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**Philosophy
Higher level
Paper 3**

Monday 9 November 2020 (morning)

1 hour 15 minutes

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the text and write a response.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[25 marks]**.

Unseen text – exploring philosophical activity

Compare and contrast the view(s) of philosophical activity presented in the text below, with your own experience and understanding of what is involved in doing philosophy [25 marks].

Is philosophy like plumbing?

Plumbing [the installation and maintenance of pipes and water drainage systems] and philosophy are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong. In both cases, this can have serious consequences. Each system supplies vital needs for those who live above it. Each is hard to repair when it does go wrong, because neither of them was ever consciously planned as a whole. There have been many ambitious attempts to reshape both of them, but existing complications are usually too widespread to allow a completely new start. [...] Both systems have grown imperceptibly over the centuries, and are constantly being altered to suit changing demands. Both are therefore now very intricate. When problems arise, a specialist is needed to locate and solve the problem.

Here, however, we run into the first striking difference between the two cases. Plumbing needs specialists with technical knowledge. With philosophy, some people doubt the need for specialist knowledge and are often skeptical about the existence of an underlying system. When the concepts we are living by function badly, they do not usually drip audibly through the ceiling or swamp the kitchen floor. They just quietly distort and obstruct our thinking.

We often do not consciously notice this obscure discomfort and malfunction, any more than we consciously notice the discomfort of a bad smell. We may indeed complain that life is going badly—that our actions and relationships are not turning out as we intend. But it can be very hard to see why this is happening, or what to do about it. This is because we find it much easier to look for trouble outside ourselves than within. It is hard to see faults in our own motivation, in the structure of our feelings. But it is in some ways even harder—even less natural—to turn our attention to what might be wrong in our ideas, in the structure of our thought. Attention naturally flows outwards to what is wrong in the world around us. To manipulate thought so that it looks critically at itself is quite hard. That is why, in any culture, philosophy is a relatively late development.

When things go wrong, however, we do have to do this. We must then somehow readjust our underlying concepts; we must shift the set of assumptions that we have inherited and have been brought up with. We must restate those existing assumptions—which are normally muddled and inarticulate—so as to focus on the source of trouble. And this new statement must somehow be put in a usable form, a form which makes the necessary changes look possible.

That is the need that philosophy exists to satisfy. It is *not* just a need felt by particularly highly-educated people. It can spoil the lives even of people with little interest in thinking, and its pressure can be vaguely felt by anyone who tries to think at all. [...]

Much of this work is boring, and it can sometimes prove astonishingly long and difficult, but it is absolutely necessary. Any powerful new idea calls for a great deal of change, and the more useful that idea is going to be, the more need there will be to work out these changes fully. New ideas usually come in part from sages who are not full-time philosophers, notably from poetry and the other arts. Shelley was indeed right to say that poets are among the unacknowledged legislators of humankind. They can show us the new vision. But to work the new ideas out fully is still a different kind of work. Whoever does it, it is always philosophical business.

Great philosophers, then, need a combination of gifts that is extremely rare. They must be lawyers as well as poets. [...] They must have both the new vision that points the way we
45 are to go to the logical doggedness that sorts out just what is, and what is not, involved in going there. [...] Bringing these two functions together is desperately hard. [...] Philosophy becomes scholastic, a specialized concern for skilled plumbers doing fine plumbing, and sometimes doing it on their own in laboratories. This happened in the late Middle Ages; it seems to have happened in China, and it has happened to Anglo–American philosophy.
50 [...] Learning is not a private playground of the learned. It is something that belongs to and affects all of us. [...] The conceptual schemes used in every study are not stagnant ponds; they are streams that are fed from our everyday thinking, are altered by the learned, and eventually flow back into it and influence our lives, like plumbing.

References:

Midgley, M., 1992. Philosophical Plumbing. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements*, 33, pp.139–151. Source adapted.