1 The nature and aim of the paper
From 2015 the Part IA General paper will consist of specific questions covering the whole range of the Part IA syllabus but also inviting students to reflect on wider issues, including metaphilosophical ones concerning the nature, scope and proper methods of philosophical inquiry. There will also be questions relating philosophy to political and ethical issues that are of special relevance in thinking about the world today, and questions that invite students to draw together knowledge from more than one subject paper. The aim is to encourage students to reflect on broader issues than arise in the context of the subject papers, and to reward originality and flexibility as much as knowledge of specific areas of the subject.

2 Approaching the General Paper
What follows is not offered as a universal prescription, but merely as some informal suggestions that may be of use to some students. Directors of Studies and supervisors will also have advice and guidance to offer.

Reading and reflecting seriously for the weekly essay will be one central strand of any student's work. But deep understanding of one topic will nearly always involve seeing how it relates to and bears upon other topics. Hence you may find it helpful to read plenty of material other than that explicitly set for your essays and should reflect on how distinctions, approaches and questions from different areas relate and on what common themes or interesting contrasts emerge. Deep understanding of the nature of issues and their location in the wider philosophical landscape is of course likely to show up in how a candidate tackles a question on any paper. But it will be of particular advantage in approaching the General Paper, which offers the opportunity to treat some topic at length.

A good way to prepare would be to write several practice essays for the General Paper, probably towards the end of the year. You might try to write up some of these at full length, taking the full three hours. For others you might try seeing how far you can get in generating ideas and planning a structure in an hour and a half. A good deal of experience in doing this, on a variety of topics (for instance those in the specimen paper), will encourage flexibility and give you confidence that you can tackle the paper.

Candidates may be tempted to come to the General Paper with some pre-prepared essay which they are determined to use, whatever the questions. This may give a sense of security. But the security is an illusion and the policy very risky. The questions in the General paper, although open to being answered in more than one way, are none the less specific questions, and not just phrases or words as at Part IB and Part II.

It is also worth reflecting that everyone will be coming to the General Paper more or less blind, and so not having planned for the questions that actually do come up confers no special disadvantage. Time spent trying to guess what questions will come up would therefore be better spent thinking for yourself about:
• What philosophy is for
• How best to do it
• How the philosophy that we study in the subject papers bears on the broad questions about the meaning of life, etc., that the layman associates with ‘philosophy’
• How philosophy casts light on important questions in the news and in everyday life

A final remark: You should take plenty of time over the idea-generating and planning stage. The sort of essay called for in the General paper will be a good deal longer than a typical answer in another paper. But we certainly do not expect it to be anywhere near three times as long. A shorter essay that is well constructed, argumentative and relevant will attract many more marks than one that manages to throw in everything that you know about the subject area.

AA
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