

Department of Philosophy

MA Exam / PhD Qualifying Exam: Ancient Philosophy

2016

Answer exactly three questions from the following sections, with no two questions from the same section. In each case, you should defend your claims as well as you can and make your answers as detailed as possible. You have two hours for the entire examination, so you should devote approximately 40 minutes to each answer.

I. Socrates

1. Explain Socrates' doctrine of the unity of virtues. Defend the interpretation of this doctrine that you find most plausible.
2. Does Socrates think that virtue is knowledge? Defend your answer to this question against the best objections.
3. In various places throughout Plato's early dialogues Socrates claims to be ignorant. Some have taken these claims to be sincere, while others have taken them to be ironic. Critically discuss what you take to be the most plausible interpretation of these claims, making sure to explain how you would respond to the most serious objections to the interpretation you choose.

II. Plato

1. What is the conversation with the slave in the *Meno* meant to show or establish? How successful is it in meeting its goal? Defend your answers.
2. Critically evaluate one of Plato's arguments in any of the dialogues for the immortality of the soul.
3. In Republic IV Plato puts forward a definition of justice in the city and justice in the individual. What are these definitions? Critically evaluate Plato's arguments on their behalf.

III. Aristotle

1. Critically discuss Aristotle's doctrine of natural teleology. What is it and how plausible is it? Defend your answer.
2. It has been claimed that Aristotle's conception of happiness, and hence his eudaemonistic ethical theory, depends on his theory of the soul and the human soul in particular. Why would anyone think this? Do you agree or disagree?
3. Critically discuss the apparent tension between Aristotle's conception of happiness (eudaimonia) in the central books (II-V) of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and book X. Is it a genuine inconsistency? If not, how do you think the tension is resolved?

IV. Miscellaneous: Greek Philosophy

1. It has been claimed that all Greek ethical theories are eudaimonistic. How plausible is this claim? Defend your answer.
2. The Epicureans held the view that everything is ultimately composed of atoms. They also held that atoms swerved randomly from their orbits. Explain how the “swerve” doctrine was supposed to accommodate human freedom in an atomistic universe. Critically evaluate this view.
3. Critically discuss the Stoic view of virtue.

V. *Analects*

1. The *Analects*' use of the term *ren* 仁 is notoriously opaque. Given its centrality in the text's account of the good person, what explains this opacity?
2. The ethics of the *Analects* is often described as particularistic, yet the text is also clearly committed to endorsing a thoroughgoing adherence to *li* 禮. How might the tension between employing practical judgment and following *li* rather strictly be reconciled?
3. Many contemporary interpreters seek to align the *Analects* with a rather standard account of virtue ethics. Provide an assessment of whether virtue ethics does indeed well map any moral theory implicit in the *Analects*.

VI. Mengzi

1. Much of Mengzi's ethics can be seen as a response to Mohist claims regarding the value of impartial caring. Core to Mengzi's response is that encouraging impartial caring and discouraging differentiated caring will put at risk the “roots” of morality. Explain what Mengzi identifies as the “roots” and assess the adequacy of his treatment of them as a response to Mozi.
2. Key to any success Mengzi's claim regarding the goodness of human nature will enjoy is providing an adequate explanation of moral failure. That is, if we are to believe that “human nature is good” in the way that Mengzi intends, we shall also require an account of why so many human beings in fact fail to be moral. Provide an overview of Mengzi's account of moral failure and assess its adequacy as support for his view of human nature.

VII. Xunzi

1. Xunzi's view of human nature, that it is “bad” (*e*惡), sometimes tempts interpreters into a psychologized reading in which Xunzi features as the “pessimistic Confucian.” This reading is, however, complicated by where Xunzi's ethics ultimately concludes: with sages who defy nature to become exquisitely moral. Discuss Xunzi's account of human nature and subsequent “solution” to the problems it poses with reference to pessimism. Is Xunzi's a pessimistic morality?
2. Xunzi's account of ritual has been viewed as providing a distinctive response to

situationist challenges in ethics. The response relies on Xunzi's strong endorsement of external supports (principally in the form *li*) as a key element in both individual moral development and social moral communities. Describe just how Xunzi's account of *li* can be understood as a potentially effective response to situationism and critically evaluate its suitability on this score.

3. Many commentators have argued that Xunzi employs a fundamentally different conception of human nature (*xing* 性) than Mengzi. That is, his dispute with Mengzi rides on his emphasizing what "one is born with" rather than the tendencies and potentialities Mengzi identifies with *xing*. Does this difference in understanding *xing* make a difference in understanding the dispute between Mengzi and Xunzi? That is, are Mengzi and Xunzi truly as far apart in their understanding of what human nature provides as Xunzi thinks they are?

VIII. Zhuangzi

1. The epistemological arguments in the *Zhuangzi* have been variously identified with: 1) relativism; 2) hard skepticism; 3) language skepticism; and 4) therapeutic heuristics. Discuss which of these views you find most adequate and accurate relative to the others.

2. The Butcher Ding story in the *Zhuangzi* is often deployed as offering a *leit motif* for the text as a whole, with Butcher Ding's description of his development of excellence in carving viewed as sketching the human developmental trajectory Zhuangzi endorses. However, as Robert Eno has argued, there is no unambiguous indication in the text that morality need be part of human development - in Eno's vivid presentation, no reason Butcher Ding couldn't be carving a person. Is the *Zhuangzi* as amoral as this suggests? Provide a case for treating the *Zhuangzi* as incorporating moral considerations or sensibilities.

3. The "philosophical methodology" of the *Zhuangzi* (if such a thing can be said to exist) is radically distinctive, freely employing fantastical story, comic jibes, and wildly non-standard exemplars. Provide an account that explains how the aesthetic and methodological oddity of the text functions as *part of* the text's arguments.

IX. Miscellaneous: Chinese Philosophy

1. Commentators such as Edward Slingerland have argued that *wuwei* 無為 operates, minimally, as a point of convergence or, maximally, as a unified focus, in most of early Chinese philosophy. Evaluate this claim. Does it overstate the significance of *wuwei* or endorse a stronger likeness across texts and philosophers than is warranted?

2. The *Mozi* employs precedent as one of its three criteria, or gauges, for evaluating the worth of claims. Critically evaluate the *Mozi*'s use of precedent, considering whether it represents a genuine criterion, a nod to conventional argument style in early China, or collapses into a consequentialist standard.