AQA

AS-LEVEL

Philosophy

PHLS1: Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion
Report on the Examination

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PHLS1: Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion

Introduction

Students performed very well on this paper, with some producing responses of quite exceptional philosophical quality. There was clear evidence of good teaching, with students demonstrating sound understanding of the material and clear evidence of them developing the skills of *philosophical* analysis and argumentation. Students demonstrated good levels of understanding across the range of topics addressed in this first AS examination, with some students bringing in material which went beyond the specification content; whilst this is not a requirement, it is pleasing to see. The broader specification coverage in the new examination format, with the range of questions-types, ensured that students had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

The question paper worked very well indeed: students could access the questions and understand clearly what was required of them. Whilst a small number of students could not answer particular questions, the specificity of questions proved to be a support to students and not a barrier. Students across the ability range were able to respond to all questions and the mark schemes catered well for the full range of those responses. Every question differentiated robustly, enabling students of differing abilities to be rewarded appropriately. In general, the majority of students were able to demonstrate understanding of the content, with differentiation being on the basis of the precision of that understanding and the demonstration of the skills of philosophical analysis and evaluation. This, too, was very pleasing to see. There were many examples of top-band performance for each of the questions, with some students deservedly achieving full marks.

There was evidence of texts being used appropriately and helpfully, with students able to articulate arguments clearly and more able students doing this with rigour and precision. Students were able to make reasoned evaluations of those arguments. There were some excellent responses, where students set out arguments precisely, accurately and consciously in their strongest form, before engaging in sophisticated analyses and evaluations. The most able students were differentiated by their ability to distinguish between crucial and less crucial arguments.

There was plentiful evidence of students trying very hard to be clear, precise and concise. There had clearly been a focus, in teaching and learning, on argument. Some students made use of formal logic and set out their arguments in formal notation; others chose to respond in extended prose; many used a range of styles. There were, of course, some students who used the language of argument, but whose responses were more rhetorical than philosophical, but the requirement that analysis and evaluation to form reasoned judgements be supported by clear understanding enabled this to be dealt with through the marking. There were relatively few narrative responses to the essay questions, even from the less able students, which was a credit to them and their teachers. It was particularly pleasing to see students applying the philosophical understanding which they had developed in Epistemology to the Philosophy of Religion and there were some excellent, analytical responses to questions in this section.

The distribution of marks from this first examination was very pleasing. The use of the full mark range for each question resulted in a wide distribution of marks for the examination as a whole, which enabled robust differentiation between higher and lower achieving students. It was pleasing to see so many students achieving full marks on particular questions and very pleasing indeed to

see some students achieving almost full total marks. Teachers and students are to be commended for an excellent first examination of this new specification.

Assessment Objectives (AO):

AO1: Demonstrate understanding of the core concepts and methods of philosophy.

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

Section A: Epistemology

Question 1 What is a priori knowledge? (2 marks)

This question addressed AO1 and focused on students demonstrating their ability to provide a clear, correct and precise definition of a philosophical term. Students rose to the challenge well, with many of them achieving full marks. Some students defined 'a priori' as 'knowledge that is acquired independently of experience,' rather than 'knowledge that is justifiable independently of experience,' and full credit was given for both cases. Provision was also made for students who defined the concept 'positively,' without explicit reference to experience. So 'knowledge acquired through the use of reason alone' was a frequent answer and full credit was given. Some students used examples, such as analytic statements, mathematical truths and innate ideas. It is important to note that, where these supported and clarified the general definition given, they did not constitute 'redundancy.' Some students suggested, incorrectly, that 'analytic' and 'a priori' were interchangeable, with the former exhausting the meaning of the latter. Of those students who scored no marks, one of the most common mistakes was the simple confusion of 'a priori' with 'a posteriori.'

Question 2 Outline the 'argument from illusion' against direct realism. (5 marks)

This question addressed AO1 and required students to demonstrate their ability to provide a full, clear and precise outline or explanation, precisely identifying points and making logical links. The majority of students demonstrated that they understood the 'substantive content' of the argument and had some understanding of the logic. Many used examples, such as the stick in water, effectively. Those students who achieved 4 or 5 marks did so because their response was fuller and/or more precise, so differentiation here was clearly by philosophical ability. Higher-achieving students recognised the role of the phenomenal principle (when we perceive something which appears to have the property F, we are perceiving something which has the property F) and some of the best answers used this principle to show how instances of illusion cast doubt on the directness of our perceptions, so undermining the theory of direct realism. Many of these answers also made reference to 'sense data' as the most plausible immediate object of perception and this did not constitute 'redundancy' as long as the point was used as a counter to direct realism. Some higher achieving students clearly defined/drew out the meaning and/or relevant features of direct realism as a philosophical position and then went on to explain precisely how and where the 'argument from illusion' attacked direct realism. Others did not, but it was clear, from their responses, that they had a good understanding of direct realism. Either approach could receive full

credit and the former did not constitute 'redundancy' as it clearly supported the outlining of the 'argument from illusion.'

Some high achieving students laid their argument out in formal (step by step) format. Numbered points and logical notation can help with precision, so minimise redundancy, but it is important to note that full credit was also received by students who wrote in standard prose. Very few students achieved no marks on this question, with almost all being able to offer at least 'fragmented points' relating to direct realism and/or illusion, without bringing out the substance of the argument.

Question 3 Explain Berkeley's attack on the primary and secondary property distinction. (9 marks)

9-mark questions focus on AO1 and require extended demonstrations of philosophical understanding.

Many students began by outlining the 'primary and secondary property distinction' with reference to Locke and/or indirect realism, with many using illustrations effectively. There was pleasing evidence of understanding of this distinction, even from lower achieving students – what they lacked was precision and an integration of the points they made about primary/secondary qualities with Berkeley's attack.

On the whole, students who started with Berkeley's idealism/immaterialism and tried to build their whole argument out of that metaphysical position (often with some reference to the 'Master' argument) did not score as well as students who focused on the specifics of Berkeley's attack on the distinction. Those who attempted to paint a 'big picture' of Berkeley's thought at the outset tended not to be able to demonstrate 'precision' and 'sustained relevance.'

Higher achieving students integrated their understanding of the primary/secondary property distinction with a clear and correct account of Berkeley's attack. The more popular and effective responses tended to revolve around perceptual variation in primary properties (especially size and motion) and the inconceivability of objects without secondary properties (especially colour). The former was generally executed more effectively than the latter, but there were outstanding examples of both.

There were many very impressive responses to this question, with a number of students receiving marks in the top band and a noticeable number of students achieving full marks. These students very clearly integrated their understanding of the primary/secondary quality distinction with a clear and precise identification of the locus of Berkeley's attack. There were some impressive responses which highlighted, for example, 'perceiver independence' as a supposed defining feature of 'primary qualities' before explaining Berkeley's attack on that very characteristic.

Question 4 Explain Locke's arguments against innatism. (9 marks)

9-mark questions focus on AO1 and require extended demonstrations of philosophical understanding.

The most effective responses to this question demonstrated understanding of Locke's strategy. They began with one or more of Locke's own claims about the kind of conditions which would be required for innate knowledge to exist, such as 'innate concepts' or 'universal agreement.' They

then went on to explain Locke's arguments against the reality of such conditions. A minority of students presented a Lockean argument against innatism, followed by an innatist response, followed by a Lockean counter to that response. This was not counted as redundancy, because students were clearly using this strategy as a logical method of adding layers to Locke's own arguments.

Many students used the example of the intellectual limitations of 'children and idiots' as a counter-example to the universality deemed essential to innate ideas. Differences in religious concepts, especially truth claims about God, were also regularly and appropriately used.

Lower achieving students generally did not demonstrate such a clear understanding of innatism, with some identifying it with rationalism by way of contrast with Locke's empiricism and appealing to his view of the mind as a *tabula rasa.* Lower achieving students tried to appropriate the *tabula rasa* as if it were a specific argument against innatism, rather than part of a more general stance of Locke's against innatism.

This question was framed in terms of 'arguments,' but there was no minimum requirement, in terms of the number of arguments, from students. Differentiation was by the quality of the response. Many of the responses in the top band (7-9 marks) did use several of Locke's arguments, but, in the very small number of cases where students offered a high quality, 'precise' and 'integrated explanation' which focused on just one argument, full credit was available.

Question 5 Is knowledge justified true belief? (15 marks)

This question focused on AO1 and AO2, so required students to select and deploy their philosophical understanding to generate a philosophical argument. Many students used a combination of extended writing and step-by-step formulation of arguments very effectively.

The question was focused on a classic philosophical conception of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB), but designed so that students were free to explore alternative theories.

There was clear evidence of good teaching here, with the majority of students demonstrating the ability to select and deploy relevant material to generate an argument in response to the question. There was frequent reference to Plato as the intellectual source of this definition and students frequently demonstrated a clear understanding of what justification/truth/belief meant. Most students were able to move onto Gettier-style objections: the classic Smith and Jones job interview scenario, the broken clock telling the correct time and the Barn County examples were all very popular. Lower achieving students were able to identify relevant material and deploy it correctly, but, as expected, their responses lacked detail or there were gaps in understanding.

Responses to these Gettier-style objections involved strengthening the justification condition (usually through infallibilism), adding a condition (usually 'no false lemmas') or considering alternatives to justification (usually through reliabilism, truth tracking or virtue epistemology). Of these positions, students tended to be least convincing on truth tracking and virtue epistemology. Where the individual conditions of JTB were probed, 'truth' often proved the most problematic for students, with Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts applied with variable results. Very few students tried to argue that unqualified JTB constitutes knowledge.

It was pleasing to see even the lower achieving students demonstrating good levels of understanding and some ability to generate argument. This meant that differentiation could, again,

be strongly in terms of philosophical ability, with students achieving in the 10-12 and 13-15 band not so much on the basis of selection of material as because of the accuracy and detail with which that material was explained and the sustained quality of analysis and evaluation. A pleasing number of students achieved in the top band and there were some responses which were very clearly deserving of full marks.

The differentiator between the 10-12 band and the 13-15 band lay in the balancing of arguments, with the highest achieving students paying attention both to the central theory (JTB) and to the criticisms. They demonstrated a clear understanding of why JTB, as a conception of knowledge, was ever thought to be persuasive, before moving on to criticisms. They explained how, according to this theory, justification, truth and belief were 'individually necessary and jointly sufficient.' The necessity of these conditions was then tested, usually against examples (both plausible and far fetched) and a preliminary conclusion formed (typically, but not always necessarily, that these three conditions *are* individually necessary). Students then went on to consider whether the conditions were jointly sufficient, almost invariably with reference to 'Gettier-style' criticisms and a range of responses to those criticisms.

Students achieved top marks in a variety of ways. Some addressed a range of positions, from classic JTB to 'truth tracking' and formed a clear summary conclusion at the end of their analysis in favour of one position or another. Others had a clearly defined, simple thesis at the outset (for example, 'knowledge is JTB with no false lemmas') and considered a narrower range of material, but did so with great precision, in detail, with integration and coherence. Many students chose to state their position with respect to the question at the beginning of the essay, enabling examiners more easily to make a judgement about the extent to which they had demonstrated 'sustained intent.'

It is important to note that simply stating a position at the beginning did not, in itself, constitute evidence of 'sustained intent.' Some students, for example, indicated that they favoured 'virtue epistemology' at the beginning of their essay, although this preferred position only featured at the very end of the essay, where it was summarised and described favourably, but without critical evaluation.

The best responses had a clear position and attempted to 'balance' arguments, considering the weight which should be given to each argument. The ability to distinguish crucial arguments from less crucial ones differentiated outstanding students. Some students appeared to be weighing arguments through rhetorical skill, with one or more being forcefully asserted, but the reason for the alleged superiority of one position over another was not always clear.

It is important to note that 15-mark questions address both AO1 and AO2. The marks are not awarded separately and the assessment objectives are intertwined and embedded in the generic level descriptions. So, for example, for the top band, students must demonstrate the skills of analysis and evaluation of philosophical argument to form reasoned judgements, but they must do so on the basis of a clear understanding of the content. That must be detailed and correct and sufficient to answer the question fully.

Differentiation was, therefore, on the basis of the accuracy and precision with which they deployed and evaluated, say, Gettier-style objections and responses. Did students *explain exactly how* the justification, truth and belief conditions are ostensibly fulfilled in the 'Smith and Jones interview scenario' or in the 'Barn County' example? Did students explain how 'infallibilism leads to scepticism?' Where such details were skipped over in summary accounts, or where assertion replaced explanation and illustration, this constituted 'gaps' and a 'lack of detail.' There were,

however, many examples of very high quality responses, with superb performance from students with respect to both assessment objectives.

Quality of written communication featured in the assessment of the 15-mark questions and there were impressive examples of high quality philosophical analysis and argumentation. There were also a small number of examples where the quality of written communication was so poor that it was difficult to discern the meaning.

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

Question 6 What does it mean to claim that God is everlasting? (2 marks)

This question addressed AO1 and focused on students demonstrating their ability to provide a clear, correct and precise definition of a philosophical term. Again, many students rose to the challenge well, with many instances of full marks being given, most commonly for "God exists throughout time, without beginning or end."

This question was more challenging than the 2-mark question in Epistemology, in part because 'a priori' is a concept that students are likely to encounter more frequently, in different contexts, than God's 'everlasting' nature. The requirement for precision enabled strong differentiation between students, with students who identified God simply as 'a being who exists in time' not receiving credit, unless they added 'without beginning or end,' since temporality alone does not distinguish God (as 'everlasting') from any other being in time. The other major reason for students not receiving credit was a straight confusion with God being 'eternal.'

There were more examples of significant redundancy on this question, with claims about God being everlasting being blurred with considerations about God being limited by time, or considerations about God's immanence and/or issues around God's knowledge of things in time.

Question 7 Outline the paradox of the stone. (5 marks)

This question addressed AO1 and required students to demonstrate their ability to provide a full, clear and precise outline or explanation, precisely identifying points and making logical links. Student performance on this question was impressive, with the majority achieving at least 4 marks and many examples of students achieving full marks. Students were typically able to identify the paradox of the stone as an attack on God's omnipotence and could outline the two relevant scenarios clearly. Students were able to identify points precisely and make logical links and some students very effectively used notation and formal logic. The strongest responses were thorough, using symbols and clarifying precisely what those symbols meant. Some students used symbols, but forgot to clarify what those symbols referred to.

Those students who gained full marks often started by offering a clear definition of omnipotence and then going on to identify the 'incoherence in the concept of an omnipotent being' as central to the paradox.

Weaker students sometimes confused the paradox of the stone with Mavrodes' response to the paradox and there were examples of students trying to evaluate the paradox, which was not

required. There was a small number of cases where students appeared not to know what the paradox was and offered no response.

Question 8 Explain how the free will defence responds to the problem of evil. (9 marks)

9-mark questions focus on AO1 and require extended demonstrations of philosophical understanding. There were some very impressive responses to this question, with the majority of students achieving at least 5 marks, many examples of 7-9 mark responses and some excellent responses rightly being awarded full marks. Even students who achieved only 1-3 marks did so by demonstrating a clear understanding of the problem of evil and of responses to it – though a very small number did confuse the free will defence with 'soul making.'

The most impressive feature of responses to this question was the clarity and precision of the majority of student answers. Most students were able to offer a clear account of the (logical) problem of evil, which was taken as either a challenge to the very existence of God or a challenge to the conception of God's nature within classical theism. They then went on to explain how, strategically, the free will defence responded to that challenge. Occasionally, students sought to show how the free will defence responded to the evidential problem of evil too.

In the specification, the free will defence is presented in Plantinga's form, but as the question was open about which form of the free will defence could be used, students who responded in terms of, say, Augustine could receive equal credit. We saw both theological arguments, based on Augustine and rooted in the Bible, and reference to analytic philosophy, largely based on Plantinga.

Students who appealed to Augustine did produce some high quality work, but, on several occasions, fell into the 4-6 mark band, because they lacked the precision and integration necessary for top band marks. Students used 'the fall' and 'original sin' to divert blame for the existence of evil from God to humanity, but that tended to be as far as the explanation got. The better versions either combined Augustine's insights with insights from more modern arguments which focus on moral autonomy, or brought out the salvific dimension of Augustine's thought and showed how God's classical attributes remained intact despite the existence of evil, with this latter point being a key feature of top band answers. Weaker responses were characterised by the inability to make a clear link between the problem of evil and the free will defence.

Some of the best responses pitted Plantinga's defence against Mackie's (or Hume's) logical problem of evil, with accounts focusing on the defence of the moral value of 'significantly free' creatures. Occasionally, this tipped into an extended and superfluous evaluation, with discussions of the alleged failure of the free will defence to explain natural evil. There were, however, many excellent accounts of Plantinga's defence, framed in terms of possible worlds, with some students managing to engage intelligently with the highly challenging concept of 'transworld depravity.'

The quality of written communication was frequently high here, with almost all students making some use of appropriate philosophical terminology and many doing so with fluency.

Question 9 Outline the verification principle and explain Hick's claim that religious statements are verifiable eschatologically. (9 marks)

9-mark questions focus on AO1 and require extended demonstrations of philosophical understanding. Students were required to *outline* the verification principle and then *explain* Hick's claim that religious statements are verifiable eschatologically. Students were not penalised for an extended treatment of the verification principle, but some students limited the marks they could gain on this question by providing a highly detailed explanation of the verification principle and a very brief explanation of Hick's position, sometimes amounting to little more than a definition of 'eschatological verification.' At most, 4 marks were available for this approach, if there was some evidence of integration between the outline of the verification principle and some attempt to explain Hick. In some cases, the issue of 'meaning' was well-explained in the context of the verification principle, but had disappeared by the time the student came to consider Hick, as did the focus on propositions/statements. Some students situated their answers in the context of cognitivist/non-cognitivist approaches to religious language, but then went down an unhelpful track, blurring verification and falsification and engaging in extended discussions of Wisdom's parable of the gardener.

There were, however, some excellent responses. Those who accessed 7-9 marks demonstrated a clear understanding of the verification principle with reference to Ayer. Sometimes they distinguished between the 'weak' and 'strong' versions. Stronger responses demonstrated how the verification principle was applied to religious statements and precisely how and why they were found wanting. Those responses then introduced Hick's concept of eschatological verification of religious statements as a response to the charge of meaninglessness. The argument that such statements could be verified in the afterlife was set out clearly, with many students demonstrating precise and detailed understanding of the meaning of the parable of the Celestial city. Some students added brief defences (drawn from Hick and entirely relevant) of the conceivability of an enduring personal identity beyond death. Some of the best responses concluded with a very clear reconnection of the questions of 'meaning' and 'verification'.

Question 10 Does the cosmological argument prove that God exists? (15 marks)

This question focused on AO1 and AO2, so required students to select and deploy their philosophical understanding to generate a philosophical argument. As with the 15-mark Epistemology question, there were some very impressive responses to this question. There were plentiful examples of work in the top band and some excellent responses which were well-deserving of the full marks they were given.

The question was framed in an open way, so that students could select the approach they wished to take. Some students ranged broadly across different versions of the argument, whereas others focused on a smaller number of arguments and some focused on only one. The full range of marks were available for any of these approaches.

Across the cohort, students made use of the full range of material from the specification, with some augmenting this with insights from the natural sciences. Such insights were sometimes highly relevant and there were some excellent discussions of the Kalam cosmological argument in relation to Big Bang cosmology. There were, however, some more generalised discussions of scientific evidence, such as a generic appeal to a 'lack of scientific evidence,' which did not contribute well to *philosophical* analysis and evaluation.

There were some very impressive responses, which matched the appropriate version of the cosmological argument to the relevant criticism(s). Whilst some criticisms can be applied to a number of versions of the cosmological argument, some hit the target rather more effectively than others. We saw students making highly effective use of the fallacy of composition argument to the cosmological argument from contingency, explaining exactly where the fallacy occurs. This enabled them to generate a more robust evaluation than those who, say, appealed to Big Bang theory as a knock-down argument against Aquinas' First Way.

15-mark questions are intended to generate a philosophical argument and most students argued that the cosmological argument did not prove the existence of God. There was evidence of students recognising the strengths of, say, the 'uncaused cause' or the 'necessary being' arguments, but questioning whether that being could be identified with the God of classical theism. There were occasional comments along the lines that Aquinas should not have made the leap from the uncaused cause/necessary being to the Christian God/God of classical theism, but there was also plentiful evidence of excellent teaching, with clear reference to the texts, with students recognising the minimalist theological aims of the specific arguments and some pointing out that Aquinas addresses issues about the *nature* of God in a separate set of arguments.

In the pressure of the examination, there were occasions when students misattributed a particular version of the cosmological argument. As long as the argument itself was presented clearly and correctly, students were not penalised for this. Factual errors such as these do matter in the context of reporting arguments, especially where such factual errors result in weak versions of the argument being presented for critical discussion. It clearly takes greater philosophical skill to analyse and evaluate a philosophical argument in its strongest form than in a misrepresented weaker form. So, for example, some students presented the first premise of the Kalam cosmological argument as 'Everything that exists has a cause' and then argued that the theist contradicts her/himself when s/he claims that God exists but is uncaused. Now, however convincing the candidate's refutation of the argument, as presented, might have been, it will obviously score less well than an evaluation which engages in detail with the premise that 'everything *that begins to* exist has a cause.' Philosophical argument is primarily interested in the latter, whereas the former is an argument which you might find outside academic philosophy and is easier to refute. That is not to say that such evaluations have no merit at all; the refutation of any argument demonstrates a degree of philosophical skill. So, whilst some very limited credit might be available for students who evaluate on the basis of a simplistic presentation of an argument, full credit is only available for students who both present and evaluate arguments philosophically, in their fully-correct form.

Rather more students did not score on this question than on the 15-mark Epistemology question. Whilst this might have been, in part, due to time-management issues, it was also because there was some evidence of students writing about the wrong argument altogether: there were essays on the design argument, the ontological argument and even discussions of the problem of evil. Very occasionally, the quality of written communication was a barrier to clear expression of meaningful arguments.

Overall, though, students rose to the challenge of writing a clearly philosophical argument in response to the question, with many setting arguments out in their logical steps and deploying the tools of philosophical analysis with clarity, precision, confidence and flair.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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UMS conversion calculator