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Philosophy

Higher level

Paper 3

1 May 2024

Zone A morning | Zone B morning | Zone C morning

1 hour 15 minutes

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the text and write a response.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[25 marks]**.

Unseen text – exploring philosophical activity

Compare and contrast the view(s) of philosophical activity presented in the text below, with your own experience and understanding of what is involved in doing philosophy [25 marks].

A common complaint about philosophy is that it is nothing but worthless speculation. Regularly heard comments are: (i) philosophy consists of mere opinions for which there can be no evidence, (ii) so philosophy makes no progress towards answering its questions, (iii) but this does not matter, since these questions are of no practical importance anyway...

5 To get an idea of the common conception of philosophy, look at what is found typically in the philosophy section of popular bookstores. Alongside books by Plato, Marx and Nietzsche, one might find self-help guides, or publications promoting, for example, the benefits of crystals and pyramids, or the prophecies of Nostradamus. Popular culture is simply mistaken as to what it identifies as philosophy.

10 The misconception of philosophy as baseless theorizing has become part of everyday understanding. When someone is at a loss for evidence, saying “It’s just my philosophy”, it is a way of cutting off argument. This use of “philosophy” is all around us: “my philosophy is “live and let live””.

15 What then is the correct conception of philosophy? Just the opposite. Philosophers do not care to merely come up with an opinion. Philosophers are in the business of *examining* opinions. There are two main sorts of questions philosophers ask about an opinion: (i) what does it really mean, and (ii) is there any reason for thinking the opinion is true? Hence, far from engaging in idle speculation and baseless theorizing, philosophers engage in *analysis* and *argument*.

20 Analysis and argument about what? We can further sharpen our understanding of philosophy by focussing on what sort of questions and opinions philosophers work on. What makes something a philosophical question? Compare the following two examples of questions:
1. What observable evidence supports Einstein’s Theory of relativity?
2. How can an observation serve as support for a theory?

25 The second is a philosophical question. Note its generality. Since philosophical questions are general, they can seem far removed from the questions of our life. However, questions one and two are not unrelated, for the second is *fundamental* with respect to the first: *how we answer the philosophical questions would in part shape how we answer the more specific questions*.

30 Of course, it is not hard to discover common opinions on questions. But why should a philosopher fall into line with the common view? Unless you can come up with a defence for the common opinion, it is just that—just an opinion. Philosophy hopes to replace common opinion with positions supported by reasons.

35 So, even though philosophical questions are general rather than particular, they arise quite naturally when we find ourselves thinking about specific, particular matters in ordinary life. This is especially so when ordinary life takes an unusual turn, thereby putting our usual beliefs under an unusual light...

40 Philosophical questions are external questions about some human activity in the sense they are asked from a perspective of one who has stepped back from the entire activity. The aim of such questions is not necessarily to change our practices, but to *understand* the nature of what we are doing. Philosophers achieve this understanding by engaging in *analysis* (that is, making clear the meaning of a proposed position) and *argument* (that is, offering evidence for the correctness of the proposed position). Since philosophical questions are external, to address them it is not altogether necessary to be familiar with the latest particular facts and
45 discoveries within a discipline.

We should expect the best answers to show up only at the end of a long journey. But at every step we are making progress, even when those steps consist of exposing the defects in proposed answers, for we are abandoning views that are defective. It would be nice also to know the right answer, but you can do that only after giving up the wrong answers. You may
50 find that many opinions you now hold will be shown to be defective. *That is progress*. It is a bit like being shown that your currency is actually counterfeit. It does not feel much like progress because you go from feeling rich to feeling quite distressed. But, you are in a better position than you were before because you no longer mistake counterfeits for the real thing.

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References:

Peter E. Pruijm "What Makes the Examined Life Worth Living?" *Teaching Philosophy* Volume 25, Issue 4, December 2002, pp. 323–343 https://www.pdcnet.org/teachphil/content/teachphil_2002_0025_0004_0323_0344.