Some advice to Oxford finalists in Philosophy

You've spent 3 (or 4) years studying philosophy at Oxford. Now you have to take Finals. You might well be unclear on how to approach this. This document collects some advice I used to offer students in my college who were facing this situation, just in case it's helpful to others.

Disclaimer: This is not official Philosophy Faculty advice; use it or not at your own discretion.

1. Revising for philosophy exams

Ordinarily, if one wants to do well, one revises for exams. But, in contrast to many other subjects, it's often unclear (to many people) what this looks like in the case of Philosophy. Some people even think it's not *possible* to revise for philosophy. Those people think that philosophy is all about getting the big picture and the ways of thinking, and that that's something that happens, or not, over the course of your degree as a whole, but can't be crammed into the last few months.

These people are wrong. There is plenty you can do, whatever level you are (as of now) starting from. I find it helpful to break this down into 3 stages, as follows.

Stage 1: Know the standard arguments and basic distinctions.

In every area of philosophy, there are some standard arguments (which often have standard names – "the argument from illusion" etc.), positions (which have standard names - "contextualism" etc.) and basic distinctions (which come with standard terminology – e.g. the distinction between saying that a god is "benevolent" vs. "omnipotent" vs. "omniscient" etc.). You should know what these are, for each of the sub-areas of philosophy you are taking Finals papers in. This material provides the basic structure into which everything else fits. It is your mental map of the terrain, at the most coarse-grained level. *Do not underestimate how powerful such a map can be in helping you to construct well-organised, clearly structured answers to exam questions, and in ensuring that you don't simply miss the point of questions.*

This level of understanding of an area is pretty rudimentary. You can pick it up from a good introductory textbook and/or a good introductory lecture. If there weren't any good introductory textbooks on your reading list and you didn't go to any good introductory lectures, it isn't too late: find yourself a good introductory textbook now. You might already know much of the material in it, but it will still help to see the material organised clearly. The (free, online) Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy is one good resource of this type. *Don't* use Wikipedia (which is largely written by non-professionals, and tends to offer terrible coverage of philosophy).

If you feel you are really struggling, and really don't get one or more of the papers you have studied: Don't underestimate how powerful this first stage of "revision", more or less *alone,* can be in giving you a basic toolkit for scraping your way through exams at the last minute.

Stage 2: Know the more advanced, but still standard, debates.

Once you've got your basic mental map (stage 1), delve in more depth into the topics you're choosing to focus on. (I'd probably recommend covering 8 or so topics at 'Stage 1' level, even if you only plan to cover say 5 in more depth for revision purposes.) This is the level of detail that standard tutorial readings go into, as well as (to a lesser extent) a more in-depth reading of Stanford

Encyclopaedia articles. At this level, you pick up a deeper understanding of the nuances of how the arguments go; and instead of just getting the basic argument, you also map out the various stages of argument-counterargument-objection-reply etc.

You can pick this up by re-reading your tutorial essays and notes, and/or key readings from your original reading list, and/or lecture notes. You need to be taking an active mental role, though – ask yourself "what exactly is the argument here?", and force yourself to make appropriate notes or diagrams etc mapping your understanding of the structure and content of the arguments, rather than letting reading "wash over you".

Stage 3: Work out what *you* think.

Philosophy isn't about just parroting what other people have thought about the topic. What do *you* think about the arguments you've been studying? Do you agree with some, disagree with others? What is your perspective on which issues are crucial to the basic questions, which are relatively tangential or merely verbal disputes? What interconnections are there between the issues you've studied, both within and across philosophy papers? Do you think all the authors whose work you've read are missing some key point?

Depending on your learning style, developing this most sophisticated level of understanding and engagement probably involves some balance of thinking on your own (and perhaps writing), and also discussing the issues with others. On the latter, you might find both (1) discussing the issues with other philosophy students studying the same paper and (2) trying to explain the issues to non-philosophers, or to philosophers who have not studied the paper in question, helpful (but helpful in very different ways).

Notes

There are various possible formats for making notes during your revision. Personally I like the "structured outline" style, for keeping track of the structure of "argument – objection 1 – reply – objection 2 – reply" and so forth (see e.g. the lecture notes on my website). Some people like spider diagrams. Experiment to find out what works best for you.

2. Organising your revision

Unlike the ones above, this next section of comments isn't really specific to philosophy.

Make a timetable and stick to it. This might sound obvious, but it's easy to get wrong. Work out how many days/weeks you have to revise. Work out how many papers/topics you need to revise. Make a strategic decision, in advance, about how long to spend on each paper/topic, and (if possible/appropriate) what order to do your revision in. Write up your plan as a revision timetable, *and then stick to it*. This is to make sure that you don't run out of revision time, and discover too late that you have only revised for (say) 4 of your 8 finals papers, with only 3 days of revision time left.

Solo and group revision. Some of your revision will be an individual matter – you sitting in the library alone with your books and notes. But other aspects of it are more group affairs. Your college will probably supply some revision classes and/or tutorials. However, you should also be proactive: insofar as you'd find it helpful to have paired/group elements to your revision beyond the ones that

are organised by your tutors, *organise them yourself*. Find some like-minded students taking the same papers (not necessarily at the same college – in particular, you might need to look in other colleges for study partners if you're taking more specialist papers), and decide what would be most productive for you. You can set up sessions of any type, focussing on e.g. any of the 3 "stages" of understanding outlined above, and/or talking through how you would have approached exam questions from past papers.

3. Exam technique

Do not underestimate the importance of formulating and practising your exam technique. Oxford Finals are quite unlike Oxford tutorials. It does not at all follow, from the fact that you have had a thorough grounding in how to do philosophy in the context of the tutorial system, that you are well prepared (even if you know the material) to do yourself justice in the three-hour exam setting. My guess that many students could raise their exam marks by ten points or so – that is *a whole degree class* – simply by honing their exam technique.

Answer the question.

This might sound obvious, and perhaps it should be, but experience shows that it isn't. Most students do not, precisely, answer the question that the examiners actually asked. The point here is that *Finals questions are quite specific. They do not simply say "write an essay on utilitarianism/on Popper/on the Everett interpretation/etc.".* As such, they are not simply invitations to regurgitate your standard tutorial essay on "the topic that the question is on". Instead, the examiners will have thought of a particular angle or new thing to ask about that topic. Often it will not be an angle that you have considered before, but if you have a good background knowledge of the topic and you read and think about the question carefully, in the good cases you will be able to see what *specific* idea the examiners might be driving at.

You won't be able to do this for all questions on the paper, of course. This leads to the importance of *question-spotting*: Don't simply pick questions to answer based on which ones correspond to topics you have revised. That is one important factor, but is not enough by itself. Pick questions that have the property that *you can see something interesting in the particular question the examiners have asked*, and *you have something to say that speaks to it*. (It doesn't matter whether your interpretation of the question turns out to be the one the examiners did have in mind, as long as it is a natural interpretation of the question as worded – i.e. it is not a contrived attempt to 'shoehorn' your standard tutorial essay into the mould of the exam question – and it is an interpretation that renders the question interesting.

This is of course difficult to do. You have a good chance of finding three questions for which you not only have a good general understanding of the topic, but can think on your feet about the relevant nuances the exam happens to have picked on, only if you have both a pretty thorough understanding of the topic, and a pretty good ability at philosophy. Accordingly, this aspect of my advice is most important for students who are aiming for a First. Getting it badly wrong, though, is also relevant to the 2:i/2:ii distinction and below. In my experience assessing exams, the difference between a First Class and an otherwise similar-quality 2:i exam script is often how *precisely tailored* the answer is to the question (i.e., has the student engaged with *exactly* what was asked and thought carefully about *exactly* how best to interpret the question, or just something in the close

vicinity?). The difference between a 2:i and an otherwise similar-quality 2:ii or Third Class exam script is often whether it is at least a *reasonably good fit* to the question (i.e., has the student talked about roughly the right aspect of the topic, or simply "written an essay on virtue ethics in response to a question that was about (a different aspect of) virtue ethics"?

This is also a reason for revising more than three topics, even if you're pretty certain that the exam will contain some question on each of your top three topics – you might not like the particular question that is asked about a given topic, so you need to have more options.

Planning.

Once you've picked your 3 questions, don't just start writing. It will pay off to spend a few minutes thinking about how you're going to tackle each, and perhaps making a bullet-point outline to plan your essay structure and order of paragraphs.

Essay structure

A good essay has a clear structure.

There is no standard template for what that structure should be. Don't assume e.g. that it is always appropriate to start off by defining/analysing the words in the question – this is sometimes appropriate, but sometimes pointless. But if you have decided e.g. to discuss two arguments and two key objections to each argument, the paragraph structure of your essay should clearly reflect that.

You should include plenty of 'signposting' to ensure that it is easy for the reader to follow your intended essay structure. The reader should never be left unclear about e.g. whether your fourth paragraph is supposed to constitute an objection to the argument sketched in the 3rd paragraph, or instead to be an additional argument for the same conclusion. To avoid this kind of unclarity, you can start paragraphs with quite explicit "signposts" like "Here is a second argument for the claim that X", or "here is an objection to the view outlined in the previous paragraph". It also helps if your essay starts with an introduction that (among other things) provides a preview of what the essay' structure will be.

Of course, realistically – even if you have written a bullet-point outline as suggested above – you might not know precisely what your essay structure will be until after you have written the essay. (New ideas that are clearly worth including will often occur to you as you write, or you might find yourself with more or less time than planned and hence include more or fewer paragraphs than originally planned.) For this reason, I recommend at least seriously considering writing the introduction *after* you have written the main body of the essay (you can leave a blank page or two at the start of the essay to fill in later).

It also helps to finish your essay with a short conclusion, summing up what you take the main take-home points from your essay to be, and making sure the relation to the question that was asked is as clear as possible.

Timing.

You have to write each essay in (on average) one hour. Once you've got your essay plan (above), think about how long you have for each paragraph/section of your essay. Make a timing plan, and stick to it. Otherwise you might find that you're either very close to the end of the hour you've allotted for a given question but only two-thirds of the way through your essay plan – so that the end of the essay ends up being very rushed, and the earlier parts unnecessarily detailed – or (generally worse) you're very close to the end of the three hours and you haven't yet started the third essay. Quite a few exam scripts end up with the third essay tailing off after (say) a copule of paragraphs, and a hurried "…ran out of time" note. You get heavily penalised for this under the marking conventions.

There are various possible ways of organising your time. Here's one I like:

- 5 minutes reading all the questions, and picking 3 that you think you understand well enough to do a good job of (see "answer the question", above)
- For each of those 3, 5 minutes writing a bullet-point outline. (Doing this now rather than later serves as a double-check that you really *do* have enough to say about each – if you stall at the bullet-point stage, go back and pick other questions as necessary.)
- Check how much time you have left, and divide it into 3 equal lengths. If all has gone to plan, you now have a bit less than 55 minutes left per essay.
- 45 minutes to write the first essay
- 5 minutes to write the introduction to the first essay (see above for why you might want to do this after writing the main body of the essay)
- Ditto for the second and third essays.
- (This plan leaves about 10 minutes to spare.)

But again, different timing plans will work best for different people. Find one that works for you *during your revision time*.

Practise!

I also can't emphasise this one too much.

In your revision timetable, include plenty of time for practising your exam technique, in addition to revising the content of the material itself. Force yourself to sit several 'mock exams' for each of the papers you are taking. That is, take a past exam paper you have not seen before, and be strict about giving yourself three continuous hours to complete it under exam conditions. If anything goes wrong (you run out of time, you realise you haven't really answered the question, etc.), stop to troubleshoot, work out what you can do differently to fix the problem, and try again with a fresh exam paper. You should have all of the above skills of question-spotting, essay structure, timing and so forth well polished *before* you enter the exam room, so that you are entering the room knowing exactly what your game plan is, and knowing that aside from the little matter of there actually being exam questions that match your expertise on this year's exam paper, it is a game plan you are well practised in executing. If you have enough revision time, it is not excessive to complete e.g. 3-5 past papers, strictly under exam conditions, during revision for each of your Finals papers.