

PHILOSOPHY A.S. UNIT 1 PAPER, JANUARY 2009
SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO SELECTED QUESTIONS

These suggested answers have been prepared with close reference to the examiners' marking scheme, sometimes quoting from it directly. But the word 'suggested' is crucial. There are many alternative ways of producing good answers to these questions. This is particularly true of the part (b) questions, where it is up to the student to decide what line to take and (to an extent) which arguments to draw on. For example, in question 4(b) of the unit 1 paper ('Assess the view that God is no more than a human construction'), I have adopted the view that the idea of God *should* be taken in this way, but an answer taking the opposite view may be equally valid if it is well argued.

Theme: Reason and experience

Question 1

- (a) Explain and illustrate **one** account of the origin of our conceptual schemes.
(15 marks)

A conceptual scheme provides a structure for the organisation of experience. Without a conceptual scheme, it is difficult to see how human beings could apprehend their experiences in an orderly way to begin with.

One way in which a conceptual scheme could be acquired is through experience. This was the view of the empiricists, such as David Hume. Hume gives an account of how the idea of causality could be derived from experience. We have experiences of certain kinds of events being followed immediately by certain other kinds of events, e.g. people releasing objects from their grasp immediately followed by those objects dropping towards the ground. This 'constant conjunction' of the two kinds of events causes the idea of the one to be associated in our minds with the idea of the other and it is this, according to Hume, that constitutes our idea of causality. We could also say that it gives us a scheme for 'making sense' of our experience, by bringing some order and predictability to it.

Even more basic elements of a conceptual scheme for understanding the physical world—such as space and time—could also be seen as derived from experience. In our visual experiences, we are presented with a field of vision which is spatially organised (two-dimensionally on Berkeley's view, three-dimensionally according to some others). According to the empiricist theory, it is this immediate experience of spatial extension that leads to the richer and more versatile idea of physical objects arranged in space. Our experience is also temporal—one impression follows another in time and empiricists would say that this is the origin of our idea of events arranged in a 'public' objective time.

- (b) How convincing is the view that we are born with at least some (innate) knowledge? (30 marks)

In the twentieth century some support for the rationalists' idea that we have innate knowledge came from a surprising quarter—the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky. Chomsky argued that the raw material of experience was too meagre for the development of linguistic skills. Empiricists would have said that young children are born at most with general skills in learning (for example, the ability to learn to associate types of events that have been found conjoined in their experience, e.g., the sound of the word 'cat' with a particular type of animal). But for these to work in enabling a child to acquire a language, she must be exposed to sufficiently many examples. Chomsky argued that as the child was growing up, she would not experience a sufficient range of examples of good linguistic practice. If she had to rely on examples alone she would never learn to talk. Consequently, Chomsky claims, she must already be equipped with some general principles that are specifically about *language*. This is somewhat like the innate ideas of philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz, for it is supposed that the human brain comes into existence with these ideas or principles already formed and just waiting to be 'triggered'.

In fact there is a general biological argument for the view that the human brain already 'knows' many things before it first encounters the world. There is abundant evidence that human beings evolved by means of a process of adaptive selection operating on random mutations. The following question then arises: is it likely that this process would have produced creatures that had to learn everything that they needed to survive in the world and transmit their genes to future generations by means of general principles of learning, or is it more likely that it would have endowed them with at least some 'hard wired' principles that already reflect specific features of their environment? Surely the latter is more likely. Having to learn everything 'from scratch' would probably result in creatures that spent so much time in the process of learning that they would have been destroyed by the various threats facing them before they had the opportunity to reproduce.

Of course, none of this implies that we have the specific innate ideas attributed to us by Descartes or other rationalists. For example, it is very unlikely that we have an innate idea of God, as Descartes conceived him to be, for it appears that the idea of a 'perfect' being is not found in every culture. (On the other hand, some might argue that a more general principle of 'spirituality' might be universal and innate.)

I will end this answer by mentioning an argument for innate knowledge that comes from Plato's *Meno* and suggesting a response to it. In this dialogue Socrates helps a slave boy solve a geometrical problem by asking him a series of questions that take him through the sequence of logical steps needed to find the answer. Plato argues that this proves the boy must already know fundamental principles of mathematics, having learnt them in a previous life. All of us, Plato maintains, must have known these things from before the time we were born.

But this argument assumes that mathematical knowledge consists in substantive facts about the world. Some philosophers have argued for a different view, which is that to 'know' mathematical truths is merely to know a set of conventions for using words relating to numbers. On this view someone who knows *how* to use the terms '2', '+',

'=' and '4' can learn *that* $2 + 2 = 4$ merely by being taught to apply their pre-existing understanding of the relevant linguistic rules. Kant's category of the 'synthetic a priori' is dismissed: mathematical truths are analytic. Of course our understanding of the conventions themselves needs explaining, but this can presumably be done in terms of the processes by which a child is taught to count and use various mathematical words in the appropriate ways. Obviously that takes place in this life, not in some hypothetical earlier one.

Theme: Why should I be moral?

Question 3

- (a) Explain and illustrate **two** criticisms of the view that morality is the product of a social contract. (15 marks)

One major criticism of the view that morality is the product of a (hypothetical) social contract is that this theory would not generate obligations to non-human animals, which are incapable of forming a contract with us even hypothetically, and yet most people do think that we have some obligations to them: e.g., not to be pointlessly cruel to them. If this is right, a social contract theory excludes a whole class of sentient beings from our moral concern.

A second criticism comes in two parts. In the most basic type of contractarian theory, the parties enter into the contract in exactly the state in which they find themselves in real life. But in real life, people are very unequal. Some are much richer, more powerful or more talented than others. (Think of wealthy bankers, prime ministers and people with high IQs.) Such fortunate people would benefit from a contract that was very unfair in moral terms, one that guaranteed that all the benefits that they already possess and any that they could obtain by the free exercise of their talents should be kept by them and not shared with others. Many would reject such a view as morally unacceptable. To deal with this problem, John Rawls devised a type of contract theory involving a 'veil of ignorance', which ensures that the parties would not know their current position in society, nor their natural talents. Rawls argues that the parties would be forced to accept the possibility that they might turn out to be at the 'bottom of the pile' and would therefore choose principles that would give more weight to the interests of less fortunate citizens. But now we get to the second part of the criticism: why should any of us agree to be bound by principles produced by a hypothetical contract that we would make *if* we didn't know certain things that we do know to be the case?

In summary, the second objection comes to this. On the one hand, the standard conception of the social contract would generate principles that were morally unfair, while on the other hand, the modification by Rawls, while it avoids such unfair principles, appears difficult to justify to those expected to participate in the contractual arrangement.

- (b) 'I might believe that an action is morally right, but this does not give me a motive to perform it.' Discuss. (30 marks)

Some people believe that the basis of morality is self-interest. Others believe that morality is about *overcoming* self-interest. The problem raised by the above quotation may seem less real for the former group. This is because self-interest seems to many the clearest reason or motive that anyone could have for doing something. So if morality is based on self-interest, then an action's being morally right would seem to be all the reason one would need for doing it.

However, there are problems with this view. For if we probe a little further, we can begin to doubt both (a) that self-interest is always strongly motivating and (b) that it is the *only* motivating force in human psychology. Let us take these points in order.

- (i) People are not always strongly motivated by considerations of self-interest. For example, a person might fully recognise the dangers of smoking and yet still continue doing it. So even if morality is entirely founded on self-interest (which is questionable anyway), the above quotation might still pose a genuine problem.
- (ii) The view of the psychological hedonist—that humans only act to maximise their own pleasure—is wrong, as can be seen from the following thought experiment. By pressing a button, a parent can secure the happiness of his children for the rest of their lives. However, pressing the button will have another effect. He will forget that he has done it and will never see his children again. So although his children will be very happy for the rest of their lives, he will not be aware of this and he will be unable to enjoy contemplating their happiness. It is clear that some parents at least when placed in this situation would opt to press the button, contrary to what the psychological hedonist would predict. So there is such a thing as genuine altruism—human beings can occasionally be motivated to act purely out of concern for others. Therefore, even if morality is *not* founded purely on self-interest, it could still be a motivating force in people's choice of actions.

But the quotation can also be looked at from another perspective. One of the most important divides in meta-ethics is between the cognitivist and non-cognitivist approaches. The former treats moral claims as factual, possessing truth or falsity, while the latter regards them as expressions of attitudes or prescriptions of some sort. An example of a cognitivist theory would be the idea that to call an act 'morally right' means the same as saying that the act maximises happiness. (Whether an act maximises happiness is a factual matter.) Cognitivists would have to grant some force to the above quotation. At least they would have to admit that people *could* know that an action was morally right, but lack the necessary motivation to perform it. For example, someone might know or believe that a certain action would maximise happiness, but still have no desire to do it. In contrast a non-cognitivist theory may seem better equipped to close the gap between moral belief and motivation. This is because having a certain attitude seems to involve a disposition to act in certain ways.

But the above makes a questionable assumption, namely, that the quotation under discussion must always be rejected as *false*. This does not seem to be correct as far as

our ordinary moral understanding is concerned. Indeed, to believe that something is morally right but lack the motivation to do it is a very common situation. It might be objected that the speaker is claiming that believing the act is right gives her *no* motive to perform it and this could be thought too implausible. And yet it involves no obvious incoherence.

If this is right, then it may be for the *non-cognitivist* that the problem really exists. Indeed, since the quotation rejects a necessary link between moral belief and action, its coherence seems to be a strong argument against the non-cognitivist account of moral language. And yet there does seem to be something right about non-cognitivist theories such as expressivism. Moral terms are often—perhaps standardly—used to express attitudes. How can we resolve this conflict?

I think the answer is to accept the non-cognitivist's idea that there is normally a close link between moral statements and attitudes (and hence indirectly between moral statements and motivation), but to allow that it can be *cancelled*, if the speaker wishes to do so. Normally if someone says 'That action is morally right', it is reasonable to take her to be doing two things which are, roughly: (a) rejecting a possible moral condemnation of the action (the non-cognitive part); and (b) indicating that the grounds for this rejection lie in certain truth-evaluable properties of the action which relate to the 'institution of morality'. Part (b) is factual, rather than attitudinal, and so this account would be an example of a *hybrid* theory of moral statements, combining both cognitive and non-cognitive elements. However, the non-cognitive part is cancellable: the speaker can say 'That action is morally right, but I would be personally indifferent to whether it is performed'. We naturally understand such a speaker to be committing herself only to part (b), so this theory makes sense of the quotation.

Theme: The idea of God

Question 4

(a) Outline **two** versions of the ontological argument. (15 marks)

St. Anselm's original version of the argument may be paraphrased as follows:

1. The phrase 'greatest possible being' is understandable and so this being exists in the mind.
2. Suppose, along with the atheist, that the greatest possible being exists only in the mind and not in reality.
3. Then there would be a being greater than the greatest possible being, namely, a greatest possible being that exists, not only in the mind, but also in reality.
4. But this is a contradiction, and so the original supposition that the greatest possible being exists only in the mind and not in reality must be false.
5. Therefore the greatest possible being (i.e. God) exists in reality.

Descartes's version of the argument uses the idea of *essence*. Some attributes that an object has are part of its essence; e.g., it is part of the essence of a mountain to have a valley, since it is impossible to conceive of a mountain without a valley. In just the same way, Descartes argues, it is impossible to conceive of a God—a 'supremely perfect being'—without thinking of him as existing. (Such a being would lack the 'perfection' of existence, and so would not be supremely perfect.) Therefore existence is part of the essence of God, and so God must exist.

What the two versions of the argument have in common is that they both attempt to infer the existence of God, not from empirical features of the world, but by examining our concept of God or what the word 'God' means.

(b) Assess the view that God is no more than a human construction. (30 marks)

One reason for thinking that God is no more than a human construction is the anthropomorphism present in most conceptions of God. Although God is not normally conceived of as having a physical existence, and is thus different from human beings in that respect, he does seem to have many of the psychological characteristics of humans, such as being wise, kind, loving and forgiving—or (on the negative side) vengeful and cruel. It is as if Man has made God 'in his image' (rather than the other way around). It might even be claimed that we *have* to conceptualise God in this way, since it would be impossible to form any kind of relationship (involving, say, awe or trust) with a being that lacked such human qualities.

Of course this does not *prove* that God exists only in human consciousness and not in reality. However, agnostics and atheists have, over the centuries, developed numerous arguments against the rationality of religious belief. The sacred texts of believers have been shown to be historically unreliable, the traditional philosophical arguments for God's existence have been found wanting, and the notorious 'problem of evil' (how could an all-good and all-powerful God permit the existence of evil?) has seemed to many to undermine the claim that religious belief is rational.

But even if God does not exist, we still need to explain why the idea of God (or gods) has been so pervasive in human society. Marxism may provide at least part of the answer. According to Marx, we construct religion in order to help us come to terms with the misery, distress and hardship of this life. ('Religion is the opium of the people.') The idea of an all-loving and all-powerful God who will guarantee us happiness in an after-life if only we will put our faith in him may well be effective solace for the oppressed (and a good tool for their capitalist bosses, who would rather that they took such comfort than challenge that oppression).

A different approach has recently been developed by Daniel Dennett. Dennett seeks a Darwinian explanation of religion in terms of its survival value in human societies. He does not suggest that religion has evolved biologically, but rather invokes Richard Dawkins' idea of a *meme*—a cultural idea or practice which is very successful in replicating itself within human populations (i.e., the cultural equivalent of a gene). According to Dennett, the origins of religion lie in human beings' adoption of the

‘intentional stance’, that is, the attitude of mind in which we attribute beliefs and desires to others. This was advantageous from an evolutionary point of view, as it helped us to improve our encounters with others. But at some point it became ‘hyperactivated’, so that even inanimate objects were thought to have beliefs and desires, giving rise to early animistic forms of religion. A similar hyperactivation of the (biologically advantageous) tendency to trust one’s parents and to see them as ‘repositories’ of knowledge led to ancestor worship, Dennett suggests. Then the critical transition to belief in an invisible god was reached when religious authorities found it advantageous to refer important questions from believers to a higher authority whose answers they alone could verify.

I have discussed two strategies for representing the idea of God as a human construction. Both are highly plausible and no doubt contain elements of the truth. But how are we to know exactly *how much* truth? One difficulty with this sort of enquiry is that it is unclear how we can make the transition from mere speculation to confirmed theory. It may be some time before we are able to place a high degree of confidence in any of these views—though we might still argue that even now they are better supported than the idea that God actually exists.