

Comprehension exercise

[Compulsory Part A of the Philosophy Test and the Philosophy section of the MLAT]

A common feature of the Philosophy Test and Philosophy section of the MLAT is a short passage, followed by a set of questions to test your comprehension. Each of the exercises below is intended to be 30 minutes work, including reading time. We don't give guidance on the weighting of the two questions as candidates usually write roughly the same for each question. Markers are instructed to give credit for the merits of what has been written, so that a briefer answer to (a), but a more expansive one to (b), may be given equal credit to two answers more similar in length. It is the quality of the work which matters.

A key element in a comprehension exercise is to begin with the whole passage, not just to take a key word or phrase and reflect from there. It's also important to retain independence of thought, so that what you offer really is your own thoughts and not a slavish reproduction of the passage itself. 'In your own words' is often used as a key instruction, intended to provoke the right kind of distance from the author of the passage.

Two examples follow: the first is more relevant for Philosophy and Theology, and the second for Philosophy and Modern Languages.

EXAMPLE A

Read the following passage carefully, and then answer questions (a) and (b).

There is, of course, no question of belief without evidence. We must beware of confusion between the way in which a Christian first assents to certain propositions and the way in which he afterwards adheres to them. These must be carefully distinguished. Of the second it is true, in a sense, to say that Christians do recommend a certain discounting of apparent contrary evidence. But so far as I know it is not expected that a man should assent to these propositions in the first place without evidence or in the teeth of the evidence. At any rate, if anyone expects that, I certainly do not. And in fact, the man who accepts Christianity always thinks he had good evidence; whether, like Dante, physical or metaphysical arguments, or historical evidence, or the evidence of religious experience, or authority, or all these together. For of course authority, however we may value it in this or that particular instance, is a kind of evidence. All of our historical beliefs, most of our geographical beliefs, many of our beliefs about matters that concern us in daily life, are accepted on the authority of other human beings, whether we are Christians, Atheists, Scientists, or Men-in-the-Street.

(CS Lewis)

- a) Explain what is being distinguished when the author separates the ways of *assenting to* and of *adhering to* propositions.

- b) *Is* authority is a form of evidence?

Possible lines of thought

In answering (a), one might draw attention to the temporal words 'first' and 'afterwards'. Assent, in the thought of the passage, is a manner of 'coming-to-believe' ('first'), and though Lewis acknowledges that others might think this coming-to-believe does not require evidence he thinks, at least in the case of assent to Christian belief, that evidence is involved. So 'assent' is not, in this case anyway, a matter of believing without any support at all. (What sort of 'support' there might be we will discuss in (b).) 'Adherence' is the 'afterwards' element; once a belief is already in place, 'adhering' to the belief is about maintaining assent to it, perhaps in the face of apparent difficulties with the belief (contrary evidence, perhaps counterarguments) which might seem to stand against it.

Part (b) requires reflection on what 'authority' means. 'Authority' cannot simply be derived from someone saying something; either the person saying it, or some other person from whom eventually the chain of sayings goes back, must presumably have authority, be authoritative (which doesn't mean merely 'sound convincing'!) in their saying. A report of the weather from my neighbour derived from his having watched the weather forecast on television, which was in turn derived from expert interpretation of the results of scientific observation, seems to come with authority. So we might say that authority isn't quite like the other things in Lewis's list, and it's not quite right to treat it as if it were the same. Historical evidence is best assessed by an historian; geographical evidence by a geographer; but the evidence is the thing interpreted and not the interpreter. So we might be tempted to answer the question with a 'no' because ultimately all evidence is of one or the other categories, and is merely transmitted by 'authorities'.

That seems slightly unnatural, though; we speak of people as 'authorities' because they embody expertise which makes their statements authoritative, and knowing that someone is a professor of mathematics seems to be enough to give authority to their claims about statistical analysis (though not necessarily to their claims about how to cook broccoli). Importantly, my belief that I will one day be able to play guitar is based in the confidence and experience of my guitar teacher, who has had many pupils before. So her belief is authoritative, but not because she has ever seen me play guitar well (I never have yet). So, yes, authority can be a form of evidence, noting that 'a form of' allows us to admit a variety of forms, of which authority is one.

EXAMPLE B

Read the following passage carefully, and then answer questions (a) and (b) below.

I am very doubtful whether [literary] criticism is a proper exercise for boys and girls. A clever schoolboy's reaction to his reading is most naturally expressed in parody or imitation. The necessary condition of all good reading is 'to get ourselves out of the way'; we do not help the young to do this by forcing them to keep on expressing opinions. Especially poisonous is the kind of teaching which encourages them to approach every literary work with suspicion. It springs from a very reasonable motive. In a world full of sophistry and propaganda, we want to protect the rising generation from being deceived, to forearm them against the invitations to false sentiment and muddled thinking which printed words will so often offer them. Unfortunately, the very same habit which makes them impervious to the bad writing may also make them impervious to the good ... No poem will give up its secret to a reader who enters it regarding the poet as a potential deceiver, and determined not to be taken in. We must risk being taken in, if we are to get anything. The best safeguard against bad literature is a full experience of good; just as a real and affectionate acquaintance with honest people gives a better protection against rogues than a habitual distrust of everyone.

(CS Lewis)

- a) Outline in your own words the central claims of the above passage.
- b) **EITHER:** In what way if any may there be a role for suspicion in literary criticism?

OR: Give the strongest argument you can *against* the view that ‘a real and affectionate acquaintance with honest people gives a better protection against rogues than a habitual distrust of everyone’.

Possible lines of thought

The passage makes a number of claims, but for (a) the key claim is probably that young people – schoolchildren? – ought to be exposed to good literature, and to be exposed to it directly rather than as an exercise in ‘criticism’. This is not to deny that there is a proper concern with critical capacities, but trying to develop critical capacities directly and from the start is likely to be counterproductive. An appreciation of good literature requires a degree of vulnerability to the text; we may hope that such an appreciation will be a first step towards the development of a proper critical capacity.

For (b) EITHER, the passage does not deny that some measure of suspicion may be important, and gives a justification for it: ‘to forearm them against the invitations to false sentiment and muddled thinking which printed words will so often offer them’. So this gives a role for suspicion, but the place of suspicion needs to be embedded within the greater context of the capacity for appreciation mentioned before. The best analogy might be with a child’s experience of parental love in early infancy; babies are not capable of suspicion of the motives of those who show them apparent affection, and so learn (if all goes well) to receive authentic love before they are taught not to talk to strangers, and so forth. Lewis appears to be concerned that children grow up as readers able to identify when emotions are being manipulated, for example, and to hope that this thought can be injected into their experience of literature after a solid foundation has been laid.

For (b) OR, we might think that the strongest argument against this view will be one which relaxes its grip on the positive desire Lewis has for literary appreciation. ‘The kind of teaching which encourages them to approach every literary work with suspicion’ might be just the thing to ensure that rogues are protected against, though admittedly this will be at the expense of an ability to appreciate good literature too. Lewis might be mistaken in thinking that we are better protected against rogues by his recommendations, just as we would surely be better protected against food poisoning by not eating anything. We will starve, of course. But at least we will not get food poisoning. Similarly, if our highest priority is not to be taken in by roguish literature then suspicion-first is not a bad policy. Of course, we will probably never appreciate any literature at all. So it rather depends on how serious a concern it is to protect ourselves from rogues, and whether the cost is worth it. It is certainly a very high cost!