideas or analysing using any philosophical tools or reasoning. Conversely, there were some quite reflective ones which considered gender fluidity and how well-equipped Beauvoir's tools are to theorise the contemporary gender landscape.

Some scripts went on the attack and attempted to make a case against Beauvoir and the feminist project more broadly. This is of course perfectly acceptable – but students must be clear that this is a philosophy essay, and so they need to employ philosophical tools and reasoning. Social-media-grade rhetoric is not going to score well.

Perhaps most importantly, students must not simply write a generic sociology style 'feminism essay' with Beauvoir's name at the start and the finish. It must be an essay addressing the ongoing relevance of Beauvoir's feminist philosophy.

### QUESTION 13

Most papers were in the B range, unlike in some other sections. This is probably because there is simply so much you can say about each of those philosophers that it's easier to hit the middle, and harder to hit the top.

There were numerous *ad hominem* attacks on Nietzsche in place of argument. For example: claiming that his ideas stem simply from his massive ego; casting aspersions on his ideas by simply associating them with the Nazi regime rather than critically analysing the ideas themselves; claiming, but not arguing, that Jordan Peterson is "ultra-right", and that he has "politically appropriated" Nietzsche's ideas which means Nietzsche is bad; attempting to malign Nietzsche's ideas not through argument but by referring to his "relative privilege" etc. Others rejected Nietzsche's master/slave model on emotional grounds without providing an argument of any kind (e.g., claiming that calling people 'lower people' is victim blaming, and therefore bad; claiming that prevalent mental health issues in our society mean we should reject Nietzsche's philosophy).

Others offered a misapplication of Nietzsche's ideas; e.g. suggesting that he would approve of Putin's actions in Ukraine, and that he would think the Ukrainian people's suffering was good for them, even though Nietzsche did not attribute psychopathic or despotic traits to the Superman.

Good responses explained the master/slave morality in more accurate detail, correctly using terms like 'ressentiment', and 'teleology'. They showed solid familiarity with the basics of Nietzsche's work and used several direct quotes appropriately. They were sometimes off the mark a bit when discussing relevance to contemporary politics—terms like 'far right' were bandied about very carelessly. But they tended to find interesting ways to apply Nietzsche to 21<sup>st</sup> century life, e.g., proposing that his ideas are a remedy for the nihilistic hopelessness that can lead to despondency.

## QUESTION 14

Students were generally able to identify some of Thoreau's key beliefs and details about his life and most also engaged with the quotation in the question. It was pleasing to see a number of students discuss different possible interpretations of what Thoreau meant when he claimed that "All good things are wild and free." Students who explicitly engaged with all parts of the question were rewarded on Criterion 1.

However, not all responses outlined *philosophical* dimensions to Thoreau's thought. Given that Criterion 2 is assessed in Section D, it is important to use and explain Thoreau's philosophical concepts such as transcendentalism, ethical perception, self-reliance and civil disobedience. Students who were able to articulate connections between Thoreau's epistemological, metaphysical, ethical and political ideas scored most highly on Criterion 2. For example, his belief that nature is divine (a metaphysical claim) leads to his belief that immersing oneself in nature is the only way to gain moral knowledge (an epistemological/ethical claim), which leads his scepticism about popular opinion and governments (another epistemological claim), which leads to his belief that we should not conform to what is considered normal and that unjust laws should be broken (ethical/political claims).

Though a small number of responses did little more than summarise Thoreau's ideas, most students applied Thoreau's philosophy to one or more contemporary issues in order to address the question's claim that "some disconnection from the natural world is necessary in order to survive in a liveable environment today and that Thoreau's prescriptions are unachievable in 2022" – these responses were rewarded on Criterion 5. Contemporary examples used to defend this claim included discussion of benefits of living in cities, the cost of visiting national parks, legal issues with living on public/private land, benefits of technology, and the unreasonableness of expecting people with dependents to withdraw from society and disobey laws.

Examples used to challenge the above claim included contemporary individuals living simply or 'off-grid' lives, the psychological harms of technology use/addiction, the increasing importance of environmental issues such as climate change and deforestation, and the successes and ongoing need for contemporary protest movements.

The best responses included some philosophical 'to-and-fro' between arguments and counter-arguments concerning whether Thoreau's philosophy is achievable in 2022. Some students included the views of different philosophers (for instance, Arendt and Zizek) to do this and others considered competing ways of interpreting and applying Thoreau's philosophy to our contemporary context—both of these were good approaches.