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# Philosophy

Epistemology and Moral Philosophy  
Report on the Examination

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## Introduction

What follows is a question by question commentary on some discernible trends in the performance of students in the 2018 series. In the course of this commentary, reference is made to anonymised responses, the Question Paper, the Assessment Objectives and the Mark Scheme level descriptors. In compiling this report, the observations of the lead examiner have been supplemented by evidence provided by senior examiners and their team members.

## Assessment Objectives:

AO1: Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the core concepts and methods of philosophy, including through the use of philosophical analysis.

AO2: Analyse and evaluate philosophical arguments to form reasoned judgements.

## Section A: Epistemology

### Question 01

This question assessed students' ability to explain the notion of a necessary truth. It is one of the concepts referred to in the specification as part of the list of key philosophical terminology that students must be able to demonstrate an understanding of (testing AO1 only).

There was scope for students to answer this question in terms of logical and/or metaphysical possibility, i.e. in terms of those truths that could not possibly be false. On the whole, those that were successful answered in terms of those truths that could not be false or could not be otherwise. This was sometimes couched in terms of possible worlds, although not as much as anticipated.

Where students did not gain full marks, there was too much conflation with the notion of analyticity, although credit was given if students used analytic truths as examples of necessary truths. Students were able to gain the full 2 marks if they gave a precise definition of necessary truth and then used an example of an analytic truth to illustrate this. However, if they claimed that all necessary truths were analytic, then this was deemed imprecise and could therefore only gain 1 mark.

The common reasons for students not achieving any marks came when there was a straightforward conflation between necessary truth and analytic truth. Whilst many necessary truths are analytic, not all are, e.g. Kripke's claim that some necessary truths are synthetic – e.g. identity claims of natural kind terms such as "water = H<sub>2</sub>O". The other main reason for students not gaining marks was a tendency to confuse necessary *truths* with necessary *conditions* – e.g. 'truth is a necessary condition for knowledge'.

### Question 02:

This question asked students to explain the position of reliabilism, which could be understood in a number of ways, either as replacing the justification condition from JTB (as per the AQA specification) or as understanding justification in terms of the reliability of cognitive processes.

At the upper end of the performance scale, students were able to clearly explain a reliabilist account of knowledge. The best answers did this by referring to RTB being the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, and then giving accurate examples of what constitute reliable cognitive processes, and their tendency to cause true beliefs. Some students referred to how this enables children and animals to have knowledge, which wasn't necessary but did add extra detail and precision to their answers.

Responses that tended to get 3 rather than 4 or 5 did so because they lacked some of the important detail, e.g. that the conditions are necessary and sufficient, or gave imprecise accounts of reliable processes, sometimes conflating a reliable source (e.g. a broadsheet newspaper) with a reliable cognitive process.

Weaker responses in the 1-2 grade scale often failed to mention reliable cognitive processes but were able to outline RTB.

Those students that failed to gain any marks did so because they often confused reliabilism with other theories on the specification such as infallibilism or the tripartite definition. If there was no mention of reliabilism then students had not written anything worthy of credit.

### **Question 03**

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1) focussing on the theory of innatism and one of Locke's criticisms of it. The weight of marks fell on an explanation of one of Locke's criticisms, as the question asked students to briefly explain innatism.

Most students started by explaining innatism in terms of concepts, knowledge, or both. Some students discriminated well between the various innatist positions, e.g. Plato and Leibniz, and then went on to develop one of Locke's criticisms. The best accounts tended to give a clear and precise account of the universal consent argument, explaining why Locke thought that innatism ought to imply universal consent. Some then also argued (correctly) that even if there was universal consent, this would not prove innatism (although students could still get in to the top band without mentioning this latter point). It was a little surprising that more students did not use the universal consent argument as it is arguably the most straightforward one to use. Some students did explain other arguments, such as Locke's claim that it seemed a near contradiction to claim that there could be truths in the mind that one was not aware of, and then linked this directly to Plato's example of the slave boy. This was an example of a well-integrated response.

Students in the 4-6 mark band were able to give an account of innatism and one of Locke's arguments but which lacked the necessary precision and detail. In other cases, students were able to give very good accounts of innatism but their explanation of Locke was weak. A common mistake was for students to take Locke's claim that the mind is a tabula rasa as an argument, rather than as a position that he argues for.

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Some students were able to explain innatism but failed to explain one of Locke's arguments against it. This, if done well, could earn students a maximum of 3 marks. Other students did not seem to understand the specifics of the question and, whilst making some relevant points, these were largely tangential and failed to address the question.

**Question 04**

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1) focussing on aspects of Descartes' methodological scepticism as presented in his 1<sup>st</sup> *Meditation*. An understanding of arguments presented in seminal philosophical texts is a key requirement of the specification. This question asked students to explain Descartes first wave (the argument from illusion/sense-deception) and second wave (the dreaming hypothesis). Although the question did not explicitly ask for the context of the arguments (i.e. Descartes' broader philosophical aims) or to explain the links between the first and second waves, the order of presentation in the *Meditations* and the way in which Descartes moves from wave one to wave two is a crucial feature of his methodological scepticism, and so some integration was expected, although not necessarily required for students to attain the top band. Most students were able to demonstrate at least some understanding of Descartes' arguments.

The best accounts started by providing some context in terms of Descartes' wider project (i.e. his attempt to find an infallible foundation for knowledge by rejecting anything that was dubitable) before moving on to discuss the first wave. They then explained how the first wave only allowed Descartes to doubt certain kinds of sensory experiences, but not all. This led them into an explanation of the dreaming argument. The very best responses then teased out some of the implications of this, in anticipation of the third wave of doubt, although again, this was not a requirement.

Many students in the 4-6 mark band were able to give a reasonable account of both waves but without the necessary degree of precision and detail needed for the top band. Some of these responses were better on one of the waves, and some did attempt to contextualise and integrate but fell short in other areas, e.g. in their explanation of the waves. Those that only explained one wave gained a maximum mark of 5 if this was done well.

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Typically, this was due to students not understanding what the first and second waves were. These students tended to explain a range of other Cartesian arguments, e.g. the cogito, evil demon hypothesis, trademark argument, etc., without actually addressing the question.

**Question 05**

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2. The question centred on assessing indirect realism, one of the main theories from the topic: Perception as a source of knowledge.

One of the main reasons that students were unable to access the higher bands was a general inability to develop fully coherent and sustained arguments. Many students were able to select and apply relevant material but were then unable to fully integrate these points into their overall argument. For example, whilst students were able to talk about the primary and secondary quality distinction, not enough were then integrating this into their arguments to show how indirect realists such as Locke can reply to the sceptical claim that indirect realists can tell us nothing about the nature of the mind-independent reality that they believe to be the cause of their perceptions.

Many of the responses operated with an overly simplistic account of direct realism, which was often associated with naïve realism. Whilst naïve realism is a form of direct realism, it is not the only form and students should be able to explain more philosophically developed versions of the theory. As such, some students tried to argue that direct realism was hopelessly naïve and

therefore indirect realism was obviously better. This was then followed up with the claim that Berkeley's idealism was clearly absurd and therefore indirect realism must be convincing. However, many struggled to convincingly argue why direct realism and idealism are wrong (spurious rejections of idealism because 'God doesn't exist' are still far too common); and either way, even if direct realism and idealism are unconvincing, this does not entail that indirect realism is any more convincing.

Students in the 7-9 mark band were able to construct more coherent and developed arguments that drew on a range of relevant material, and there were some good treatments of the sceptical arguments in support of indirect realism, Russell's claim that the existence of the external world is the best hypothesis, and Trotter-Cockburn's argument concerning the coherence of sense experiences. Those students that accessed the higher grade boundaries were able to further develop these through argument and counter-argument, for example by defending direct realism against indirect realist arguments, and then arguing for the ontological simplicity of direct realism over indirect realism. Similarly, some students argued in favour of Berkeley's idealism along similar lines. There were some excellent responses and the openness of the question allowed for some imaginative and sophisticated answers.

## **Section B: Moral Philosophy**

### **Question 06**

This question assessed students' ability to explain the metaphysical/ontological position of moral anti-realism. It is one of the central concepts in the meta-ethics section (testing AO1 only).

There was scope for students to answer this question in terms of the denial of mind-independent or objective moral facts, properties or truths. In order to gain the full 2 marks students had to make reference to *mind-independence* or *objectivity*. Where students only gained 1 mark this was typically due to them not making reference to *mind-independent* or *objective* moral facts, whilst in a few cases, students failed to mention *moral* facts. These were deemed partial and/or imprecise responses.

The common reason for students not achieving any marks was when there was a straightforward conflation between anti-realism and non-cognitivism. Whilst many anti-realists are non-cognitivists, these are distinct philosophical positions, and some anti-realists are cognitivists, i.e. Mackie. The other main reason for students not gaining marks was a tendency to confuse anti-realism with a range of other moral positions, both meta and normative.

### **Question 07**

This question asked students to explain the importance of education/habitation within Aristotle's account of the development of moral character

At the top end of the performance scale students were able to explain in detail the various features of Aristotle's account, including how virtues have to be acquired and cultivated through education and continued practice. These students made good use of the skills analogy and the importance of

identifying a role model, learning from them, and then becoming independent by attaining mastery. Students that tended to get 3 rather than 4 or 5 did so because they lacked some of the important detail listed above, or failed to develop their points with enough precision.

Students in the 1-2 performance scale were only able to offer a few relevant or fragmented points.

### **Question 08**

This question tested the students' ability to apply a normative ethical theory – utilitarianism – to the issue of eating animals. Students were able to discuss utilitarianism in general or to choose a particular version, such as act, rule or preference. The majority of students choose to discuss a range of theories and were able to apply them to the issue with varying degrees of success. The vast majority of students knew at least one version of utilitarianism and were able to anticipate how a utilitarian might respond to the issue of eating animals. The difficulty is that different utilitarians will respond in different ways, and too often students did not address this, with many arguing that the principle of utility does not take into consideration the pleasure and pain of animals and therefore it is morally permissible for all utilitarians to eat animals if the majority of humans want to.

The best responses were able to address the subtleties of the question. For example, some students recognised that Bentham does take into account animal pleasure and pain; some made the distinction between higher and lower pleasures in Mill and applied it to this issue with some skill; others were able to discuss the nuances of Singer's preference utilitarianism.

Students in the 4-6 mark band were able to give reasonable accounts but without the necessary levels of precision and detail needed for the top band. Some of these responses were better on one aspect of the question, for example giving a good account of utilitarianism but not applying it well to the issue. However, this was more credit worthy than those students who just gave a generic account of animal rights issues.

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Typically, this was due to students giving very basic and imprecise accounts of utilitarianism, making basic errors, or providing very little in the way of philosophical argument. Rule Utilitarianism in particular was poorly dealt with. In some cases, it would have been better for students to focus on one or two versions of utilitarianism and develop these in more detail and with more precision.

### **Question 09: Explain how Mackie's argument from relativity challenges moral realism. (9 marks)**

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1) focussing on how Mackie's argument from relativity challenges moral realism. This required students to explain how a specific form of inductive/abductive argument can be used to critique a philosophical position. The skills required were similar to those on Question 3 (Innatism and Locke), although on this question students were not given a choice of which criticism to choose.

The best accounts, where students scored in the 7-9 mark band, were able to give a precise account of moral realism and its central claim regarding the existence of mind-independent moral facts/properties. They then proceeded to set up Mackie's criticism as a probabilistic argument against moral realism: the best explanation for the enormous amount of variation in moral views (i.e. descriptive relativism) is the anti-realist hypothesis that it is highly unlikely that there are mind-independent moral facts, as opposed to the realist alternative.

Students in the 4-6 mark band were able to provide a reasonable account of moral realism but failed to provide the essence of Mackie's inductive/abductive argument against that position. Some accounts strayed too far into discussions of moral relativism without addressing the logic of Mackie's argument. These were largely correct but lacked the clear, integrated and logical form that is needed for the top band.

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Too many students lacked knowledge of Mackie's actual argument, giving generalised accounts of moral relativism that did not focus specifically enough on the question, or giving simplistic arguments that concluded that the fact that there is so much moral disagreement proves that moral realism is false. Those who were able to outline moral realism without referring to how moral relativism challenges the view could gain a maximum of 3 marks.

More students scored zero on this question than on any other question on the paper. Many students seemed unaware of Mackie's argument and there were a significant number of students who did not attempt to answer the question.

### **Question 10**

This was the second of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2. The question required students to assess the extent to which Kantian ethics can be defended against objections. This enabled many students to grapple with the main issues more directly, and the best responses were able to construct sophisticated answers with some very good argument and counter-argument.

Those students that accessed the top band 13-15 did so through a careful balancing of objections and counter-responses, with some arguing in favour of Kant and others against. Either way, their arguments were clear, complete and sustained, demonstrating a detailed and correct understanding of the relevant content. These responses demonstrated a solid understanding of Kantian deontological ethics and many structured their essays by identifying key features of Kant's theory (e.g. actions have to be motivated by duty to be morally praiseworthy) and then addressing objections to these features on a case-by-case basis before going on to consider Kantian responses. This demonstrated good integration and allowed the student to argue with clear and sustained intent.

Students in the 10-12 mark band gave clear and coherent arguments although the balancing of arguments was not always present. For example, some objections were dealt with but others were not. Furthermore, answers in this band tended to start off by explaining Kant's theory (often in good detail) before then moving on to consider objections and responses. Whilst this approach did not necessarily preclude students from the top band, it often meant that they had less time to deal specifically with the objections to Kant's theory.

Most students scored in the 7-9 mark band and the main reasons for this were that they spent too long explaining Kant's theory rather than dealing with the objections to it, and then considering Kantian responses. Students were able to identify and explain objections but often did not stop to consider how a Kantian could/might reply, this meant that there were gaps in detail or the overall argument lacked full coherence.

Those students that scored in the 4-6 mark band often knew some of the more famous objections (e.g. the axe murderer) but simply presented them as knock down arguments, showing very little



awareness of counter-responses. As such, these responses were very one-sided or had substantial gaps in detail.

At the bottom end (1-3 marks) students lacked the necessary understanding of Kantian ethics and some tried to answer the question from a purely juxtaposed point of view, i.e. by arguing that utilitarianism was obviously better. This suggested that these students had not revised Kant and were simply using whatever philosophical knowledge they had at their disposal to try and construct some kind of argument, although not one that addressed the question.

A surprisingly high number of students failed to score any marks, either through not attempting the question or by simply knowing very little, if anything, about Kantian ethics.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.