

## The General Paper and preparing for it

### (1) The nature and aim of the paper

A General paper is set in Part IB and Part II. The paper consists of a list of topics indicated by just one word, or a brief phrase — for example 'Necessity', 'Pleasure', 'Knowledge of God', 'Nature', 'Mental causation', 'Originality'. Candidates are invited to define for themselves a question centred on one of these topics and then to write about it in a focused and sustained way. The paper thus gives candidates the opportunity to write at greater length than is possible in the other papers and on a question in part set by themselves. We expect candidates to invent an interesting and relevant question and to develop and follow through a detailed or wide-ranging argument in answer to it.

### (2) Acceptable questions

(a) *Relevance*. The question that the candidate defines must be 'centred on the topic' stated in the question. This means that if e.g. the question is 'Necessity' then the answer must be in an obvious and intuitive sense about necessity. The paper is **not** a license to answer any question at all into which you can contrive to insert that word. **Answers that are completely irrelevant will earn a failing mark.**

The following rule of thumb may be helpful: if your essay on word 'X' appeared in a book, would you reasonably expect to find it listed in the index under 'X'? If so, then you have got a relevant question, otherwise not. The following table lists some examples of relevant and irrelevant questions.

Word	Relevant question	Irrelevant question
Necessity	Is necessity conventional?	Is abortion necessarily wrong?
Freedom	What kind of freedom does moral responsibility entail?	Are we free to say that there could be a private language?
Pleasure	Is pleasure subjective? Can you measure pleasure?	Would the modern debate on causation have given Hume any pleasure?

(b) *Relation to the syllabus*. Although your answer must be a philosophical essay, there is no requirement that it should *only* use material drawn from your Part of the Cambridge syllabus. So whilst it is likely that much of your discussion will draw on topics that you have met in lectures and/or supervisions, there is nothing to stop you from covering subjects that do not appear in your Part of it or even in the Tripos at all. But bear in mind that the essay should display a level of sophistication and philosophical interest that is appropriate to your Part of the course. A superficial commentary on the ramblings of some deservedly forgotten philosopher is unlikely to impress anyone.

### (3) Approaching the General Paper

What follows is not offered as a universal prescription, but merely as some informal suggestions which 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 should 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 advantage in approaching the General Paper, which offers the opportunity to treat some topic at length.

To encourage deep and wide-ranging thinking, you may find it advantageous to keep throughout the year a file of ideas, comparisons, questions and speculations which interest you. For example when writing your weekly essay you may be struck by some line of thought which is not quite on the topic you have been asked to tackle, but which interests you. Do not distort your essay to accommodate it, but do not let it go to waste. Instead write down everything about it which strikes you, so that you know you will not forget your idea, and then return to think more about it later. This will develop skills in thinking about the placement of questions in the overall landscape of philosophy, and in relating ideas from different areas, both of which are themselves valuable philosophical abilities. You should write several practice essays for the General paper, probably towards the end of the year. Some of them you will want to write up at full length. 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 one-word topics, 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 titles offered. This may give a sense of security. But the security is an illusion and the policy very risky. If you are willing to write only on your preferred theory of Justice, then if 'Justice' (or a close cognate) does not appear on the list you will be in trouble. The fact that you can shape your own question does not mean that you can be sure of finding some peg on which to hang any question whatsoever. If you pervert one of the other titles into a peg, (for example taking 'Nature' and setting your question to be 'What is the Nature of Justice?') you will be severely penalised for irrelevance. You would have done better to have mustered what thoughts you have about 'Nature' (using, for example, the technique suggested below), when you might at least have got a respectable second class.

Of course, the more you have studied and practised, the more likely it is that you find quite extensive bodies of material already organised in your mind, which are suitable to be deployed at some point in your essay. But your essay will still need to be crafted and structured in the light of the topic named and the question you select.

Is there any way of anticipating the topics which will appear on the General paper? In setting a whole set of Tripos papers, Examiners aim to give all candidates a chance to do themselves justice, whatever range of material from the syllabus they have studied, if the range is reasonably extensive. So a rough principle followed by Examiners is that major syllabus topics which are not directly addressed in the relevant subject paper are likely to appear in some form in the General paper. But you should note that this is not a rule the application of which can be mechanically worked out and that the form in which topics appear is unpredictable. It therefore remains the case that you must come to the General paper prepared to think on your feet and to draw on any material which you have studied.

It is possible to write the kind of essay needed for the General Paper either by going deeply into one

question or by making connections between different areas of the philosophical landscape. Although these sound different the contrast, as suggested earlier, is more superficial than it may seem. A strikingly good essay will probably have elements of both. But whichever initial style of approach you favour, it is important to make the best use of all the information you have. Faced with a one-word title, you may be tempted to rely on only those obvious ideas which first come to mind and so may overlook relevant things you know. It is therefore important to take time to retrieve from memory all those ideas, distinctions and arguments which could be of use. The remarks below offer one possible method of going about this.

Let us suppose that you have already chosen a one-word topic which looks promising, one of which you have some knowledge and which interests you. The need now is to remind yourself of all relevant ideas, points, questions, distinctions and arguments you know to make your essay as rich as possible. Here are some steps by which you may do this:

(a) Assemble a list of perhaps five or six major philosophical areas or concepts. They might be chosen from among such things as the following: ontology, epistemology, ethics, logic, God, time, matter, mind, causation, everyday life, history of philosophy, art, politics, science, love, necessity, hate, creativity, death, law, etc. (You should choose your list to range widely and to reflect themes which intrigue you.)

(b) Now take the one word which defines the topic you want to tackle and juxtapose it in turn to all your chosen big concepts. Take several minutes to stir and associate with each pairing and write down all the questions (distinctions, arguments, positions etc.) which suggest themselves.

(c) Look at the results and see what themes or interestingly linked sets of ideas emerge. Reflect further on any such set which strikes you as important or promising. Identify a guiding question which unifies that set and an answer to the question which you think you can defend, from the ideas and arguments you have to hand. Discard the rest of your materials and begin to construct an essay.

You cannot construct a good essay merely by collecting many points about a topic and setting them out in a list or jumbled heap. They need to be organised into an argument in favour of some particular conclusion, which has been specified at the start as the target. But in this paper you have the advantage that you can (within the constraints of relevance to your one-word title) set the question so that it can be answered convincingly with the materials you have. But once you have defined your question, it is as important in this paper as in any other to answer it, and not some other, vaguely related one.

For Part IB and Part II:

*Your essay must not overlap substantially with the content of any extended essay (or dissertation) that you submitted for assessment in place of taking another paper.*

Some examples are now offered to give more sense of how the procedure might work.

Example 1: Suppose your chosen word is 'Pleasure' and your five chosen big categories are ontology, epistemology, ethics, logic and God. We take 'Pleasure' with each in turn, and jot down questions which suggest themselves:

Pleasure + ontology: **What sort of thing is pleasure — is it just a subjective state of mind?** Is it different from happiness or contentment? **Does it come in higher and lower varieties?**

Pleasure + epistemology: Can we know whether another is enjoying some pleasure and if so how, and how accurately? **Can I know whether I am taking pleasure and if so how?** Do issues about the

epistemology of pleasure make obstacles for attempts to make pleasure the central notion in ethics?

Pleasure + ethics: **Is pleasure the only valuable thing? If not, why not, and what other sorts of valuable things are there?** How should I (morally? rationally?) weigh my own pleasure in comparison with that of others when I am making decisions?

Pleasure + logic: What is the logical shape of claims about pleasure — e.g. **does a person always take pleasure in something or can a person just have pleasure but in nothing in particular? Can pleasure be quantified?** Does it make logical or conceptual sense to talk of 'units of pleasure' or one person having twice as much pleasure as another?

Pleasure + God: Could God and/or belief in God be a source of happiness or pleasure? If so, of what kind and why? Does the notion of infinite bliss lasting for eternity make sense?

Let us stress again that you should take a good few minutes over each pairing in this part of the process. If no questions or ideas present themselves at first when you juxtapose (say) 'pleasure' and 'logic' do not give up instantly but persevere and try associating from the two concepts in various directions and stirring round in your mind and see if you cannot get them to link up somehow. So far you have just written down anything which came to mind. At the next stage you need to be more selective. Which of these questions are you interested in? Which of them do you have defensible answers to? And (very importantly) which of them fit together, in the sense that giving a certain answer to one might commit you to giving a certain answer to another? From this kind of reflection, with any luck, you will begin to see a possible structure for an essay.

For example from the material on pleasure above, some questions are in bold and they can be linked as follows. Suppose you find yourself interested in the question as to whether there are higher and lower forms of pleasure and strongly inclined to think that there are. How then are you to distinguish the higher from the lower? One plausible move commits you to saying that pleasure must be taken in something (i.e. commits you to an answer to the question about the logical shape of talk about pleasure), precisely because it seems natural to distinguish the levels of pleasure by saying that higher pleasures are taken by interacting with the more valuable things. But now you find yourself committed to objectivism about value. Perhaps this does not seem to you at all congenial! Can you find a way out, by differentiating higher and lower pleasures in some other way?

Yes! you remember that there are various proposals here. For example, perhaps a person can herself, by comparing her pleasures, tell that some of them are 'better' than others, in that they are 'richer' or 'more fruitful'. But can this idea be made clear and plausible? Does it draw the line between higher and lower where you would like to draw it? Hm – let's think about various cases . . .

In constructing this line of thought many, indeed most, of the questions and ideas generated by the juxtaposing process have been discarded. There is no need to think that you must use in your final essay everything assembled in the initial phase. A different selection is possible and would be needed for a different topic. For example, in the material above, a second set of questions is picked out by underlining. They and their possible answers could be linked to build into a discussion of whether difficulties about knowledge of other minds, and/or about measuring pleasure, make insuperable problems for utilitarian theories of ethics. Doubtless there are also other essays which could be constructed from these initial materials.

Now you can begin to start outlining your essay on whether there are higher and lower pleasures. An introduction will say that what you want to do is show how we can distinguish higher and lower pleasures without committing ourselves to implausibly strong views about the objectivity of value.

Then there might be a section in which you point out how the various options seem to be connected. Then perhaps another section in which you explain your way out. Perhaps there will be various subsections as well. There will be plenty of scope for examining different kinds of case, comparing and contrasting examples of higher and lower, saying why, according to you, objectivity of value is not a plausible idea, etc. etc.

Example 2: Let us consider another topic you might find on a General paper, say 'Knowledge of God'. When faced with such a phrase it might be a good idea to look at each part of it separately, rather than moving instantly to consider the most obvious question which the phrase suggests. So let us take 'Knowledge' and link it in turn with the five major concepts.

Knowledge + ontology: What ontological category does knowledge itself belong to — e.g. is it a state of mind? **What ontological categories of things can we know about?**

Knowledge + epistemology: This looks a bit boring! Not every juxtaposition yields something interesting. But perhaps we are wrong here. **Are there special problems in knowing about knowledge?** There is indeed an issue about how and whether we can know about definitions of knowledge. When testing a definition we need agreed cases of the thing to be defined to provide tests, but the possibility of sceptical disputes, e.g. about whether we really do know about external objects, makes this sort of testing problematic in the case of knowledge. So how can we test our attempted definitions?

Knowledge + ethics: Should we take responsibility for our own opinions? (Remember Descartes's view that falling into error was always our own fault?) Can we know about values?

Knowledge + logic: **What is the logical shape of the concept of knowledge? How is knowledge to be defined — e.g. is it justified true belief or is it belief caused by what is known or is it belief acquired by a reliable method?**

Knowledge + God: **Can we know God exists? Can we know God's properties?**

It is with this final comparison that the most obvious questions suggested by the phrase 'Knowledge of God' will appear - e.g. Does the ontological argument work? Does the argument from design work? etc. And of course, one way of tackling this topic would be to write a particularly thorough and systematic account of the traditional arguments. But the interest of the method is that it might jog us into thinking of something a bit different from this. And indeed the above mix of materials does suggest another question, namely what would 'knowledge of God' be, if various of the mooted definitions of 'knowledge' were correct?

Suppose, for example, that a reliable method theory of knowledge were correct, then a believer would have knowledge of the existence of God if God exists and the believer has formed that belief by a generally reliable method. What is a reliable method? Well, suppose that believing what seems intuitively plausible to you is a generally reliable method and the believer has used this method. It follows that his or her belief is knowledge! This result may seem odd. Why is this? It is perhaps because much discussion of 'arguments for the existence of God', 'whether we can know God exists' etc. proceeds tacitly on an assumption of a 'justified true belief' account of knowledge — i.e. it proceeds on the assumption that we cannot know of God's existence unless we can provide reasons for it. But if a reliable method theory of knowledge is correct, this is not right. The believer's inability to produce reason/proof for her belief no more threatens its claim to be knowledge than our inability to prove the existence of the external world threatens our claim to know of it.

But is this a satisfactory position? Doesn't it make things somehow too easy for the believer? If we think it does, how should we react? By rejecting, or altering, the reliable method account? (What does it take for a method to be 'reliable'? Are all reliable methods knowledge-generators? If not, how do we distinguish them?) By finding some significant difference between the concept of God and that of the external world? Various things could be suggested here. (And perhaps a line of thought pursuing these issues could weave in the point about the difficulty of testing definitions of knowledge because of the difficulty of knowing which are cases of knowledge?)

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 it need not be three times as long. It is more important that it should be coherent and well constructed than that it should be lengthy.

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