

## **PHILOSOPHY ORAL EXAM TOPICS**

In both of my philosophy classes I give a 25 minute oral final exam. I give the students half a dozen ridiculous scenarios to study before the exam. The scenarios depict various philosophers from all eras in a dramatic scene. The student must imagine what conversation might occur between the philosophers. The student may choose two of the scenarios to discuss, and I reserve the right to ask them questions about any of the other scenarios when we are done. I give oral exams for two primary reasons: first, it stresses learning philosophy as a language with which to construct philosophical meaning, rather than encouraging the memorizing of terms, and, second, it is much easier for me to get a sense of how well they have internalized the material. I take pains to avoid being interpersonally intimidating, since most are intimidated enough by the material. I take copious notes about what they say, and I write down follow up questions as they are speaking. Below are some examples of these scenarios.

### **(I) Selections from Moral Philosophy final**

#### **A) The Reckless Chariot Ride.**

Imagine that Plato takes David Hume and Jean Paul Sartre on a joy ride around the outskirts of Athens in his new low-rider chariot. With the wind whistling through their hair, the three get into an argument over moral psychology. While distracted by his own particularly involved intellectual discourse, Plato lets the reins slip and the chariot crashes into a gully. A few minutes later, as they limp back towards Athens, what discussion about the metaphor of the chariot might arise? What might the three say to each other?

#### **B) The Lifeboat.**

Imagine that you are in a lifeboat with Jeremy Bentham, Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche, and a case of spam. Having grown hostile to philosophy after suffering through a high school course on ethics you turn your attention to the case of spam. In order to survive you must make certain that you get as much spam as possible. You rack your brain to retrieve information about these dead philosophers. What would you say to these three men to best assure your survival? Who would you speak to? Knowing their points of view on morality, how would you craft your arguments to get them to do what you want? Would you ally with one or another?

#### **C) The Burning House.**

J. S. Mill, Jean Paul Sartre and Immanuel Kant are walking down the street when they hear a mother screaming, "My baby! My baby! Save my baby!" They see flames bursting out of the upstairs windows of a town house. Royce hesitates, has a sudden moral insight, and rushes into the building and saves the baby. Kant asked him if he acted out of duty to reason. Sartre shakes his head, "Ah, it duz not

matter. Eet iz all relative, you know?" Royce thinks his two friends don't understand the situation. What alternative to relativism (naturalism, rationalism, or religious absolutism) might Royce choose? What discussion would follow?

## **(II) Selections from Metaphysics and Epistemology final**

### **A) The Idea of Cheesecake**

The Bishop George Berkeley and philosopher Thomas Hobbes are having a heated discussion over the nature of reality in a local restaurant just as you walk in for lunch. You hear the Bishop say, "And what else can we be, may I ask, but daydreams in the mind of God?" Hobbes smirks and replies, "Atoms and void, atoms and void!" As you look over the menu the argument begins to get out of control. Suddenly Hobbes picks up his dessert and yells "So how would you like the idea of cheesecake smashed in the idea of your face?" As the waiter tries to take your order, Berkeley gets Hobbes in a headlock and they crash to the floor. Hobbes screams, "Stop pulling my hair! It hurts!". The Bishop tosses him across the room, "Ah hah! Pain is a real idea, isn't it?" "The physiological state of my brain is the hate I have for you!" yells Hobbes as he lunges at the Bishop. The two turn over tables on their way out the door. As Hobbes chases Berkeley down the street, the waiter offers to pay for your meal if you would explain to him what was going on. You are hungry, poor, but a philosophy student. Make certain that you give a full explanation of idealism, materialism and the debate between them.

### **B) Hume's Smelly Feet**

One rainy evening in May, David Hume, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant pull their chairs closer to the fire in an Amsterdam pub. While waiting for their ale, Hume takes off his shoes and stretches his feet before the fire. Descartes wrinkles his nose and smirks. "Sacre blue! Your feet...zay, how do you say,...zay stink?" The Scot wiggles his toes and asks, "How do you know? You really are just assuming cause and effect between my removing my shoes and the smell." "Um...gee, I don't know. I geuzz I could be deceived", Descartes murmurs. "Of course you could be," says Hume, "if you believe more than you should! There is no objective knowledge." Kant shakes his head, takes a deep breath and begins, "Do I have to explain this to you two again?" Describe the discussion that might follow.

### **C) Spelunking with Sartre**

Jean Paul Sartre, cut off from his spelunking buddies in a cave near Delphi, Greece, stumbles into a scene reminiscent of Plato's analogy of the cave. Amongst the many people in this fire-lit cave Sartre notices a prisoner, hung from the ceiling by his arms. Moved by sympathy, Sartre frees the prisoner. As they sit next to the fire the prisoner rubs his wrists and thanks Sartre profusely. He then launches into a story about some man who wandered through here last week speaking of an upper realm and something called the "sun". He urges Sartre to seek out this upper realm with him. Sartre simply replies, "Yes, I have heard of this madman." Describe the discussion that might follow were Sartre to bring up many of the themes of existentialism. How might this scenario be interpreted as a metaphor for the human

predicament, both in general and from an existentialist perspective.