AS

Philosophy

Epistemology and Moral Philosophy
Report on the Examination

Version: 1.0

Introduction

What follows is a question by question commentary on some discernible trends in the performance of students in the 2019 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: What is global scepticism? **(2 marks)**

This question assessed students' ability to define global scepticism, testing their knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a key philosophical position. It is referred to in the section 'The limits of knowledge' (3.1.3.2). Students were more effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding 2 mark question on the Moral Philosophy section. In comparison to the 2018 paper, students performed much better, with only a small proportion scoring 0 – the vast majority were able to write something that was worthy of credit.

There was scope for students to frame their answers in a number of ways, as long as they demonstrated a clear understanding of the position. For example, negatively – we *cannot* know anything, or positively – doubt *can be* extended without limit. Typically, this was explained in terms of justification – e.g. none of our beliefs are justified and therefore knowledge is not possible, although the mark scheme did allow credit to be given to those who framed it in terms of truth/falsity – e.g. all of our knowledge claims are false.

The key requirement was that students needed to make reference to the epistemological nature of scepticism rather than merely ontological considerations. Students were able to gain the full 2 marks if they gave a precise definition of global scepticism and then linked this to ontological considerations. However, if they claimed that global scepticism is the position that nothing exists (outside the mind) without mentioning doubt or belief, then this was deemed too imprecise.

For both marks, students needed to demonstrate an understanding of 'doubt' and the all-encompassing nature of this for the global sceptic. They also needed to show that this is a philosophical *position* and not just a methodology. Some responses did not differentiate carefully enough between the two; for example, by using the evil demon to illustrate the position and then claiming that Descartes was a global sceptic rather than a methodological sceptic.

Where students did not gain full marks, this was because they did not cover both features clearly, or they covered both features but imprecisely, or in a circular fashion – e.g. 'global doubt' or 'scepticism about everything'.

Question 02: Explain Leibniz's argument for innatism. **(5 marks)**

This question could be approached in two ways, either through Leibniz's argument for innate knowledge based on necessary truths (as per the AQA specification 3.1.3) or his argument for innate concepts/ideas based on intellectual ideas (although very few students answered in this way). Performance was below the corresponding question on the Moral Philosophy section, with just under half of the students gaining 3 marks or above. However, students performed better on this question than on the corresponding 5 mark Epistemology question in 2018.

A mark of 3 demonstrated that students had grasped the substantive content of the question. In order to do this, they needed to explain (one of) Leibniz's argument(s). At the upper end of the performance scale, students were able to give full, clear and precise accounts, which demonstrated an understanding of innatism, the distinction between necessary and contingent truths (often with one of Leibniz's examples), and why Leibniz believed that experience was insufficient to explain necessary truths. Many students also linked this to the marble analogy. Whilst this was not a requirement, it did add extra detail and precision to their answers when done well. Responses that tended to get 3 rather than 4 or 5 did so because they lacked the necessary detail and/or precision.

Responses that gained 2 often failed to mention any actual argument and relied too heavily on the marble analogy alone. This demonstrated some relevant knowledge and understanding but the overall logic was unclear. Some credit (1 mark) was given to responses that only gave an account of innatism but without any reference to Leibniz. If there was no mention of innatism or Leibniz then students had not written anything worthy of credit. However, the vast majority of students were able to gain some marks. It was also pleasing to see fewer examples of innate abilities (e.g. breathing, suckling, etc) over innate knowledge (or ideas).

Question 03: Outline direct realism and explain how the time-lag argument challenges this view. **(9 marks)**

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a key philosophical theory and related critical issue from the 'Perception as a source of knowledge' section of the specification (3.1.2). It tested students' ability to not only outline and explain, but also to logically integrate these into a coherent response. The weight of marks fell on an explanation of the time-lag argument, as the question asked students to outline direct realism. However, students that gave accounts of direct realism without any reference to the time-lag argument could still gain a maximum of 4 marks if this was done with detail and precision, and demonstrated an ability to set out their answer in a coherent form, with logical links identified. This was the best performing 9 mark question on the paper, with the majority of students gaining 4 or more marks. There was a significant improvement in comparison to the corresponding 9 mark Epistemology questions on the 2018 paper, which suggests that this is not only a topic that students understand, but also that they are better able to meet the specific demands of this type of question (which is further evidenced across all the 9 mark questions on this paper in comparison to 2018).

Most students began by outlining direct realism and the best answers did so by explaining the realist component (in terms of the existence of mind-independent objects and properties…) and then the directness element (…which we are directly aware of in perception with no intermediary) before going on to integrate the time lag argument as a particular criticism of the immediacy that is implied by the directness claim. For the top band (7-9), both parts of the question needed to be addressed and clearly integrated.

Students in the 4-6 mark band were often able to give an account of both direct realism and the time-lag argument, but their accounts tended to lack the necessary precision and detail, or failed to integrate the two components coherently. In other cases, students were able to give good accounts (usually) of direct realism but their explanation of the time-lag argument was weak. Some students included direct realist responses to the argument and, whilst they were not penalised (unless what they wrote contradicted or clearly introduced an element of confusion to their response), no credit can be given as this was not relevant material. Students are better off using their time more effectively by sticking to the specific demands of the question.

Very few students failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band. Those that did not tended to misunderstand the specifics of the question and, whilst making some relevant points, these were largely tangential and failed to address the question directly.

Question 04: Explain Descartes' proof of the external world from the existence of God. (9 marks)

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical knowledge and understanding (AO1) of Descartes' proof of the external world as presented in his *Meditations*. It tested students' ability to not only explain the various steps in Descartes' proof but also to set them out in a clear and logical form. An understanding of arguments presented in seminal philosophical works is a requirement of the specification and it was pleasing to see that a number of students had a very good understanding of both the structure and detail of Descartes' text. Those that did, and who were able to recall the most relevant material and then apply this in their answers, did very well indeed. There were some excellent responses that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of Descartes' arguments.

Although the question did not ask students to explain any of Descartes' arguments for the existence of God (only to show how God plays an essential role in his proof), students who did explain one or more of his arguments for God's existence were not necessarily penalised. However, some students spent too much time on this and, in many of these cases, failed to address the specific demands of the question. Over the paper, this was the 9 mark question that students performed least well on, although a higher percentage of students accessed the top band (7-9) than on the corresponding A3 and A4 questions in 2018.

In order to get into the top band (7-9), students needed to present all the key ingredients of the proof. These included: the 3 possible causes for Descartes' perceptual experiences - self, God, or physical objects. They then needed to explain why the cause could not be himself (because of the involuntary nature of perceptual experience) nor God (because God, as a non-deceiver, would not create him with a strong tendency to believe in the existence of physical objects, which he was unable to correct). Given this, it follows that the only possible cause is physical objects and therefore an external world exists. Some students explained the argument by linking it back to the 3 waves of doubt, particularly wave 3, and how Descartes' arguments for God enabled him to eradicate such sceptical concerns. Again, this was not necessary but was in no way penalised if students addressed the main aspects of the question. However, students should be confident to answer the question on its own terms without feeling the need to bring in every aspect of Descartes' project. Some of the best responses simply set out the proof as above, sometimes integrating some of these earlier parts, but without spending too much time explaining them in detail.

Many students in the 4-6 mark band were able to give generally accurate explanations of the proof but without all of the key detail. For example, quite a number of responses gave good accounts of the role that God plays in the argument but failed to mention the self as a possible cause of perceptual experiences. Others spent too long on less relevant material (e.g. explaining all of Descartes' arguments for God) and not enough time on the actual proof

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Typically, this was due to students stating that God would not deceive Descartes about the existence of the external world but providing no reasons or explanations as to why. Other responses demonstrated some knowledge of Descartes' wider philosophical project but little, if anything, on the proof itself.

Question 05: Is knowledge justified true belief? **(15 marks)**

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2. The question centred on assessing the tripartite definition of knowledge, one of the main areas from the topic: 'What is knowledge?' (3.1.1). Students performed better on this question than on the corresponding 15 mark question on Moral Philosophy, with nearly half of students accessing the top two levels (10-12 and 13-15). Very few gained less than 4 marks, which demonstrates that this is a topic that students have at least a sound knowledge and understanding of, even if they are not always able to evaluate the positions effectively. In comparison to 2018, there was a significant improvement in the students' ability to meet the demands of the question and this was rewarded accordingly.

In nearly all cases, students were able to outline and explain JTB, and then to develop this in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In some cases, there were lengthy but not very illuminating explanations of each condition when a briefer account would have sufficed. Some then went on to assess whether the conditions were in fact necessary, using a range of counter-examples, some more convincing than others. Those that attacked belief and justification often fared better than those that attempted to attack the notion of truth using Kuhnian relativism. There were some very good responses that used the attack on justification as a way into reliabilism.

The vast majority of responses discussed Gettier cases and many were able to do so accurately. It was good to see that students understood the logic of Gettier's examples and the better responses explained this precisely in terms of the justification preserving nature of deduction. The most common case discussed was the job interview but some also attempted Jones and Brown. However, there was no need to discuss both cases unless students were making specific points about each. From here, students then discussed a range of responses and it was pleasing to see fewer students attempting a general trawl through all the possible responses to Gettier before finally running out of steam at Virtue Epistemology. There were some excellent essays that focused on a couple of responses with precision and in detail, constructing complete and coherent arguments in the process. There were some very good accounts of reliabilism and no false lemmas, although the evaluation of infallibilism tended to be less detailed, and accounts of Virtue Epistemology (if covered) also tended to lack detail and precision (although there were some very good accounts).

Those students that accessed the top band (13-15) did so through a careful balancing of objections and counter-responses; some were lengthy and covered a lot of ground very well, whereas other responses were shorter, more selective, but equally effective in constructing complete and coherent arguments with a careful balancing of positions.

Students in the 10-12 mark band gave clear and coherent accounts although the balancing of arguments was not always present. For example, some would give very good accounts of Gettier and one alternative, such as no false lemmas, but then were less detailed and/or precise on another alternative that was playing a crucial role in their overall argument. As such, these responses were typified by a lack of balance overall. Students who scored in the 7-9 mark band were able to outline JTB, explain Gettier cases and consider a response, but then tended to lack sufficient critical analysis or sustained evaluation.

At the lower end, students were often able to outline JTB but their evaluation, either in terms of necessity or sufficiency conditions, lacked detail; sometimes, in the case of Gettier, they had misunderstood the logic.

Section B: Moral Philosophy

Question 06: What does Aristotle mean by a 'voluntary action'? **(2 marks)**

This question assessed students' ability to define Aristotle's notion of voluntary action, a key part of his virtue ethics. It is one of the concepts in the 'Normative ethical theories' section (3.2.1), testing AO1 only. Students were slightly less effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding 2 mark question on the Epistemology section, although the vast majority were able to gain at least 1 mark. In comparison to 2018, students were much more effective in gaining marks and only a small percentage failed to write anything worthy of credit.

For 2 marks, students needed to address both features: the 'control' condition and the 'epistemic' condition. This could be expressed in a variety of ways, e.g. in terms of the action being done deliberately/intentionally and with awareness/knowledge/lack of ignorance. It could be framed positively, negatively, or as a mixture of both. For example, 'willingly and with awareness' or 'through neither force nor ignorance'.

Students that gained 1 mark did so because they only mentioned one of the conditions, or there was a lack of precision so that one condition was clearly addressed but the other was partial or imprecise – e.g. just mentioning an awareness of consequences rather than the wider relevant material circumstances.

The reason for students not achieving any marks was when they failed to explicitly mention either condition. For example, some responses stated that a voluntary action is one for which we can be held morally responsible. Whilst this is an important implication of Aristotle's definition, it is not on its own sufficient as it fails to account for the fact that we are held responsible because we are aware of what we are doing and are the willing causes of our actions. Another reason for students not gaining marks was by confusing voluntary actions with unrelated definitions or concepts, e.g. the greatest happiness for the greatest number, although these were rare.

Question 07: Explain Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. **(5 marks)**

This question asked students to explain the doctrine of the mean within Aristotle's account of the development of the virtues. Performance was slightly higher than the corresponding question on section A, and significantly more students performed in the 3-5 mark range on this question, with many grasping the substantive content of the question. This required students to make reference to the vices of excess and deficiency, with virtue being the mean between these two extremes. For 3 marks, students did not need to make the situational aspects of the doctrine explicit although

they could not explicitly state that the mean is always a moderate response, i.e. exactly in the middle of two vices. Many used examples to good effect, such as courage/bravery.

To progress beyond 3 marks, students needed to tease out the situational aspects more explicitly and those at the top of the performance scale were able to do this with precision and in detail, for example by linking it to practical wisdom. Some also linked it to function and eudaimonia, although there was no requirement to do so.

Students in the 1-2 performance scale were only able to offer a few relevant or fragmented points. For example, some were able to make the link to virtues being the mean between extremes but failed to develop their answers beyond that. Some confused the doctrine of the mean with utility calculations although the vast majority of students were able to offer at least one relevant point.

Question 08: Outline Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative <u>and</u> explain the issue that not all non-universalisable maxims are immoral.   (9 marks)

This question tested the students' ability to apply a specific critical issue to Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative – the Formula of Universal Law. Similar to A3 and B9, this was a two part question, with the weight of marks falling on the explanation of the issue. In order to explain the issue effectively, students would necessarily be demonstrating knowledge and understanding of Kant's first formulation. Allowing a 4 mark maximum for a clear and detailed account of Kant's first formulation, without clear reference to the issue of non-universalisable maxims, ensured that students who understood Kant's position but not the issue were not unduly penalised, and were still able to access the middle band (4-6). Approximately two-thirds were able to access the 4-6 or 7-9 bands, with approximately one-third not managing to progress beyond band 1-3. In comparison to 2018, students performed better at the highest level (7-9) although fewer progressed beyond 1-3. The main reason for this was a lack of understanding of the critical issue rather than an understanding of Kant's first formulation.

On the whole, there were some very good outlines of Kant's first formulation, and the better responses did this in terms of both contradictions in conception and will, with clear and relevant examples to illustrate, particularly lying and never helping others. The best answers were then able to directly link a counter-example to one of these contradictions, illustrating the issue of non-universalisable non-immoral maxims with precision. Typically, these referred to contradictions in conception, e.g. buying but never selling. For the top band, students needed to explain how such maxims could not be consistently universalised and yet were clearly not immoral.

Students in the 4-6 mark band were able to give generally accurate 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, usually by giving a good account of Kant's first formulation. The most common error or area of imprecision came with the issue, with quite a large number of students giving examples that did not illustrate or address it clearly enough. For example, a number of responses cited a variant of the maxim 'I will not lie, even to save someone's life' but did not explain why this is non-universalisable, by posing a contradiction in either conception or will.

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 Kant's first formulation, making basic errors, or providing insufficient relevant material. In most of these cases, the issue was very poorly dealt with, or not addressed at all.

Question 09: Outline rule utilitarianism <u>and</u> explain how rule utilitarians might oppose the telling of lies. (9 marks)

This question tested the students' ability to apply a normative ethical theory – rule utilitarianism – to the issue of lying. This was the best performing 9 mark question on the Moral Philosophy section of the paper, as well as being a significant improvement on the 9 mark questions on the 2018 paper. The majority of students were able to outline rule utilitarianism, often contrasting it with act utilitarianism. Whilst there was no requirement to do this, it often allowed students to tease out the detail more precisely. A maximum of 4 marks could be awarded for a clear and detailed outline of rule utilitarianism although most were able to say something about how a rule utilitarian might oppose the telling of lies.

The best responses were able to address the subtleties of the question, in particular by giving clear and detailed explanations as to the utility maximising consequences of telling the truth and/or the utility minimising consequences of telling lies: hence why the rule 'Do not lie' is one that rule utilitarians are likely to follow. These responses often made reference to the wider social benefits of not lying.

A good number of students then made the distinction between strong and weak rule utilitarianism, explaining how the weak utilitarian might be willing to break the rule in extreme cases, or to amend the rule accordingly. Whilst this was not a requirement, and students could and did access the top band without making the distinction, those that did make this distinction (and did it well) were able to demonstrate a detailed understanding of the issue. The ubiquitous axe murderer featured quite heavily and this was fine if the example was used effectively, e.g. to illustrate how weak utlilitarians might allow lying in such extreme cases. However, it was less effective as the main example, particularly in those answers where the Kantian response about how the lie could accidentally end up in murder, and therefore it was not permissible to break the rule even in these types of cases, not really helping the issue.

Similar to question B8 on Kant, students in the 4-6 mark band tended to provide responses that were better on one aspect of the question, for example by giving a good account of rule utilitarianism but then not applying it to the issue well enough. In particular, these answers were typified by a lack of detail on why lying decreases utility and some answers relied solely on the fact that rule utilitarians would oppose the telling of lies simply because it was a rule, rather than explaining why this was a rule in the first place. In other cases, some relied too heavily on the axe murderer example, which tended to introduce an element of imprecision into their responses if not executed well.

Those that failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band did so for a number of reasons. Typically, this was due to them giving very basic and imprecise accounts of rule utilitarianism, making basic errors, or providing very little in the way of philosophical knowledge and understanding.

Question 10: Is moral realism the right approach to metaethics? (15 marks)

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 moral realism can be considered the right approach to metaethics. It enabled students to grapple with a range of philosophical issues, ranging from ontological, epistemological and semantic considerations, and the best responses were able to distinguish well between these different strands, constructing sophisticated answers with some very good argument and counter-argument.

Overall, students performed less well on this question than on the corresponding 15 mark question on Epistemology, although over a third of students were able to access the top two bands (13-15 and 10-12), with the most common bands accessed being equally split between 10-12 and 7-9. Some students did not attempt to answer the question, although this number was very small. The vast majority of students were able to score at least 4 marks or more, demonstrating at least some knowledge and understanding of the issues addressed by the question. There was a recognition that this can be a more abstract and difficult topic for students to grasp, and so whenever possible, credit was given to those who were able to outline and explain positions and issues without necessarily being able to fully evaluate them fully. However, even though students did struggle with this question in comparison to A5, their performance in comparison to the corresponding 2018 B10 was better, with two-thirds gaining more than 7 marks.

In general, well over half of students had a sound understanding of metaethics and were able to outline the various positions and issues within the field. There were some very good attempts to make links between realism/anti-realism and cognitivism/non-cognitivism although some only aligned cognitivism with realism, ignoring Mackie's error theory. It was pleasing to see that very few students focused solely on normative ethical theories and, when students did include these theories, they were able to make relevant points regarding the metaethical foundations of them. Typically, this was done better in relation to utilitarianism rather than Kant.

Those students that accessed the top bands (13-15 and 10-12) did so through a careful balancing of arguments and counter-arguments, with some arguing in favour of realism, although many chose to argue against it and in favour of some form of anti-realism. These answers focused directly on moral realism, including a consideration of arguments for (e.g. Mill's proof of utilitarianism in relation to moral naturalism, or more generally in terms of moral progress, etc) and then directly pitting these against relevant counter arguments. For example, some very good answers considered Mill's proof, then attacked this using Moore's naturalistic fallacy, before introducing intuitionism and then considering anti-realist objections to this, such as Mackie's arguments from relativity and/or queerness. Others utilised Hume's Fork and the better accounts were able to explain in detail how this can be used as an objection to moral realism in relation to the non-existence of moral facts. These arguments were clear, complete and sustained, demonstrating a detailed and correct understanding of the relevant content. They also demonstrated good integration and allowed the students to argue with clear and sustained intent. Those in the 10-12 band had many of these features but the balance was not always present, for example they were able to explain some arguments and counter-arguments in detail but others less so. A specific example of this was Ayer's verification principle, which was often outlined clearly but not well integrated into the overall argument.

Students who scored in the 7-9 mark band were able to explain relevant material but these responses tended to juxtapose arguments and positions rather than integrating them into a coherent and sustained argument. The intent was present but the lack of detail, precision and integration meant that the conclusion was not well supported and so not fully coherent.

Those students that scored in the lower mark bands were able to present one or two relevant arguments, or explain some relevant positions, but the responses were either too narrow, lacked sufficient relevant material, or demonstrated evidence of serious misunderstandings. Examples included very basic accounts of Mackie's argument from relativity, or poor treatments of Moore, some of whom claimed that he was an anti-realist and an intuitionist at the same time.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.