

2023 ASSESSMENT REPORT

PHL315118 PHILOSOPHY

General Comments

As is always the case, students engaged with a lovely variety of thinkers, ranging from the ancient to the contemporary, and applied them to an impressive range of contemporary issues. Generally, the best essays didn't try to cover too much ground, but explored what they did cover in detail. Students should avoid discussing any more than three philosophical positions per essay - you simply cannot do justice to more in 45 minutes.

Another general feature that differentiated weaker essays from stronger essays was the ratio of explanation, analysis and evaluation. Many weaker essays consisted almost entirely of description/explanation with, perhaps, one to two sentences devoted to evaluating each argument. Future candidates should seek to explain the arguments of others as succinctly as possible so that more time/energy/word count can be devoted to analysing the reasoning supporting arguments and then evaluating how effectively those reasons support philosophical positions. A good 'rule of thumb' is that 1/3 of the word count should be devoted to explanation, 1/3 to analysis and 1/3 evaluation. When candidates can achieve exceptional clarity and concision of explanation, even more of the word count can be devoted to evaluation of arguments, objections and replies. Something that often helps with achieving this concision is to focus on explaining the aspects of a philosophical position that will feature in the evaluation of that position; explaining and analysing parts of arguments that are never evaluated is often a waste of words.

On a related note, successful essays supported a clear personal philosophical position with clear evidence and reasoning. Weaker essays tended to back up their position with unjustified assertions; for example, many declared arguments to be good because they were 'scientific' or 'logical'. While scientific evidence is often important to philosophical argumentation, none of the questions in the course can be settled by science alone. Addressing metaphysical and ethical questions (all of the questions in the exam) always involves claims that cannot be verified or falsified through empirical observation. Also, candidates should remember that an argument being 'logical' is no guarantee of its truth.

The above comments 'boil down' to reminding students that philosophy is an activity, not simply a body of knowledge to be remembered and written down. This activity consists in clearly articulating and then giving reasons to support and challenge different points of view. Candidates who do philosophy in a thoughtful and sustained way cannot help but address all of the assessed criteria. In the comments below, there is one overwhelming refrain: always justify your view.

Section A – Mind/Body

Question 1

Most candidates accurately explained either a monist or dualist position in philosophy of mind. Substance dualism and reductive materialism (identity theory) were the most common positions considered, though a few discussed property dualism, eliminative materialism and idealism. Most were also able to discuss a ‘major criticism’, such as the problem of interaction for dualism or the problem of explaining subjective experience in reductionist terms for physicalism.

There was a tendency in weaker responses to lay out some strengths and weaknesses of monism and dualism and then conclude that they are both simply good for helping us understand the debate. Though it is true that studying different points of view helps us to understand debates, the job of a philosopher is to defend a position. This can be wholehearted or tentative agreement with a position, proposing a modified version of a position, or rejecting one or more positions. The important thing is that students take some stance and then defend that stance with reasons/evidence.

Students should also keep coherency of argumentation in mind as they prepare for the examination. Many candidates ended up agreeing with positions even though they had not refuted criticisms of that position.

Although the question asked students to describe and explain one monist or dualist argument, students were not penalised if they discussed additional relevant philosophical positions. Similarly, although the question asked students to explain multiple strengths and a single ‘major criticism’, students were not penalised if they discussed multiple criticisms/objections. Students should always interpret the numbered requirements in the question as establishing minimum expectations rather than limiting what can be legitimately discussed.

Question 2

Most candidates were able to give some explanation of what thought experiments are and also to identify and explain a thought experiment relevant to philosophy of mind.

Weaker responses tended to argue that thought experiments performed a purely illustrative function – that they simply made theories of mind easier to understand. More sophisticated essays noted that thought experiments are usually used to provide justification for specific claims/propositions in philosophical arguments. For example, Searle’s ‘Chinese Room’ thought experiment is used to provide intuitive support for the claim that no amount of arranging symbols can lead to understanding the meaning of those symbols, which is then used to support the claim that strong A.I. is impossible.

Many, though not all, candidates addressed the second part of the question, concerning whether thought experiments are ‘unscientific speculations’. Many weaker responses tended to assume that ‘unscientific’ was synonymous with ‘useless’ without clearly articulating what differentiates scientific and unscientific claims or their relative strengths and weaknesses. Stronger responses justified an argument about the usefulness of thought experiments in general based on their evaluation of one or more specific thought experiments discussed in the essay. A few excellent responses noted that some thought experiments in philosophy of mind are unscientific speculations about what will be known and knowable with a ‘mature’ neuroscience.

Question 3

Most responses included an explanation of the concept of qualia and also recognised that the quotation in the question was a physicalist interpretation of qualia. Most were also able to articulate the differences between physicalist accounts of the mind (such as those of J.J.C. Smart, Patricia & Paul Churchland and Daniel Dennett) and property dualist accounts of the mind (such as those of Frank Jackson and David Chalmers). Some candidates also discussed Thomas Nagel, who doesn't strictly defend any metaphysical position in philosophy of mind, but students were not penalised if they analysed and evaluated Nagel's argument effectively.

Basic responses often discussed the concept of qualia as evidence for the property dualist position; however, this tended to involve circular reasoning (an uncritical acceptance of qualia being immaterial was used to justify the claim that immaterial properties of mind exist).

More sophisticated responses tended to interrogate the nature of consciousness/subjective experience/qualia. Is consciousness an exceptional/irreducible part of nature? Or can it be explained in terms of the physical operations of the brain? A few excellent responses distinguished between the epistemological and metaphysical issues involved in the debate about the nature of qualia. Do issues concerning our ability to scientifically study the experiences of others give us good reasons to argue that qualia are non-physical in nature?

Some candidates showed awareness of different varieties of property dualism and the question of whether immaterial properties of the mind are fundamental (panpsychism) or emergent (epiphenomenalism). These candidates were rewarded on Criterion 2 for demonstrating a very good knowledge of philosophical concepts and arguments.

Section B – Free Will

Question 4

The railroad analogy in the prompt was successfully addressed in most responses and linked effectively to relevant libertarian and hard determinist positions.

However, many essays adopted an overly descriptive 'tour of ideas' structure, explaining many arguments in superficial detail. These essays tended to be light on analysis, evidence and evaluation, so did not score highly on Criterion 3 or 4.

The discussion of libertarian arguments in particular would benefit from more detailed analysis and evaluation of the supporting reasoning for these positions. For example, students writing about Jean-Paul Sartre, could discuss his phenomenological method or his 'paper knife' argument, which claims that, because humans are not designed, they lack an essence and are, therefore, free. For students writing about William James, they could discuss his rejection of the correspondence and coherence theories of truth usually connected with scientific determinist arguments in favour of a pragmatic conception of truth.

Weaker responses often proposed that we should believe that free will exists because it gives us a sense of hope or, on the other hand, that we should give up on the idea of free will because of scientific evidence.

However, they did not tend to back up these assertions with clear evidence or reasoning. It is important to argue why the psychological implications of a theory are reasons to accept/reject it and why scientific evidence should lead us to accept/reject metaphysical claims.

The best essays clearly analysed the reasoning supporting arguments, often using standard form to do so, and then evaluated the arguments by questioning specific propositions in the arguments.

Question 5

Though most responses attempted to engage with a compatibilist position, students should be reminded that compatibilism is not really a 'middle ground' of the two incompatibilist theories of freedom (hard determinism and libertarianism), as some believed. Compatibilists accept a deterministic (or indeterministic) account of reality, but argue that freedom is compatible with determinism by conceptualising freedom differently from hard determinists. Students who noted that compatibilists claim that free choices are still causally determined, though in highly specified ways (e.g. voluntarily), demonstrated a much stronger grasp of the position.

Given that Criterion 4 is assessed in this section, it is important to include a range of examples/evidence to support arguments. A range of subjectively experienced, everyday decisions were analysed effectively as well as scientific studies (such as the Libet studies) and thought experiments (such as Dennett's 'nefarious neurosurgeon'). Less successful papers tended to focus on explanation without presenting evidence for arguments.

Some candidates presented a thorough evaluation of compatibilism and another position or positions; however, many included only superficial assessment of arguments and these responses did not do well on Criterion 3. Two common problems arose. The first was students accepting compatibilism because it was asserted to be a sensible 'middle ground'; this is problematic because, in addition to the issue of misrepresenting compatibilism noted above, it assumes that compromise is always a good thing. If one claim is simply true and the other is false, then accepting a middle ground position is a worse outcome than rejecting the false claim - reasons need to be given to show that compromise is warranted. The other common error was rejecting compatibilism on the grounds that the compatibilist conception of freedom 'isn't really freedom at all' because it doesn't align with one's 'common sense' view of freedom as the ability to do otherwise. Again, reasons need to be given to support the common sense conception of freedom; common sense, like compromise, is not always justifiable.

Question 6

This question required students to discuss metaphysical arguments (libertarianism, determinism and/or compatibilism) and their ethical/political implications (for moral responsibility and punishment) in order to defend a personal position about whether people should be punished for breaking laws.

Most candidates were able to explain two or more metaphysical arguments and explain the implications of those arguments for punishment. However, as with Question 4 and 5, many essays were excessively descriptive and consisted largely of summaries of different positions, with little or no analysis of reasoning or evaluation of arguments. These essays did not score highly on Criterion 3.

It is worth noting that quotations from philosophers that simply assert/express their view are not evidence for that view. Evidence must support an argument to be rewarded on Criterion 4.

Some very good essays also discussed theories of punishment (such as utilitarian or desert-based theories), the motivations for punishing (such retribution, incapacitation, deterrence and rehabilitation) and forms of punishment (such as imprisonment, fines, the death penalty, community service and education) and then discussed which of these were consistent with different metaphysical positions. A small number of essays overemphasised these issues concerning punishment with only a minimal focus on the metaphysical positions named in the question. These did not score well on Criterion 1 as they did not address all parts of the question.

Section C – Contemporary Conflicts in Moral Theory **OR** Life, the Universe and Everything

Question 7 & 8

Questions 7 and 8 both called for fairly similar responses; the only real difference was that one question required discussion of the strengths of one ethical theory, while the other invited discussion of the strengths of two. In light of this, the following comments apply equally to both questions. As with previous questions, discussing weaknesses of and objections to theories as well as strengths was perfectly acceptable.

Both questions required students to balance discussion of a contemporary issue with analysis and evaluation of ethical theory. Many weaker responses devoted too many words to explaining the contemporary issue and too few words to ethical theory, overwhelming the reader with factual detail at the expense of philosophical analysis. Strong responses concisely introduced the contemporary issue early on and then integrated more discussion of the issue with their analysis and evaluation of ethical theories.

Most students chose to focus on Immanuel Kant's deontology and Jeremy Bentham's act utilitarianism as their moral frameworks, though a variety of others were considered, including but not limited to: Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, John Rawls's deontological theory of justice, deep ecology, virtue ethics, ecofeminism, cultural relativism and First Nations ethics. All of these approaches were appropriate, so long as the philosophical reasoning supporting their prescriptions was clearly established.

Though it is very heartening to see a larger number of candidates grappling with First Nations ethics, quite a few papers didn't get beyond a description of the beliefs of a particular nation/group of nations or presented a weakly justified argument taking the form: First Nations people believe x, therefore, x is right. Stronger responses analysed the often holistic metaphysical foundations of First Nations ethics and then considered objections such as: problems concerning consensus/disagreement across or within First Nations communities; whether the justification for First Nations ethical judgements amount to an appeal to tradition or appeal to authority of elders; and whether First Nations ethics can avoid a slide into cultural or bioregional relativism. Issues of ethical universalism, pluralism and relativism are worthy areas to explore in more detail in the future in relation to First Nations ethics.

Given that Criterion 4 is assessed, selection of examples is an important consideration in Section C. Candidates are encouraged to restrict their choice of examples to those concerning their chosen issue. Generic illustrative examples such as the trolley problem often wasted words that could have been better used elsewhere.

Question 9

Only a very small number of candidates attempted to answer this question. Weaker responses tended to explain one or more of the named arguments in the question and then to explain the 'Big Bang' theory of cosmology. However, these responses tended to neglect the reasoning used to justify the arguments and also the way that the 'Big Bang' theory challenges cosmological arguments for the existence of God. Students who explicitly addressed the 'challenge' part of the question did well on Criterion 1.

Some weaker responses also tended to debate the defensibility or religious belief in general rather than specific philosophical arguments, occasionally taking the form of a rant rather than a considered argument. Stronger responses tended to highlight the general features that unite cosmological arguments (ideas of causation justifying the existence of God) and then engage with the reasoning and evidence used to support specific cosmological arguments (often using standard form to good effect). They also explained the scientific evidence that supports the Big Bang Theory and then evaluated how effectively this scientific evidence can support/challenge metaphysical views. Students who were able to do some or all of this were rewarded on Criterion 4.

It is important to remember that, although the question didn't explicitly ask students to show the implications of their arguments for contemporary issues, these requirements still feature in the assessment criteria. Some candidates did this successfully by noting that the failure of cosmological arguments do not mean that belief in God(s) is irrational or unjustifiable in contemporary society. Students who claim that religious belief should be abandoned because of failed cosmological arguments tend to commit the fallacy fallacy: just because an argument is fallacious, does not mean that its conclusion is untrue. Likewise, as noted in the introductory comments in this report, the success of scientific arguments alone cannot justify metaphysical conclusions about the existence or non-existence of God(s). Some excellent responses considered the implications of these positions as being consistent with social/political tolerance of different religious beliefs as well as agnostic and/or atheistic views in contemporary society and also to caution against dogmatic atheism and theism and religiously motivated conflict. Those who included discussion of the implications of their personal position for their own life and/or contemporary society were rewarded on Criterion 5.

Question 10

Though this question was more popular than Question 9, again, only a small number of candidates wrote in response to Question 10. Most responses included discussion of one or more relevant design arguments - most commonly, Paley's watchmaker argument. As with the previous question, weaker responses tended to be overly descriptive and neglect the evidence/reasoning behind arguments and also critical evaluation of arguments.

Stronger responses tended to explicitly outline the general characteristics of teleological arguments (designer is evidence of the existence of God) and then analyse the specific reasoning supporting specific arguments. Often, these essays also included empirical evidence that supports Darwin’s theory of evolution, such as his studies of finches and contemporary analysis of fossil records. These specific explorations of evidence were rewarded on Criterion 4.

The above comments about considering the implications of arguments for contemporary society also applied to this question. Some students did this by considering the roles of faith and religious belief in contemporary society. For example, even if we accept that the failure of rational/empirical deductions concerning God’s existence, this does not undermine faith-based belief. Some sophisticated responses also considered the role of faith/dogmatism in the contemporary phenomena of religious fundamentalism, scientism and/or New Atheism.

Section D – The Good Life

Question 11

The quotation in this question was a little more challenging than the others in Section D and some candidates had trouble connecting it to Michel de Montaigne’s prescriptions on living well. Perhaps because of this, Question 11 was attempted by the fewest candidate of any in Section D. Nonetheless, a number of candidates made insightful observations that, because of our rationality, we often exaggerate and dwell upon trivial fears (e.g. social embarrassment about our bodies or conduct) that may never actually happen and, perhaps less trivial fears (e.g. fear of death) that do happen, but that we do not actually experience - they then expanded upon Montaigne’s advice for avoiding these pitfalls.

Candidates are reminded to use and explain philosophical language in essays on Montaigne. Although his arguments are less formal than other philosophers in this section, there are still opportunities to explain the essay form as an ‘attempt’ to address philosophical questions (as opposed to a ‘proof’), his scepticism, his critique of rationalism, links with stoicism, ethical pluralism, etc. Candidates who did this were rewarded on Criterion 2.

The question of Montaigne’s enduring relevance was generally addressed, though with varying degrees of detail and effectiveness. The most successful responses linked Montaigne’s philosophy to issues such as social media and beauty standards, the body positivity movement, and the failure of contemporary education systems to cultivate wisdom. They supported these arguments with detailed analysis of these contemporary social issues. Less effective responses merely named social issues without elaboration or a clear demonstration of how Montaigne’s thought can help us to navigate them. Some candidates effectively criticised Montaigne’s prescriptions by demonstrating, for example, that there are additional structural barriers that can prevent women and other minorities from simply stopping worrying about their bodies. However, very few addressed the further question of whether this is grounds to reject his position or whether, instead, we ought to strive to remove these structural barriers to make Montaigne’s advice a more viable option for all of humanity.

Question 12

Most candidates were able to link the quotation, 'biology is not destiny', with Simone de Beauvoir's critique of biological essentialism and/or determinism. Sophisticated responses acknowledged that, although the body does not define the human, it plays a significant role in our lives. As Beauvoir writes, 'the body is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects.'

Unfortunately, some students' responses resembled a sociology or history essay rather than a philosophy paper. Students should be reminded that there is no need to provide detailed contextual information about Beauvoir's life, her relationships, or the different waves of feminism. It is more important to focus on her philosophical ideas and the application of these. Candidates who did explain Beauvoir's (extensive) conceptual framework were rewarded on Criterion 2. Concepts that were productively engaged with included: essentialism, existentialism, the Other, transcendence, immanence, freedom, situation, alienation, objectification, authenticity, bad faith and *mitsein*.

When it came to assessing whether Beauvoir's prescriptions remain relevant, students arguing in the positive gave relevant contemporary examples of women being relegated to a state of immanence or being 'Othered,' such as: statistics on gender pay gaps; women in politics/leadership; the division of household labour; social perceptions of sexual activity; traditions relating to marriage, family and child rearing; and perceptions of women in the media.

Quite a few papers dismissed the relevancy of Beauvoir by asserting that her argument is inadequately intersectional. Though this position has some plausible grounds (such as Beauvoir's overwhelming use of white women as the examples/case-studies that support her argument), candidates must substantiate such claims. Mostly, these assertions demonstrated a lack of understanding of the subtlety of Beauvoir's argument and the way that it opened up lines of intersectional inquiry for future thinkers. *The Second Sex* includes a sustained analysis of the intersection between sex-based and class-based oppression and also discusses racist and ageist Othering. Additionally, an argument not being intersectional is not, by itself, grounds to reject the whole argument; it may simply need to be subtly modified or applied more thoughtfully to a broader range of people, cultures, etc.

Question 13

Weaker responses tended to be overly focused on biographical details and simplistic accounts of how suffering makes you stronger, without directly addressing the other parts of the question. Strong responses that directly engaged with the question's connection between suffering, character-formation and meaning-making were rewarded on Criterion 1.

Many candidates also used some of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical concepts to address the question and were rewarded on Criterion 2. This sometimes involved discussion of the *ubermensch* as embodying ideal character traits and sometimes involved discussion of Nietzsche's positive valuation of unfashionable character traits such as envy, pride and duplicity. Some candidates also noted that, for Nietzsche, resentment is a negative psychological response to suffering that gives rise to 'slavish' character traits such as humility and conformity. Excellent responses noted that Nietzsche would probably reject the question's idea of being able to 'find' meaning in suffering; this choice of word seems to imply that meaning

already exists ‘out there’ waiting to be found. Instead, Nietzsche advocates that ‘free spirits’ respond to suffering by creating meaning. Other philosophical concepts that were used productively included perspectivism, the will to power, master and slave morality, the transvaluation of all values, eternal recurrence, and amor fati.

Candidates generally made some attempt to consider the contemporary relevance of Nietzsche’s arguments. Weaker responses tended to assert that Nietzsche would condone the acts of contemporary authoritarian political figures and that we should reject his view on this ground. This style of argument misrepresents Nietzsche as defending a ‘might makes right’ conception of ethics that endorses ‘master morality’. However, Nietzsche’s view is that ‘new philosophers’ must move beyond both master and slave morality through a creative re-evaluation of all existing values. The role of creativity in Nietzsche’s philosophy is consistently vastly under-emphasised by students. Other potentially relevant contemporary issues that were explored, with varying degrees of success, included: cancel culture, contemporary figures (athletes, artists, etc.) who strive for and achieve excellence, and examples of suffering due to mental and physical health issues.

Question 14

Responses generally offered accurate accounts of Henry David Thoreau’s life and explanation of the role of nature and simplicity in his ideas concerning the good life. However, many responses were overly biographical and descriptive, devoting little attention to explaining philosophical concepts and analysing/evaluating Thoreau’s reasoning.

Some candidates explained overtly philosophical concepts (such as transcendentalism and ethical perception) and were rewarded on Criterion 2. However, relatively few essays gave attention to the less-obvious concepts that still benefit from careful explanation. For example, what does it mean to live ‘deliberately’ according to Thoreau? How does he conceive of ‘nature’? What makes disobedience ‘civil’?

The contemporary relevance of Thoreau’s arguments was generally discussed in reasonable detail. Candidates raised contemporary issues including climate change, non-violent protest movements, consumerism and excessive use of digital devices then linked these to Thoreau’s arguments concerning nature, civil disobedience and simplicity.

Some candidates argued that Thoreau’s enduring relevance was limited because not everyone is able to withdraw to the woods as he did for social or economic reasons. Though it is undeniable that this is the case, candidates should be wary of outright dismissing ethical arguments because they are difficult to enact. Some essays ended up committing the false dilemma (all or nothing) fallacy in arguing that, because we cannot completely follow Thoreau’s example, we should reject his thought entirely.