

Common problems on the midterm exam

(the exam is reproduced below)

Question 1

Some people took one of the premises to be of the form "if theism is true, then the fact F makes theism probable". The relevant premise is that if theism is true, then the fact F (fine-tuning) is more probable.

A similar mistake was made with the prime principle of confirmation. A lot of people said "If a fact F supports theory T1 but does not support theory T2, then theory T1 is more probable". The relevant claim is that if a fact F is more probable given the truth of a theory T1 than given the truth of a theory T2, then F favors T1.

The fine-tuning argument isn't the same thing as the argument from analogy. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is not, at least obviously, an objection to the fine-tuning argument, even though it does seem to be a good objection to the version of the argument from analogy we considered.

Many people omitted discussion of the prime principle of confirmation altogether.

Question 2

A common problem was confusion about which direction of the biconditional in the statement of the memory theory to get rid of. Many students gave the wrong explanation then state the correct modification, indicating that they simply memorized the answer. Confusion over the nature of the memory theory and the proposed modification seem to be among the most common problems across the exam.

Many people failed to explain what the transitivity of identity is.

The transitivity of identity is a *general* principle about identity; it says that for any objects x, y, and z, if $x=y$ and $y=z$, then $x=z$ -- it is not a principle about *personal* identity in particular. So, in particular, the thesis of the transitivity of identity says nothing at all about memory, or about what unifies things which have memories.

Question 3

Most people said that the first premise is "everything has a cause" rather than "everything that comes to exist has a cause for its existence." This is a crucial difference, since the former premise would imply that God has a cause.

Many people failed to take a position on the argument, and instead just turned in a list of premises and objections.

Some students confused this argument and the Leibnizian cosmological argument. The first cause is not "outside the chain of causes" and especially not "outside the infinite chain of causes." It is the first in a finite series of causes.

The example of Thomson's lamp only shows that there cannot be an infinite series of events in a finite time.

Question 4

Many students said that the principle of necessity of identity is that if $x=y$ then $x=y$. This is true, but not the principle of the necessity of identity, which says that if $x=y$, then, necessarily, $x=y$. Some students also confused the principle with Descartes claim that "I think, therefore I am."

Some students were confused about whether the necessity of identity was an objection to Descartes, or a part of his argument. (It is the latter.)

Midterm exam

PHIL 10100

Answer 3 of the following 4 questions in your blue book. You will have until 2:50 to complete the exam. If you have any questions, feel free to come to the front to ask me.

1. Explain the “fine-tuning” argument for the existence of God. What is the prime principle of confirmation, and what role does it play in the argument? Is the argument a good one? Why or why not?
 2. Explain Reid’s argument against the memory theory of persons. What is the transitivity of identity, and what role does it play in this argument? Can the memory theory be revised so as to avoid Reid’s argument? If so, how?
 3. Explain and evaluate one of Aquinas’ five arguments for the existence of God. Be sure to consider a few objections to whichever argument you discuss.
 4. What is the principle of the necessity of identity, and what role does it play in Descartes’ argument for dualism? Is the principle true or false? Defend your answer.
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Extra credit: Suppose you're on a game show, and you're given the choice of three doors: Behind one door is a car; behind the others, goats. You pick a door, say No. 1, and the host, who knows what's behind the doors, uses his knowledge to open another door which has a goat behind it --- say, No. 3. (The host always opens a door with a goat behind it after you choose, to build the suspense for your final choice.) He then says to you, "Do you want to switch to door No. 2?" Answer the following two questions:

What should you rationally believe is the probability that the car is behind Door No. 1 (the one you initially chose)?

What should you rationally believe is the probability that the car is behind Door No. 2 (the other door that has not yet been opened)? (1 pt for each, 3 if you get both)