AS-LEVEL

Philosophy

PHLS1-Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion
Report on the Examination

PHLS1: Epistemology and Philosophy of Religion

Introduction

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

Summary Findings

There is strong quantitative and qualitative evidence of an improvement in student performance across the paper and on the majority of individual questions.

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 the tripartite view of propositional knowledge? (2 marks)

This question assessed students' ability to identify the essential elements in a key theory in epistemology covered in the current specification (testing AO1). Students were much more effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding question last year, with a significant increase in the number of students scoring full marks. Typically this was achieved by the following kind of response: 'The tripartite view is the theory that we acquire propositional knowledge when we have a belief, when that belief is true, and when that belief is justified.' Some continued to explain that these conditions were 'individually necessary and jointly sufficient', or pointed at that the theory 'goes back to Plato.' This was unnecessary, but it certainly did not constitute 'significant redundancy', and so full marks were awarded to these responses.

Because there are three elements to the 'tripartite view' and only 2 marks available, no marks were awarded for definitions of 'propositional knowledge', although students did gain credit (1 mark) for clearly and correctly identifying any one of the three components of the theory. This constituted a 'partial' answer.

Students were much more disciplined this year in resisting the temptation to use (unnecessary) examples, which reduced the scope for the 'significant redundancy' that cost students marks in the previous series. On the occasions this did happen, it tended to be students explaining the 'tripartite view' before illustrating with an impressive example of what they took to be the theory of 'justified true belief 'in action, or else they just offered an example of propositional knowledge, which clouded rather than illuminated the clarity of the answer.

Question 2: Explain the empiricist distinction between simple and complex concepts. (5 marks)

This question also addressed AO1, but required a fuller demonstration of understanding applied to some of the core concepts in philosophy covered within the current specification. To achieve full marks students had to have an understanding of 'simple' and 'complex concepts' within the context of the empiricist philosophical tradition. The majority of students got to 3 marks (because substantially correct) with a brief definition of empiricism before distinguishing 'simple' and 'complex' concepts in terms of how the latter are constituted by combining the former. Illustrations were sometimes offered ('dogs', 'unicorns' and 'golden mountains' were especially popular).

Those who accessed higher marks (4-5) offered fuller or more precise explanations: for example, detailed explanations of how simple concepts are formed from sense experience, as the effects or copies of impressions (Hume) or of reality (Locke), alongside precise accounts of how the process of combination or abstraction work in the formation of complex concepts of things which may have no mind independent existence. Some of these better responses explicitly and correctly utilised Locke and Hume when explaining the distinction.

At the lower end of the marking scale (1-2 marks), students tended not to get beyond a basic explanation of empiricism and / or offering non philosophical explanations of the terms 'simple' and 'complex' before trying (with limited success) to apply these to the question. Some also confused the distinction inherent in 'Hume's folk' with the distinction between 'simple' and 'complex concepts'.

Question 3: Outline Descartes' evil deceiver argument and explain what he then says about his knowledge of his own existence. (9 marks).

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1) focussing on a classic sceptical argument in modern epistemology from one of the key thinkers featured in the current specification. Most students took the logical approach of breaking the question down into its component parts in the first instance, with the best achieving precise and detailed integration in their responses. On average, students performed better on this question than the corresponding one last year, while 5 rather than 4 was the most frequently awarded score.

The wording of this question meant there could be little uncertainty concerning the (deceiving) role of the evil being entertained by Descartes in his early *Meditations* (1-2), and the vast majority of students correctly located this argument within those sceptical reflections. The best responses to the first part of the question could reach the bottom of Level 2 (4 marks) with a clear and detailed outline of the hyperbolic doubt engendered by this particular thought experiment, pointing out that even some a prior truths were threatened by this sceptical scenario. More typically, however, the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' was simply taken as another potential source of doubt for the reliability of one's senses along with the experience of illusions and dreams (sometimes 'illusions' and 'dreams' were treated to quite detailed accounts, with the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' tagged on at the end). Sometimes students approached the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' as an entity that Descartes actually believed existed, rather than a sceptical possibility that he entertained. This kind of material did not usually take students beyond the bottom band (1-3 marks): they raised 'relevant points', and little else.

On the other side of the question, and at the low end of attainment, sometimes students did not get beyond producing partially remembered features of the cogito (sometimes in Latin and English),

and failed to link it to the sceptical arguments or provide any philosophical context for it at all. These responses also failed to get students beyond the bottom band (1-3 marks).

The extent to which students progressed through the middle band of marks (4-6) and into the top band (7-9) depended on the extent to which they clearly and correctly explained Descartes' cogito, and showed how it responded to the sceptical challenges he had set for himself (specifically, the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' argument). Some of the best supplemented their account of the cogito (as a response to the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' argument) with explanatory comments on the character of the cogito and what it is designed to achieve philosophically: an introspective enquiry, instigated by Descartes, subjecting all his beliefs to doubt in order to discover whether he can reach any indubitable epistemological foundation.

Lower down the scale (4-6) students' answers lacked specificity and precision, simply taking the 'evil deceiver' / 'evil demon' alongside other doubts without trying to bring out its more radical features, or answering the question from the point of view of a student who has an overall appreciation of Cartesian epistemology but not the precise understanding necessary to meet the specific demands of the question to the same standards as the very best students. For example, these middle band responses would often give (considerable) time and space to discussing the epistemological role of God in Descartes's philosophy, or explaining why God could not be the 'evil deceiver'. This was not wholly irrelevant, but nor was it well focussed on the key issues.

Question 4: Outline Berkeley's idealism and explain how it could lead to solipsism. (9 marks)

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focusing on a classic theory in early modern epistemology, and one of its supposed weakness, covered in this current specification. Most students took the logical approach of breaking the question down into its component parts in the first instance, with the best achieving precise and detailed integration between the relevant issues. On average, students were more successful scoring marks on this question than on the corresponding one last year, and the most frequently awarded mark was 6 rather than last year's 5.

The vast majority of students progressed through the bottom band of marks (1-3) and into the middle band (4-6) with relevant points of understanding on both sides of the question. The first part of the question (on idealism) was generally well understood; solipsism rather less so. The very best responses often gave clear explanations of idealism (going well beyond the required 'outline'), contextualising the theory historically and detailing arguments in its favour, before defining solipsism (correctly), and showing how idealism might tend in that direction. Some students understood solipsism ontologically, some epistemologically. Both were credit worthy.

At the lower end (1-3 marks) students either did not understand what solipsism is at all (it was sometimes confused with scepticism more broadly conceived), and only managed a basic outline of idealism; or else their account of idealism was indistinguishable from solipsism, and so the demands of this two part question were never really met.

The (not uncommon) inclusion of God in responses to this question sometimes helped but often hindered the quality of the answers. Some responses set Berkley's idealism up at the outset in such a way that it couldn't be solipsistic (with God as the eternal perceiver who sustains all that exists), and so the subsequent explanation of how his position could lead to solipsism did not cohere with the rest of the answer. The better responses which made use of God either briefly raised common philosophical objections to belief in God, thereby leaving idealism more vulnerable to the challenge of solipsism, or they extended their answer by saying that although Berkley's

idealism *could* lead to solipsism or *might appear* to lead to solipsism considered up to a certain point, once one factors in the existence of God in Berkeley's system, we see that, as a matter of fact, it does *not* lead to solipsism. Because this question specifically tested students' understanding of idealism, this was not taken to be redundant evaluation, but as evidence of an appreciation of idealism.

Question 5: Are direct realists right to claim that the immediate objects of perception are mind-dependent? (15 marks)

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test AO1 *and* AO2. The question was precisely focussed on the central claim of one of the epistemological theories featured in this specification. It was open to students to address the central issues from a variety of theoretical perspectives: direct realism (of course), but also indirect realism and idealism. On average, students were more successful in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding question last year. Most students tended to answer the question in the negative, arguing against direct realism, but the direct realist claim also had some very able defenders.

Students found it easier to access the 7-9 band this year due to an improvement in the explanation of relevant theoretical positions used when trying to answer the question. Surprisingly, perhaps, the theory that was usually treated in the least detail was direct realism itself, which often received a cursory description at the outset before evaluation began: key criticisms of direct realism tended to the argument from illusion, perceptual variation, hallucination and time lag. A profitable distinction between naïve and more sophisticated (philosophical) direct realism was not made as frequently one might expect, and the assumption that naïve realism is the only variety available sometimes compromised the quality of the analysis.

Responses which attracted marks in the 10 – 12 range tended to present a succession of relevant arguments and counter arguments (for and against the claims of direct realism), but without any clear rationale for why some were more decisive than others. More students accessed the top band (13-15) than on the corresponding question last year, arguing with sustained intent to a conclusion using relevant philosophical, explained in details; moreover, it was clear from these answers why they judged certain arguments to carry more weight than others. Just for example, 'perceptual variation' was often taken to be a more powerful objection to direct realism than the argument from 'hallucination' before the latter is, arguably, not a perception at all.

Lower down the scale (4-6 marks) students either used a very narrow range of material (eg only the arguments from illusion, and even then without detail and precision), or else they understood the question far too narrowly: focussing on the bare *existence* of the external (material) world rather than the *immediacy* of our perceptions of that world. The claims of indirect realism and idealism also became confused in these responses.

More students manage to get out of the bottom scoring band (1-3) this year than on the corresponding question last year. Those that didn't tended to briefly describe 'direct realism' and / or make brief reference to opposing theories. The number of students unable to pick up any marks at all also fell.

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

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

This question assessed the students' ability to explain a key divine attribute covered in the current specification (testing AO1). Students found it marginally harder to score marks on this than the corresponding question on the Epistemology section, but there was a significant advance compared with the corresponding question last year, with more than twice as many students acquiring full marks. A typical answer was: 'To claim that God is eternal means that he exists outside of time, without beginning or end.' The latter part of that response was unnecessary, but it certainly did not constitute 'significant redundancy', and full marks were awarded to a clear majority of students.

Because the claim that 'God exists without beginning or end' is true of God conceived either as an 'eternal' being or an 'everlasting' being, students who only managed to include that feature could still score 1 mark for a 'partial' answer. Marks were also lost by students who erred on the key temporal aspect of the claim, often confusing 'eternal' with 'everlasting' (mirroring the problem encountered by students last year on the corresponding question), or with 'omniscience.'

Question 7: Outline Descartes' version of the ontological argument. (5 marks)

This question also addressed AO1, but required a fuller demonstration of philosophical understanding centring on a theistic proof featured within this specification. On average, students performed better on this question that the corresponding one the Epistemology section, but not as well as the corresponding on the Philosophy of Religion last year.

At the upper end, more students achieved maximum marks than last year, while the most frequently awarded score remained to be 4. Some of the best responses began by characterising the ontological argument as an 'a priori and deductive argument for the existence of God, which tries to establishes the necessity of his existence' before outlining the logical steps in Descartes's own version (although this contextual introduction wasn't necessary). These high scoring accounts of Descartes's argument started with him having the 'idea of God' (sometimes adding that this idea is 'innate'), conceived as a 'supremely perfect being'. This laid solid conceptual foundations for the rest of the argument: since a 'supremely perfect being possesses all perfections', and 'existence is a perfection', then 'God (as a supremely perfect being) must exist'.

Lower down the scale, Descartes's version was sometimes blurred with Anselm's, but contained sufficient relevant material to acquire 2 or 3 marks. Also at this lower end, some students treated Descartes's argument for God's existence as an analytic (tautological) manoeuvre, without breaking down the steps of his metaphysical argument. In this context, appeal to the definition of triangles as comparable to definitions of God did not help (they are of course taken from Descartes himself, but he intended this to illustrate a point about the essence of God, not a semantic point).

Students who failed to score any marks at all, or who earned 1 mark for fragmented understanding, tended to confuse the 'ontological' argument with the 'trademark' argument.

Question 8: Explain Mitchell's view of religious language and how he used his 'Partisan' story to illustrate this. (9 marks)

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussing on a twentieth century controversy concerning religious language featured in the current specification. Most students took the logical approach of breaking the question down into its component parts in the first instance, with the best achieving precise and detailed integration between the relevant issues. It proved to be the most challenging question to score marks on the whole paper. This is the second year in succession that many students have seemed underprepared to deal with a question on religious language: last year it was the question on the 'verification 'principle' and Hick's 'eschatological verificationism' which posed significant difficulties.

The best answers understood Mitchell as a 'cognitivist' who accepted the challenge of Flew's falsification principle, and used the 'Partisan' story to show how religious language (manifest in commitment to / belief in a proposition in the face of ambiguous evidence) does not fall foul of Flew's principle and descend into meaninglessness: the religious believer acknowledges counter evidence, but they cannot say in advance how much counter evidence would serve to falsify their belies. It did not matter if students told the story of the 'Partisan' by setting it in revolutionary France, Nazi Germany, or anywhere else. The key challenge was to integrate the underlying themes in the story with Mitchell's view of religious language.

Lower down the scale (4-6 marks), students made brief but accurate remarks on Mitchell's view of religious language but made only tenuous connections to the story. Elsewhere, students gave a fair and detailed account of the story, but the philosophical significance of the story wasn't very clear.

The most serious misunderstandings (and more students failed to score any marks on this than any other question) centred on taking Mitchell as a non-cognitivist and fideist who thought religious language was either meaningless, or only meaningful in so far as it is 'not propositional'. Others seemed to be answering Question 9 from last year (commenting on Hick's 'eschatological verificationism' and giving an account of the 'Parable of the Celestial city'), or else they wrote about Wisdom/Flew's the 'Parable of the Gardener'.

Question 9: Outline and explain Swinburne's version of the argument from design. (9 marks)

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussed on one of the theistic proofs featured in the current specification, and one of the most influential over the last half a century. Although this question was framed in two parts, inviting students to offer an 'outline' of the argument (possibly formal, but not necessarily) and an explanation of key points in more detail, students who produced a well organised and content rich explanation of the argument could and did receive full marks, rendering any 'outline' superfluous to requirements.

On average students fared better on this question than they did on question 08, but not as well as on the corresponding question last year. The explanation for so many low scores on this question (0-3) was a straight forward defect in understanding of the specifics of Swinburne's arguments. Many students made generic but relevant points about the character of Swinburne's approach, explaining that it is an 'inductive, teleological argument for the existence of God', which relies on 'inference to the best / simplest explanation', often connecting it with 'fine tuning' arguments and

'Ockam's razor'. These points were often accompanied by more concrete arguments from 'spatial and temporal' order, which were sufficiently well explained to take students into the middle band (4-6). Lower down the scale (1-3 marks), however, Swinburne's design argument was just confused with Paley's watch maker argument (with Swinburne presented as just 'updating' the argument from analogy). Sometimes the design argument was confused with the cosmological argument, rather than presented as part of a cumulative case for the existence of God *alongside* cosmological (and other) arguments.

For all the challenges, however, there are real positives to report on this question, with more students scoring full marks than on the corresponding question last year, and more than any other 9 mark question this year. Students who reached maximum marks went beyond the points detailed above to explain why Swinburne emphasises 'temporal order' over 'spatial order', and why exactly he thinks a 'personal explanation' is a more plausible explanation for 'temporal order' than a 'scientific explanation'. Some of these students also went on to explain Swinburne's view of what the likely character of this personal explanation of design would be: omnipotent, immaterial, etc. Speculation on the character of the designer not was not necessary, but it was pleasing to see how comprehensive a grasp some students had of this multifaceted argument.

Question 10: Does the existence of evil mean that an omnipotent, omniscient and supremely good God does not exist? (15 marks).

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, taking as its subject matter one of the classic problems in the Philosophy of Religion which features in the current specification. Some students approached the question as alluding exclusively to the 'logical problem of evil' (sometimes explicitly placing the 'evidential problem' to one side for the purposes of the essay, which was fine). Successful answers that were narrow and detailed in character were often inspired but this logical form of the problem. The more expansive responses distinguished between these types of problem and presented developed discussions and evaluations of both. Although most students seemed to answer the question in the affirmation, defences of the existence of God give the existence of evil were well represented.

Mackie was the typical reference point for the logical problem of evil, but Hume also featured frequently. In both cases the problem was typically set up in terms of an inconsistent triad (just what the members of this triad are was always clear, however. There was also some impressive utilisation of Mackie's distinction between first and second order evil, although where Mackie alone provided counter argument's to his own version of the problem of evil, the evaluation was rather less robust. Very few students made explicit use of the distinction between a theodicy and a defence, but Plantinga's free will defence was usually taken as the principal response to the logical version of the problem of evil, and this was often explained and applied very well (students tended not to venture into modal logical .and 'Transworld depravity', and there is little evidence they suffered as a result). The evidential problem of evil was less typically located in the thought on any particular philosopher, but Rowe was often cited in connection with the problem of 'animal suffering.' Hick's soul making theodicy was one of the favoured responses to this version of the problem, but the quality of discussion / detail in understanding here was more variable that with Plantinga's free will defence.

Last year essays on Question 10 were compromised by a lack of understanding, and we stressed how (relatively) evenly balanced AO1 and AO2 are on this question type, and, crucially, how the strength of understanding impacts on the quality of evaluation. That lesson has clearly been learnt,

and the improvement in theoretical understanding was striking. Whereas the score most frequently awarded lasted year was 6, this year it was 8, while the number of students scoring lower down the scale (0-3 marks) reduced dramatically. Those unable to progress beyond this tended to offer a sketchy outline of the problem of evil and then briefly raise relevant arguments.

Students who failed to get out of the 7-9 band tended to stack up arguments (often well explained) in support of a position, but there was limited critical evaluation of their favoured arguments or a sense of why some arguments carried more weight than others. These answers often addressed the problem of evil (evidential or logical) with little attention given to its component parts: the concepts of 'omnipotence', 'omniscience' and 'supreme goodness' received limited analysis in relation to evil, either individually or collectively. There were a number of (usually unsuccessful) attempts to link the problem of evil to the Euthyphro dilemma (with reference to 'God's goodness'), and the paradox of the stone (with reference to 'God's omnipotence'). The most successful of these analyses tended to focus on God's 'omniscience', and the problems this poses for 'free will defences'. Very few students explored the option of clarifying or revising the traditional divine attributes, however.

Students who accessed higher scores (10-12 marks) had more substantial arguments and counter arguments, with conclusions that truly reflected the argumentative weight and balance of the previous discussion. More essays were awarded full marks on this question type than any of its kind in the brief lifetime of the current specification. Students earning this score argued for a position with sustained intent, showing detailed understanding of the arguments deployed, and achieved commendable integration and coherence in their responses, clearly distinguishing between more and less crucial arguments in making their case for or against the existence of God in lights of the existence of evil.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator