Half-hour essay question

One of the options for Section B of the Philosophy Test and Philosophy section of the MLAT may include an essay question which you will be need to answer within 30 minutes.

What do we hope to learn from a half-hour essay?

Choosing a question from a short list and answering it well in half an hour is a demanding task. We are looking for

- serious attention to the question asked
- good, well-argued content
- objections to be anticipated, and met or at least acknowledged
- all this to be done on around two sides of A4 paper

The first point is central: it's vital to answer the question. The question is not intended as a prompt to recall material you have already learnt at school or college. There are no hidden agendas or special codes to decipher. We really just want an answer to the question.

When we read candidates' answers we can see how well they have understood the question and what it demands of them. We see if they can argue in their own voice with their own thoughts, and if they can consider what an opponent might say, with a different point of view. This inner dialogue of other viewpoints is really important as so much teaching at Oxford is in very small groups in tutorials, so it's useful to be able to consider other sides of any debate.

We recommend that you spend time thinking and planning your essay, and then write it carefully. The instructions are to answer the question, not to write as much as you can. Longer essays usually indicate a tendency merely to write a lot, without serious thought or reflection. You should be helped and not hindered by a careful decision to limit the length of your essay. The instruction to 'do as much as you can in the time available' is not, as will hopefully be clear, advice to write a lot. It is intended to communicate the recognition that with more time, more could be done, but that with just 30 minutes candidates will need to be selective.

What will the questions be like?

A question for this exercise will give plenty of room for argument. It will not be a question where you can give a simple answer – however obvious it may appear – or a question where you can just report on something that you have learned. Even if the question seems to suggest an obvious answer, you will still need to argue the case, and recognise that something needs to be said for at least one alternative point of view.

Lots of questions like this are discussed in politics and in wider society all the time. You do not need to feel limited to past admissions tests when it comes to developing skills in thinking and arguing. The people marking these tests do not have a 'right answer' in mind, nor a set list of points to be made. The marker need not have any answer of their own in mind at all, and, even if they do, they might be persuaded otherwise by a good argument from an applicant.

Below are some notes on how you might approach questions from previous test papers. We suggest you start with the question for the test that you will need to take, but do also read through the notes for the other tests, including the TSA which has a similar style of question. We hope these notes give you an idea of how you might approach other questions, and the sorts of things you might choose to write.

We encourage you think about these questions and consider different arguments you might use. What other questions would you find interesting to answer? Remember that these are notes by an Oxford tutor, not an applicant, and they are notes, not sample essays.

According to a major business analysis organisation, only 14.2% of the top five leadership positions in 500 major listed companies are held by women. According to official statistics, only 14.5% of school exclusions (for example, on grounds of behaviour) in English state primary schools are of girls. If either of these statistics worries us, should the other do so as well? (Philosophy Test 2017, q4)

This question was suggested by the statistical similarity in the two cases. The question itself is the final sentence. It does not ask whether either of the quoted statistics is worrying. They may be, they may not be. It asks: if one worries us, should the other do so? We can see that there are two questions to address:

A. If it worries us that there is such a small proportion of women in company leadership, should we be worried that such a small proportion of girls are excluded from primary school? (Or, the same but with 'a large proportion of men' and 'a large proportion of boys'.)

B. If it worries us that such a small proportion of girls (or large proportion of boys) are excluded from primary school, should it worry us that such a small proportion of women (or large proportion of men) are in company leadership?

It may be worth pointing out that all we're given is the two statistics. One or two applicants who answered the question seemed to imagine that the girls who were excluded from school went on to be the company leaders, but there's no reason to think that. We can answer the question without making any guesses on that score.

Let's start with A. One might think: it's worrying that such a small proportion of women are in company leadership. After all, women make up around half of the population. So half of those in company leadership should be women. Call this 'the 50% argument'.

If that thought is right, it looks as though, if half of the pupils in primary schools are girls, we're excluding too few girls, and/or too many boys. It seems that if the first worries us, the second should do so.

That though seems to be too quick all the way through. We may in fact be challenged by the fact that most of us just accept that (many) more boys will be excluded than girls, though as a number of applicants said this can become self-fulfilling; primary school teachers, it was said, many of whom are women, may have different expectations and tolerances of the behaviour of girls, and that may explain at least some of the disparity. Most of us think, though, that there are reasons why more boys are excluded (perhaps biological, perhaps to do with socialisation). So the thought might go: there's no reason why there should be significantly less than 50% of women in company leadership, but there's perfectly valid reasons why more boys are excluded from primary schools.

That puts the focus back on the reason why we are worried that so few women are in company leadership. If it was just the 50% argument, we should be worried about primary school exclusions too. But we're not; there we seek and find reasons, and for the most part regard them with a shrug of the shoulders. Are there other reasons to be worried about the lack of women in company leadership?

We can see how B might go, then: if we were worried about the school exclusion disparity it might be because of the 50% argument, and then we'd be worried about the women-in-company-leadership statistics too. If the reason we should be worried about the primary school statistics is because they give us a basis to suspect that female teachers are more intolerant of boys (or some other equivalent story) then we may well look for a story connected with prejudice and gender-stereotypes in the companies case too. This need not be driven by a strong commitment to the 50% argument, that proportions should be equal, but because we adopt a working hypothesis that if there were no other factors at work we might roughly expect the balance to be equal, and then look for why it isn't. Maybe all three of biology, socialisation and teacher-prejudice are at work, and correcting for teacher prejudice we'll exclude fewer boys (or more girls). We might still get nowhere near equality, though.

On this argument, if one of the statistics gives us reason to worry, and that in turn provokes us to look for why the disparity exists, perhaps the other should worry us too, in the same sense of getting us to look for why. We ought, though, to be open to alternative hypotheses. One person who attended one of our student conferences said she suspected that the reason why men are in company leadership positions is that they are driven to work extremely long hours to get there. 'And', she added, 'women aren't that stupid'.

So this is another 'it all depends', but not because we can't decide. It depends on why we're worried by the relevant statistic. It it's just the 50% argument, then yes, probably the other should worry us too. The 50% argument doesn't, though, on reflection, look like it's a very compelling argument in itself, and not actually a very good ground for worry. So it will depend why we are worried, and whether it looks plausible that the worry should carry over to the other case.

If we know a language only through written examples (because all of its speakers are dead, and there are no audio recordings available), what precisely have we lost? Does it matter? (MLAT Philosophy 2015, q2)

This two-part question was for Philosophy and Modern Languages students, who might be interested in this area.

Two key words to note are 'precisely', indicating that are looking for specific answers rather than generalisations, and 'matter', which invites response like 'to whom and for what?'

We can see that the language envisaged is one which does in fact have written examples, so that the loss both of speakers and of samples of speech are not the end of the language completely. None of this is to underestimate the task of recovering a written language which may use characters quite unlike any known to us, and in a worst-case scenario might be mistaken for a pattern and not noticed as a language at all. (You might like to search online for 'Linear B'.) What is lost here is the sound of the language – we can still perhaps recover texts from the dead language, and thus stories, histories, geography, science and religious beliefs may all become accessible. What is lost?

An immediate thought is that there may be uses of speech which do rely on sound – poetry and song – and that poetry enjoyed only in written form loses a great deal. The bare recovery of meaning with no clue as to the way in which words contribute by their rhythm may deprive us of some of the aesthetic pleasure of the poem. It might be speculated, though, that it deprives us of an aspect of meaning too; if it is the sound of the words which contributed directly to the communicative action of the original poem (whether in a superficial way by imitating something extra-linguistic like an animal sound, or more profoundly by invoking tension in the hearer or suggesting calm through the experience of the sounds themselves) then something is not present in any reading of the text which would have been available to a hearer. A poem whose words indicate one thing, while the sound of the words indicates another, such as an affirmation of calm in sounds suggestive of agitation, would be ironic, but in ways lost completely to us. Much of the value even of our best-loved prose is experienced in its being read out – increasingly so in an age of audiobooks read by fine actors, interestingly; think of what someone would make of the King James Bible if they were merely deciphering its meaning from a written dictionary and grammar in the absence of any knowledge whatsoever of the sounds of English.

It looks as though quite a lot is lost, aesthetically certainly, but also in terms of the communication of meaning which lies beyond the content of the sentences. It's interesting to note that with some knowledge of the sounds of a language, but not complete knowledge, poetry may help us reconstruct other sounds, through rhyme and rhythm, but in our own case we have nothing to go on at all.

Does it matter that we have lost the sound of a language? That, as hinted above, surely depends. Someone who sees the artefacts of a past language merely as the means to some discovery which depends only on the meaning of a text – the whereabouts of the emperor's treasure, or how a community brewed their beer – nothing may have been lost. And yet something does seem to have been lost; the ability of those language-using civilizations to speak their literary culture to us in its fullness is certainly lost (which is not to underestimate the difficulty, or the extent, to which we can receive that culture, given our own formation in the sounds of our own languages). It means that they cannot communicate to us what mattered to them in sound, and that is a loss, giving us only a sanitised version, like a picture of a spice market without the smells. And does that matter? We lose a full appreciation of a culture, and thereby a properly rounded picture of one way of being human – and that may seem like a loss, perhaps a greater loss than just not 'getting' an ironic poem and hearing it for what it is.

Should convicted criminals be allowed to vote? (TSA 2012, q1)

This is a nice, direct question, anticipating a conclusion of 'yes', 'no' or possibly 'it all depends'. It's very important for anyone wanting to argue for 'it all depends' that this isn't a simple refusal to make your mind up between 'yes' and 'no'! 'Who am I to decide?', you might think, but that's exactly what the question is asking you to do.

Start by thinking of an argument for 'no'. One obvious answer would be that criminals should be punished, and one form of punishment would be removing permission to vote. That of course implies that being allowed to vote is a good thing, which may make us wonder why it is – what sort of punishment is it to be deprived of a chance to vote? Is it worse to be deprived of a vote where otherwise one is merely permitted to do so, or where as in some countries it is compulsory?

One possible answer to the 'Why is voting good?' question is that it's a chance to have a say in something – in who governs, in what policy is adopted, and so on. And criminals (one might suggest) ought not to have a say. We'll come back to why that might be so in a bit.

Then what might count for an answer 'yes'? Obviously we need to be talking about a situation where voting happens – it would be odd if convicted criminals were the only ones who were allowed to vote (in an absolute monarchy, for example)! Assuming there is indeed voting, we could say that whilst depriving criminals of their liberty and the chance freely to associate with friends and family is a perfectly proper punishment, depriving them of the chance to vote cuts them off from society, and we may hope that one day they will re-enter that society, so that they should have some chance to continue to shape it.

A thought that many people have about punishment is that it should 'fit the crime'. If we think about depriving someone of a vote who has committed a serious assault against a neighbour, we may see no clear connection between a fitting punishment for the offence and losing their permission to vote. On the other hand, if the crime were a crime against the political system – murdering an MP or attempting to blow up Parliament as an extreme example, failing to pay Council Tax as a less extreme one – maybe it is indeed fitting to think of being deprived of a vote as a punishment. So that points us in the direction of an 'it all depends' answer, but one which has real content to it. It all depends on the crime committed – not so much its seriousness as the sort of crime it is.

One might also want to ask whether for a long sentence (20 years, say) one should be deprived of a vote at first but then – maybe 5 years before release, when returning to the community is no longer a distant prospect – voting is restored as part of rehabilitation.

All of this is quite abstract, but there is also a practical question. For a national referendum it may not matter where one votes. For a constituency-based democracy like that in the UK, prisoners would need to vote in a place. Should that place be where they are held prisoner? (Imagine a constituency with a very large prison in it, and a very close contest between two political parties.) Should it be where they last lived, even if that is now miles from where they now are, and as part of their punishment they are banned, even when released, from ever returning there?