PHI 202|How to do well in the midterm examination

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1. Understand the format

You will have 50 minutes to write two essays. There will be around six prompts to choose from. Basically, each of these prompts will ask you to *explain and assess* some idea, argument, or part of an argument discussed in the lectures. The two essays will have equal weight.

2. Be smart about your preparations

(a) *Prioritise material covered in the lectures.* Start with the lecture slides and with your notes. Supplement it with my handouts and with internet resources. If you have been doing all the readings, that is definitely going to help you but it might be inefficient to read or re-read all of the assigned texts over the next few days.

(b) *Be selective.* Recognise that you don't need to know everything. Of course, we would like you to master all the material covered in the lectures and in the precepts. But you will have around six different prompts to choose from. And you won't be able to (and shouldn't!) present 3 different objections to some argument in a short essay anyway.

(c) *Prepare good notes*. Whatever topic you are studying, "explain and assess" should be your motto. You might find it helpful to divide your notes into two parts: explanation and assessment. Keep your notes short; there is only so much you can write in around 25 minutes.

(d) *Do at least one mock exam*. There is only so much that you can write in 25 minutes. You won't find out how much until you do a mock exam.

3. Write good essays

(a) *Get straight to the point*. Bernard Williams can get away with 5.5 pages of introduction, but that's only because he is writing a paper that has 75 pages. In an examination essay of this length, it's best to just tell the reader what claim you will be defending and, roughly, how you will go about it.

(b) *Focus on one issue*. In a short essay, it is wise to focus on just one issue and explore it in depth, instead of offering a shallow treatment of many loosely connected matters. For instance, if you want to show that some argument fails to establish some claim, it is best to present *one* objection to this argument, defend it carefully, consider a possible response, and finally address this response.

(c) *Defend your claims*.

> (i) Do not just *assert* things. *Argue* for them. Philosophers are not interested in *what* you think. They are interested in *why* you think that or, indeed, why we should think that.
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> (ii) Suppose that you want to argue that some theory is false. It is not sufficient to argue that this theory *has* some feature. You also need to argue that this theory *should not have* this feature. For instance, showing that utilitarianism is indifferent between bringing about an equal and an equal distribution of well-being is not sufficient. You also need to argue that an adequate moral theory should favour the equal distribution.
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> (iii) It is perfectly appropriate to appeal to intuitions in your arguments. But note that the force of these arguments is limited. For one, our intuitions might be mistaken. For another, intuitions at most tell us *that* something (e.g., equality) is important. But they cannot tell us *why* this thing is important. Philosophers are interested in both of these questions. To answer the second, you need to bolster your argument with "theoretical" considerations.

(d) *Structure your essay*. Divide your essay into sections. For instance, your first section might be an introduction, your second section might explain the view under consideration, your third section might present an objection to this view, your fourth section might present a response to this objection, etc. A section can be a single paragraph or multiple paragraphs. It won't hurt to give your sections simple headings and to leave an empty line between sections. This will increase the legibility of your essay, especially when it is hastily hand-written.

(e) *Time yourself*. You will be asked to write two essays in 50 minutes. Don't spend 40 minutes on the first one and the remaining time on the second one. It will show.

(f) *Be clear and precise*. Write in short and simple sentences. Any "philosophical" term that you are using has probably been used by some other, more famous philosopher in a different sense. To avoid being misunderstood, define or explain your central terms. And stick to them throughout your discussion instead of using "synonyms". They most likely are not synonyms.

(g) *Don't worry about originality too much*. This is an introduction-level course. We are primarily interested in teaching you how to approach certain questions, how to scrutinise various answers that one might give to these questions, and how to write good philosophical arguments. Especially in the examinations, it is generally prudent to opt for the trusted and well-known arguments rather than potentially more interesting but untested ones. Originality should never take precedence over showcasing the core philosophical skills listed above.

(h) *Be charitable*. When you attack some view or some argument, it is important to consider what its proponent could say in response. However, considering *a* response is not enough. It must a be a reasonably good one. Think about it this way. It's not very impressive to defeat an opponent in an athletic event when they are injured. You want to beat them when they are in shape.