

# Comments on midterm exams

PHIL 20229

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In general, the exams were good. Some specific commonly made mistakes are listed below. But one general point is worth emphasizing: each of the questions on the exams asks for your opinions on some topic, along with an argument in support of your opinion. If you fail to say what you think, you thereby fail to answer part of the question. This is why I emphasized that the best way to study for the exam is to develop your own views about these topics, rather than just try to memorize arguments.

1. There are two separate problems about completing an infinite number of tasks, each of which is relevant to this question. The first is the problem that it seems that an infinite number of tasks would take infinitely long to complete, since each task would take some finite amount of time; this line of reasoning seems to rest on a mistaken inference from ‘for any finite length of time  $t$ , an infinite series of tasks each of which take  $t$  to complete would as a whole take infinitely long to complete’ to ‘an infinite series of tasks, each of which take some finite time or other to complete would as a whole take infinitely long to complete.’ The second problem is the problem of ‘Thomson’s lamp’: this is an argument which purports to derive an absurdity from the assumption that infinitely many tasks can be completed in a finite time.
2. The solution to the problem of completing infinitely many tasks in a finite time is not that the tasks become infinitely short, if this means that there are tasks in the series which take no finite amount of time to complete. On the contrary, each task in the series takes some finite amount of time to complete. It’s just that the amounts of time get smaller and smaller.
3. Nihilism is not the view that the clay exists but not the statue, nor is it the view that clay bits exist but nothing else. It is the view that only simple things — things which lack parts — exist.
4. In response to the split brain case, it is not satisfactory to say that  $A$  and  $B$  are the same person in one sense, but not in another — e.g., ‘physically the same’ but not ‘spiritually the same.’ If there are such things as persons,

we can ask whether two persons are the same or not, and this question must have an answer. You might deny that there are persons, but then this should be clear in your answer. Otherwise, you are just hedging your bets without really saying anything.

5. Strictly speaking, the relevant experimental result is not that there are two streams of consciousness. The result is that split-brain patients give certain responses to perceptual stimuli, from which we infer that there are two streams of consciousness.
6. Many people stated the consequence argument fairly clearly, but neglected to say what the argument has to do with determinism. If you fail to do this, then you can't really explain why the argument shows (or aims to show) that free will and determinism are incompatible. The relevant point is that the conditional 'if such-and-such past events happened, then I will do such-and-such' is beyond my control if determinism is true because it is guaranteed by the laws of nature, and the laws of nature are beyond my control.
7. The consequence argument aims to show that free will and determinism are incompatible. Here are some things it does not aim to show: that we have free will; that we do not have free will; that determinism is true; that determinism is false. So to object to the argument on the grounds that we have free will is to misunderstand the argument; same with the objection that the argument must be wrong, since determinism is false. If you think that we have free will and determinism is true, that does conflict with the argument. But in that case you need to do more than state the view that free will is compatible with determinism; you should explain which premise in the consequence argument you reject, or why you think that the argument is invalid.