

BANQUE DE SUJETS

ANGLAIS / PHILOSOPHIE

SECTION EUROPÉENNE

SESSION 2018

MARLY

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°1

Notions : Morale

Question : Does morality help to be happy?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

Why think that the natural life for human beings is a life of virtue? On the face of it this equation requires a pretty sunny view of the human animal. We need not subscribe to a great pessimism to fear that evolution has thrown up¹ a human nature with significant elements of selfishness, aggression, shortsightedness, cruelty, and so forth.

5 Conversely, there may be circumstances, one would think, in which virtue requires us to sacrifice something of our own health or happiness. At the limit, virtue and duty may require us to lay down life itself². So there is no automatic alignment between behaving well and looking after our happiness.

10 The tradition (...) sometimes called the tradition of 'virtue ethics' tries heroically to squeeze together³ what is natural for people, a life lived according to reason, a happy life, and a virtuous life. Its main device is the social nature of the self. Within society, the villain cannot generally flourish, either in the eyes of others, or, ultimately, in his own eyes. The life of injustice is apt to be a life of care and insecurity. If someone prospers by thieving or cheating, his prosperity is likely to turn to ashes. Perhaps this
15 is likely, but it is not at all certain.

Simon Blackburn
Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics (2003)

¹ To throw up : here, to produce.

² To lay down one's life: to sacrifice one's life.

³ To squeeze together : here, to put together.

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°2

Notions : Morale

Question : Do we have the right to judge the values of other societies?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise des deux textes suivants et sur votre culture philosophique.

“Every society has its own standards” may be a sometimes useful maxim of social study; as a maxim of social study it is also harmless. But what, after all, is one supposed to do if confronted with a human sacrifice? – not a real question for many of us, perhaps, but a real question for Cortez [facing the sacrificial Aztec practices]. “It wasn’t their business” it may be said; “they had no right to be there anyway”. Perhaps – though this, once more, is precisely an absolute moral judgement itself. But even if they had no right to be there, it is a matter for real moral argument what would follow from that. For if a burglar¹ comes across² (1) the owner of the house trying to murder somebody, is he morally obliged not to interfere because he is trespassing? None of this is to deny the obvious facts that many have interfered with other societies when they should not have done, without understanding and often with a brutality greater than that of anything they were trying to stop. I am saying only that it cannot be a consequence of the nature of morality itself that no society ought ever to interfere with another, or that individuals from one society confronted with the practices of another should, if rational, react with acceptance.

Bernard Williams
Morality: An introduction to ethics (1972)

¹ Burglar : thief who breaks into houses.

² To come across : to encounter by chance.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°3

Notions : Morale

Question : If God does not exist, is everything permitted?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

5 Either one's motives for following the moral word of God are moral motives, or they are not. If they are, then one is already equipped with moral motivations, and the introduction of God adds nothing extra. But if they are not moral motives, then they will be motives of such a kind that they cannot appropriately motivate morality at all: in particular, they are likely to be motives of prudence, a possibility most roughly portrayed
10 by certain evangelists¹ in terms of hellfire². But nothing motivated by prudential considerations can be genuinely moral action; genuinely moral action must be motivated by the consideration that it is morally right and by no other consideration at all. So, taking this all together, we reach the conclusion that any appeal to God in this connection either adds nothing at all, or it adds the wrong sort of thing.

Bernard Williams
Morality: An introduction to ethics (1972)

¹ An evangelist: a person who tries to persuade people to become Christians.

² in terms of hellfire : regarding what is supposed to happen after death.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°4

Notions : Morale

Question : Do we feel what is right to do ?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

5 Take any vicious action, willful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. In whatever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object. You never can find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but it is the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object. So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compared to sounds, colors, heat, and cold, which (...) are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind.

David Hume
A Treatise of human nature (1740)

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°5

Notions : Morale

Question : Are moral truths mere conventions?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

We do not ordinarily understand our moral convictions (...) as merely the expression of our preferences or as commitments we simply decide to adopt. The difference between moral good and bad is not something we naturally think of ourselves as creating, but rather something to which we respond. We do not suppose that something is morally right because we prefer it; we think that it is because something is morally correct that we should prefer it. We assume that the difference between moral right and wrong is independent of our preferences. This ordinary understanding may be wrong. We can hold (...) that it is an error - that in reality moral value is but a projection, a way we color the world in the light of our own desires. But surely the burden of proof¹ lies with those who claim that the idea of moral truth is a mistake.

Charles Larmore.
The Morals of Modernity (1996)

¹ The burden of proof : the task to provide proof.

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°7

Notions : Morale

Question : Can it be right to sacrifice an innocent life?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

To do a serious injustice to someone is a terrible thing. How terrible it must be for a man to know that he is about to be executed, or that he must stay in prison for many years. How much worse it must be for the man if he knows that he is innocent: to all the usual pains and penalties is added the anguish¹ of his believing himself to be
5 disgraced and held in contempt because people had false beliefs about him. It really is distressing even to think about such a case. And yet one can argue that our feelings of distress are (at least partly) due to looking at only one aspect of the situation. If the harm done to the victim really is much less than the harm that would have been
10 on), then it ought to give us even more anguish if we contemplate this side of the story. (...). I think that the consequentialist must be prepared to sacrifice the harmony of his own mind for the good of others.

J. J. C. Smart
Utilitarianism and Justice (1978)

¹ Anguish : anxiety.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°7

Notions : Morale

Question : Does determinism exclude freedom and responsibility?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

If determinism is true, if, that is, all events obey immutable laws, then my will too is always determined, by my innate character and my motives. Hence my decisions are necessary, not free. But if so, then I am not responsible for my acts, for I would be accountable for them only if I could do something about the way my decisions went; but
5 I can do nothing about it, since they proceed with necessity from my character and my motives. And I have made neither, and have no power over them: the motives come from without¹, and my character is the necessary product of the innate tendencies and the external influences which have been effective during my lifetime. Thus determinism and moral responsibility are incompatible. Moral responsibility presupposes freedom,
10 that is, exemption from causality.

Moritz Schlick
Problems of ethics (1939)

¹ come from without : come from the outside.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°8

Notions : Liberté

Question : Is the notion of free will based on our experience?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

Arguing over the telephone with an awkward and deeply exasperating colleague, I raise my voice, deliberately speak ever more woundingly – and then, as my temper mounts, finish by quite intentionally delivering a gross insult and smashing down the phone. I
5 feel myself doing all this – and I feel my control over what I do lessening progressively as I do it. I can feel myself just losing it. As I experience my action, I feel it is increasingly my anger that is determining how I am acting, not I. (...). My experience is just the kind that leads those having it to believe that they are losing control. It is just the kind of experience that we would report as the ‘feeling that one was losing it’.
10 We have a widely shared idea of freedom – a freedom or control of what we do that we naturally conceive in libertarian terms. It is an idea that is as much and vivid an element in our experience of ourselves and of the world as is the very different idea of causal power. So why try to turn one power into the other? And why be selectively sceptical of one power and not the other?

15

Thomas Pink.
Free Will: A Very Short Introduction (2004)

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°9

Notions : Liberté

Question : If men have no free will, can one blame or praise their actions?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

You may be very mad at someone who comes to a party at your house and steals all your Glenn Gould¹ records. But suppose you believed that his action was determined in advance by his nature and the situation. Suppose you believed that everything he did, including the earlier actions that had contributed to the formation of his character, was
5 determined in advance by earlier circumstances. Could you still hold him responsible for such low-grade behavior? Or would it be more reasonable to regard him as a kind of natural disaster—as if your records had been eaten by termites?

People disagree about this. Some think that if determinism is true, no one can reasonably be praised or blamed for anything, any more than the rain can be praised or
10 blamed for falling. Others think that it still makes sense to praise good actions and condemn bad ones, even if they were inevitable. After all, the fact that someone was determined in advance to behave badly doesn't mean that he didn't behave badly. If he steals your records, that shows inconsiderateness and dishonesty, whether it was determined or not. Furthermore, if we don't blame him, or perhaps even punish him,
15 he'll probably do it again. On the other hand, if we think that what he did was determined in advance, this seems more like punishing a dog for chewing on the rug². It doesn't mean we hold him responsible for what he did: we're just trying to influence his behavior in the future. I myself don't think it makes sense to blame someone for doing what it was impossible for him not to do.

Thomas Nagel
What does it all mean? (1987)

¹ Glenn Gould is a famous pianist.

² Rug : carpet.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°10

Notions : Liberté

Question : Can men be both free and causally determined?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

5 There is a special problem about free will because we have two absolutely irreconcilable convictions, each of which seems to be completely correct and, indeed, inescapable. The first is that every event that occurs in the world has antecedently sufficient causes. The sufficient causes of an event are those that, in a particular
10 context, are sufficient to determine that that event will occur. (...). Our second conviction, that we do in fact have free will, is based on certain experiences of human freedom. We have the experience of making up our mind to do something and then doing it. There is, in short, a gap between the causes of your decisions and actions in the form of reasons, and the actual making of the decisions, and the performance of the actions.

15 Does compatibilism really give us a solution to the free-will problem? I said that I think most philosophers suppose that it does. (...). Compatibilism simply assumes that we are determined. (...). I think if many philosophers accept compatibilism it is that they are less interested in the problem of free will than in the problem of "moral responsibility". They are anxious to insist that a person like Hitler does not escape moral responsibility for his actions even if we can show that his behavior was determined. In that sense they want to say moral responsibility is compatible with determinism.

John Searle
Mind: A Brief Introduction (2004)

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°13

Notions : Démocratie – État

Question : Is democracy only a set of institutions?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

Socrates was not a leader of Athenian democracy, or a theorist of the open society. He was, rather, a critic of Athens and of her democratic institutions. (...). There is a fundamental difference between a democratic and a totalitarian criticism of democracy. Socrates' criticism was a democratic one, and indeed of the kind that is
5 the very life of democracy. (...)

I have already mentioned some aspects of Socrates' teaching: his intellectualism, that is, his equalitarian theory of human reason as a universal medium of communication; his stress on intellectual honesty and self-criticism; his equalitarian theory of justice, and his doctrine that it is better to be a victim of injustice than to
10 inflict it upon others. (...). In his time, the closed society, and with it its belief that the group is everything and the individual nothing, had broken down. Individual initiative and self-assertion had become a fact. Interest in the human individual as individual, and not only as tribal hero and saviour, had been aroused.

Karl Popper
The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945)

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°12

Notions : Démocratie – État

Question : Is a multitude able to handle its own interests?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

The view that it is more proper, for the multitude, to be sovereign than the few of greatest virtue might be thought to be the true view. For it is possible that the many, though not individually good men, yet when they come together may be better, not individually but collectively, than those who are so. Public dinners to which many
5 contribute are better than those supplied by only one man. Where there are many, each individual has some portion of virtue and wisdom; and when they have come together, just as the multitude becomes a single man with many feet and many hands and many senses, so also it becomes one personality with respect to the moral and intellectual
10 faculties. This is why the general public is a better judge of the works of music and those of the poets, because different men can judge a different part of the performance, and all of them all of it.

Aristotle
The Politics (350 BC)

Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°13

Notions : Démocratie – État

**Question : Is the separation of powers a good protection
against the tyranny of the majority?**

*Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur
une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.*

But the great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the
same department consists in giving to those who administer each department the
necessary constitutional means and personal motives to resist encroachments¹ of
the others. (...). Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the
5 man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. (...) Such devices
should be necessary to control the abuses of government.

But what is government itself (...)? If men were angels, no government would be
necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on
government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be
10 administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable
the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control
itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the
government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary
precautions.

James Madison
The Federalist. N°51. (1787)

¹ Encroachment : violation.

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°14

Notions : Démocratie – État

**Question : Why do one obey the majority rule?
Is majority rule compatible with the respect of minority will?**

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

When any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body, with a power to act as one body, which is only by the will and determination of the majority. For what acts any community, being only the consent of the individuals of it, and it being one body, must
5 move one way, it is necessary this body should move where the greater force carries it, which is the consent of the majority; or else it is impossible it should act or continue as one body, as one community (...); and so everyone is bound by that consent to be concluded by the majority. And therefore we see, that in assemblies(...) the act of the
10 majority passes for the act of the whole, and of course determines, as having, by the law of nature and reason, the power of the whole.

John Locke
Second Treatise Of Government (1690)

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Binôme : Anglais / Philosophie

Sujet n°15

Notions : Démocratie – État

Question : Can collective deliberation shape a general will?

Pour répondre à cette question, vous proposerez une réflexion personnelle et construite sur une lecture précise du texte suivant et sur votre culture philosophique.

Does participation in democratic procedures have only the functional meaning of silencing a defeated minority, or does it have the deliberative meaning of including the arguments of citizens in the democratic process of opinion- and will-formation? (...) Democracy depends on the belief of the people that there is some room left for collectively shaping a challenging future.

Jürgen Habermas
Leadership and Leitkultur
New-York Times (2010)

In great assemblies where every man may enter at his pleasure, there is no means to deliberate and give counsel what to do, but by long and set discourses through which every man has more or less hope to incline and sway¹ the assembly to his own ends. In a multitude of speakers therefore, where always, either one is eminent alone, or a few being (...) eminent above the rest, one or few must of necessity sway the whole; insomuch², that a democracy, in effect, is no more than an aristocracy of orators, interrupted sometimes with the temporary monarchy of one orator.

Thomas Hobbes
The Elements of Law (1640)

¹ To sway : to influence.

² Insomuch : to that extent.