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A-LEVEL

# Philosophy

PHLS2-Ethics and Philosophy of Mind  
Report on the Examination

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2175  
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## **PHLS2: Ethics and Philosophy of Mind**

### **Introduction**

What follows is a question-by-question commentary on the performance of students in the first A2 examination for A-level Philosophy (2175). In the course of this commentary, I make reference to anonymised student responses, the Question Paper, the Assessment Objectives, the Specification 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.

Across this paper, we saw some excellent work from students. For both topic areas – Ethics and the Philosophy of Mind – there was evidence of high quality teaching and learning. We saw a very substantial improvement in student performance, in comparison with last year's AS, on the challenging 5-mark questions, showing that students had developed the important philosophical skills of accuracy and precision. Student performance on some of the most challenging material, in the Philosophy of Mind, was very pleasing indeed. Both teachers and students are to be commended for their hard work.

### **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: Ethics**

#### **Question 1: What is moral realism? (3 marks)**

This question assessed students' ability to explain a key ethical concept in the current Specification (AO1). Although only a low tariff question, this allowed students to be more expansive than the corresponding question type on the AS paper.

The question differentiated well. An example of a student response which was awarded full marks was: 'Moral realism holds that ethical language is used to make claims about mind independent reality which can be true or false.'

Where students did not achieve full marks, this was usually because they did not make reference to idea that moral truths are mind independent, or because they understood moral realism (narrowly) in terms of naturalism.

Lower achieving students gained a mark for fragments of understanding: for example by identifying moral realism as a 'cognitivist meta-ethical theory', or a 'theory which holds that there are moral truths'.

#### **Question 2: Explain how an act utilitarian would make a moral decision. (5 marks)**

This question also addressed AO1, but required a fuller demonstration of understanding applied to some of the core concepts in philosophy cover within the current Specification. To

achieve full marks students had to understand ‘act utilitarianism’ and demonstrate how that theory would work in moral deliberation. Most students responded in continuous prose, but other approaches could, of course, receive full credit.

There were very few very low scoring answers here, with most students demonstrating a solid understanding of this famous moral theory. Responses tended to bunch around 3 to 4 marks, with students showing a good general appreciation of utilitarianism, and some (often) very detailed understanding of Jeremy Bentham’s ‘greatest happiness’ principle and the ‘hedonic calculus’.

On the other hand fewer students scored full marks for this question than any other of its type on the paper. The main reason for this was a failure to bring out the distinctive ‘case by case’ dimension of *act* utilitarianism. Surprisingly few students took the option of defining act utilitarianism over against rule utilitarianism. Those who did take this approach did not lose marks for redundancy: this was a legitimate strategy for teasing out the characteristic elements, and it was used effectively by some. Other students achieved this through well-chosen examples (for instance, the rights and wrongs of ‘killing’ or ‘stealing’ depending on the situation in focus). More typically, students made a series of claims within their explanation which would be true of both act and rule utilitarianism.

### **Question 3: Outline Aristotle’s function argument. (5 marks)**

This question also addressed AO1, requiring students to demonstrate their understanding of an important argument within a classic theory of ethics. The average score was lower on this question than the previous one, with more students seeming unable to respond to the question at all. Higher achieving students, however, answered this question well. There were some exemplary responses, with clear outlines and precise logical links. Some students achieved maximum marks by writing in continuous prose; others outlined the argument step by step. Both were equally legitimate approaches.

Students typically achieved 3 marks (capturing the substance of the argument) with some introductory remarks about Aristotle’s ethics, pointing out that, for Aristotle, something ‘is good insofar as it fulfils its function.’ Analogies were frequently drawn between the function of mechanical devices towards their ends (‘knives’ and ‘can openers’ were very popular) and human beings functioning rationally to achieve their end (eudemonia).

Where students achieved below maximum marks, this tended to be because they were not clear that, for Aristotle, ‘rationality is the ‘characteristic’ (or ‘unique’) function of human beings. The highest achieving students did do this, usually by way of contrast to less distinctive characteristics shared by other animals: like ‘breathing’, ‘sentience’, or ‘reproduction’. These responses also tended to develop the analogy between human beings and mechanical devices with reference to the virtues (or excellences) which are necessary to the performance of a function.

Lower achieving students (1-2 marks) often presented plenty of relevant material, but were imprecise, blurring the concepts of ‘virtue’, ‘function’ and ‘eudemonia.’ Some students identified the ‘function argument’ as part of Aristotle’s ‘agent’ or ‘virtue’ centred approach to ethics, with ‘eudemonia’ as the end of the moral life, but they were not able to outline the specifics of the function argument.

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**Question 4: Explain the similarities and differences between what emotivists and prescriptivists say about ethical language. (12 marks)**

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussed on two meta-ethical theories featured in the current Specification. A variety of approaches were taken.

To achieve the highest band (10 -12 marks) required integration and logical form. Some students achieved this by writing what was effectively a short essay with a general introduction to the two theories, a discussion of the similarities and differences, and a concluding summary statement. Others zigzagged back and forth between similarities and differences, but in such a way that, for example, a point of difference would grow out of some similarity they had just discussed: eg. 'While both theories allow that ethical language can be meaningful, they differ in their accounts of how ethical language acquires its meaning...' This too was a legitimate way of achieving integration between clear and precise points of understanding.

Although students were expected to discuss similarities *and* differences, there was no predetermined number of similarities and differences that students had to discuss. In general, however, students accessing the top band of marks were able to explain more than one similarity and difference, with most demonstrating a breadth of understanding. These high scoring answers did not have to be symmetrical; for example, some students explained one or two similarities at the outset before explaining four differences. Occasionally students presented their answers in a table format, and, for those who managed to include sufficient detail, this worked well.

Most students progressed to the middle range of marks (6-7) through a more or less well developed explanation of the shared 'non-cognitive' and/or 'non-realist' status of these 'meta-ethical theories', with the emphasis thereafter falling on the differences. Typically these differences centred on the relationship to moral action: emotivism was often characterised as 'an emotional response of approval or disapproval which claims to offer no guidance', and prescriptivism as 'commending a particular course of action for anyone in that same situation.' Other students explained that emotivism views 'ethical statements as falling outside the realm of rational debate, amounting to nothing but "hurrah/boo" responses to things', whereas prescriptivism allows for 'rational discourse in terms of the consistency of our prescriptions.' Higher achieving students often distinguished between different forms of the two theories in the hands of different philosophers; for example when explaining the shared view that 'the purpose of ethical language is to influence others' (Stevenson for emotivism and Hare for prescriptivism).

Lower achieving (1-3 marks) students tended to describe / briefly state similarities and differences without explaining them in any detail. Common mistakes on emotivism included slipping between writing about emotivism as a view that ethical language 'expresses emotion' to a view of that ethical language 'just expresses your personal/subjective believe/opinion that...'; whereas a common mistake on prescriptivism was where the term 'good' was interpreted as 'commanding' something rather than 'commending' it.

**Question 5: Is Kant's deontological approach to ethics correct (25 marks)**

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test AO1 *and* AO2. The question invited a critical discussion of one of the moral theories featured in the current Specification, and one of the most influential ethical systems in Western philosophy. The approach taken by most students was to explain key features of Kant's ethical system (as they understood it) before commencing evaluation, although some of the very best combined evaluation and understanding from beginning to end. Most students seemed to argue against Kant's approach.

The most frequently awarded scores were in the 11 – 15 band, with students offering a clear answer in the form of an argument. They argued with intent using relevant philosophical material, but this content was either not very detailed, or the conclusion was not strongly supported by the previous discussion to achieve higher marks. A typical approach was to explain the first two formulations of the categorical imperative before offering criticisms and (sometimes) response to those criticisms. Criticisms were, typically, ‘a lack of attention to consequences’, ‘clashes of duties’, and the ‘counter intuitive preference for duty as a motive over attitudes such as love’. Common mistakes included: 1) confusing the two tests *within* the first formulation of the categorical imperative (whether a course of action implies a ‘contradiction in conception’ or a ‘contradiction in will’, giving rise to ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect duties’ respectively) with the first two formations of the categorical imperative; 2) treating (non-moral /a-moral) courses of action which would pass the first formational of the categorical imperative as *morally binding* imperatives; and 3) taking courses of action motivated by ‘love’ or ‘compassion’ as morally *wrong* because not motivated by duty.

From the AS to the A2 paper there is a considerable shift in focus from AO1 to AO2. Some students showed precise and detailed understanding of Kant’s system (AO1), but spent so much time explaining it that the evaluative dimension suffered (AO2). This was, of course, preferable to (and achieved higher credit than) responses which were consistently evaluative in tone and intent, but where there were such large gaps in their account of Kant that the evaluation was not clearly supported. For example, the ‘axe murderer at the door’ scenario was one of the most frequently used objections to Kant. Sometimes this was presented as a critique of Kant’s disregard for consequences, sometimes as a critique of his disregard for the moral value of personal attachments (where the potential victim is a friend), and sometimes as an illustration of a conflict of duties unresolved by Kant’s system. Very few students were able to explain Kantian replies to these criticisms, but, more seriously, it was not uncommon for this objection to be raised without any clear account of exactly why lying would be forbidden in Kant’s system in the first place and / or why protecting a friend would be supported by Kant’s system. Those students who paid attention to explaining Kant in detail did not have these kind of gaps in their analysis.

The very best essays (21 – 25 marks) robustly defended their verdict on Kant’s approach, usually with a focus on the strengths and weaknesses of a duty based / motive based approach over a consequentialist one (focussing on the first formulation of the categorical imperative), and a critical appreciation the place Kant gives to reason and autonomy in his system (focussing on the second formulation of the categorical imperative..

Although it was open to students to advance the claims of alternative moral theories in critical conversation with Kant, this was rarely successful, with preferences for consequentialist or virtue theories tagged onto essays, because they were ‘more practical’ or more ‘in keeping with our ‘intuitions’, rather than used to furnish a sustained critique of Kant. In fact, some of the lowest scoring responses (1-5 marks) tended to describe similarities and difference between Kant’s approach and alternative systems of ethics and little else. Where alternative theories were utilised well, they tended to be confined to particular moral scenarios, for example how utilitarians or a virtue theorist would deal with the ‘axe murderer at the door’ example.

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## Section B: Philosophy of Mind

### Question 6: What claim do logical/analytical behaviourists make regarding statements about mental states

This question assessed students' ability to explain a key claim made by advocates of a theory of mind featured in the current Specification (AO1).

Although only a low tariff question, this allowed students to be more expansive than the corresponding question type on the AS paper, and the question differentiated well between students. More students were awarded full marks for this question than on the corresponding question on Ethics, although on average students performed better on the Ethics question. The highest achieving students maintained a precise focus on *statements*, appreciating that this 'claim' concerns a linguistic/analytic reduction. There was licence to explain this in a variety of ways; for example, the following response was awarded full marks: 'Logical/analytic behaviourists claim that talk about mental states can be reduced without loss of meaning to talk about behaviour.'

Where students achieved only 2 marks, this tended to be because they wavered between (precise) explanations centred on 'reducing *statements* about mental states' and (imprecise) explanations about 'reducing *mental states*'; or else they wavered between (precise) explanations centred on '*statements* about behaviour' to (imprecise) explanations centred on '*behaviour*'. Precision was also sacrificed by students who treated 'logical' and 'analytical' behaviourism as if they were entirely different positions requiring entirely different answers. The vast majority of students were able to acquire at least 1 mark on this question (more so than the corresponding question of the Ethics section). Lower achieving students were awarded a mark for showing limited understanding of the relevant theory without actually bringing out the analytical and reductive substance of the claim; for example, 'Logical/analytic behaviourism is a materialist theory', or that 'logical/analytic behaviourists understand mental states in terms of behavioural states or disposition' etc.

### Question 7: Explain the argument that it would be self-refuting to articulate eliminative materialism as a theory. (5 marks)

This question also addressed AO1, but required a fuller demonstration of philosophical understanding centring on a supposed flaw in a radical modern theory of mind. A number of different approaches were taken, including formal step-by-step arguments and explanations in continuous prose.

Students found this the most challenging 5 mark question, but this was because there were a number of candidates who simply did not understand what eliminative materialism was. There was, however, very pleasing performance from higher achieving students, with more students being awarded maximum marks than on either of the corresponding Ethics questions.

Students typically characterised eliminative materialism as a 'scientifically informed' theory of mind which claimed that 'mental states as understood in folk psychology do not exist.' The Churchlands were typically (though not accurately) taken to be the 'inventors' of this view. This characterisation would take students to 2 marks: relevant points of understanding. Most students went beyond this by latching onto one or more common mental state terms, usually 'belief'. The argument was then

developed in such a way that eliminative materialism was said to ‘contradict/refute itself’ by ‘believing that there are no beliefs.’ Where students failed to access the top marks (4-5), this was usually because they did not address the ‘self-refuting’ charge with a focus on *articulating* ‘eliminative materialism as a theory’.

At the top end, students produced some very precise and sophisticated explanations of the argument which teased out the implicit or explicit role of, for example, ‘belief’, ‘truth’ and ‘intentionality’ in the articulation of eliminative materialism as a theory which, so this argument goes, depends on the very system of folk psychology it purports to deny.

**Question 8: Outline the knowledge/Mary argument. (5 marks)**

This question also required a precise demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussing on an important twentieth-century argument in favour of property dualism / against materialism. On average students performed better on this question than any other on the paper, with more achieving full marks than on any other 5 mark question. The standard overall was excellent.

Most students correctly identified the argument with Jackson, and characterised it either as an argument for property dualism and / or an argument against reductive materialist theories. Some high scoring responses sought to outline the argument formally, abstracted from the specific detailed on the original thought experiment, but most of the best responses wrote in continuous prose, precisely identifying the parts of Jackson’s scenario about Mary— the scientist who specialises in colour vision despite living in a monochrome environment—which suggest that there exists a realm of knowledge distinct from physical knowledge: knowledge of non-physical properties’.

Where students did not achieve full marks, this tended to be because they characterised the knowledge that Mary had whilst ‘in the black and white room’ as all-encompassing rather than restricted to *physical* knowledge; or else students gave a good account of the Knowledge/Mary argument finishing with, for example, the existence of ‘qualia’, but did not fully draw out the philosophical implications of this with respect to dualism and / or materialism.

Lower achieving students (1- 2 marks) typically were able to say something about the philosophical purpose of the argument, but could not explain its logic.

**Question 9: Explain the similarities and difference between functionalism and mind-brain type identity theory. (12 marks)**

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussed on two major theories of mind featured in the current Specification.

As with the corresponding question on the Ethics section, a variety of approaches were taken. Some students achieved the highest marks (10-12 marks) through a short essay, with a general introduction to the two theories, discussing the similarities and differences, and then providing a concluding statement. Others zigzagged back and forth between similarities and differences, but in such a way that a point of difference would grow out of some similarity just discussed: eg. ‘So while both theories reduce mental states to something else, they differ on what they reduce mental states to...’ The latter approach tended to work better for some students, as they were directly meeting the demands of the question from the very start, rather than simply reproducing the same



material they had included in their introductory comments when detailing the similarities and differences. Again, some students presented their answers to this type of question the form of a table, and this was fine, so long as the points of similarity and differences were organised clearly and explained in sufficient detail. Although students adopted similar styles for answering both 12 mark questions, they found it harder to score marks on this one.

Beyond a requirement to address both similarities *and* differences, there was no predetermined number of either that students had to include; nor did there have to be symmetry between the number of similarities and the number of differences explained. Students were, however, not usually able to produce the necessary detail and development to access the top band unless they explained at least two of each and, usually, they attempted more.

The vast majority of students were able to provide a plurality of similarities and differences between the theories, but relatively few were full, detailed and precise. The main similarities referred to were that both theories are typically 'physicalist positions' (although the stronger responses often noted that functionalism is compatible with dualism); that both are 'reductive'; and that both are 'informed by modern science'. The main differences centred on the 'nature of the reduction', the 'multiple reliability of functionalism' over against the 'chauvinism' of mind-brain type identity theory (with examples drawn from 'AI' and 'alien mentalities'); and the fact that functionalism can 'avoid the location problem'. Some of the highest achieving students showed an awareness of the varieties of functionalism, and framed the similarities and differences which they considered accordingly. Some of the less precise responses seemed to be making contradictory claims about functionalism, but, as far as possible, we tried to give students the benefit of the doubt and interpret them as (implicitly) addressing different forms of functionalism in their answer.

Lower achieving students (1-3 marks) provided descriptive accounts of one or both positions without ever clearly addressing the similarities and differences, or offered perhaps one brief similarity or difference. More able students (4-6 marks), identified multiple similarities and differences, but some were left implicit within extended accounts of each theory and with limited integration. The distinction between an 'ontological' and an 'analytic reduction' was not always clearly and precisely maintained in answers which fell into this range of attainment.

**Question 10: Are dualists right to say that minds and/or their properties are non-physical? (25 Marks)**

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, taking as its subject matter the central claim of one of the classic theories in the Philosophy of Mind. The typical approach to this question was to begin with the arguments of Descartes for substance dualism, presenting objections and replies, before moving on to more recent arguments for property dualism. It was not necessary for students to discuss both these versions of dualism to access the top band of marks (21 – 25), although most did. There were some outstanding answers which eschewed the historical / chronological approach and focused on, for example, key challenges posed to physicalist theories of mind from relatively recent dualist perspectives: approaches centred, for example, on the 'hard problem' of consciousness, the difficulty of 'accounting for qualia', and the 'knowledge/Mary' argument. Most students argued against dualism.

Most students performed better on this question than on the corresponding question on the Ethics section of the paper. In part this was because students usually wrote about Descartes, and they tended to give fairer accounts of his arguments than they did for those of Kant. This provided a firmer foundation on which to build a critical case and they were able to target evaluative points precisely to specific steps in Descartes' arguments. The 'conceivability argument' and the

'indivisibility argument' were often presented in a step-by-step format (supported through reference to Leibniz's law) and critiqued in a similarly well-structured way. The 'problem of other minds' and the 'threat of solipsism' loomed large in some discussions, while the 'masked man fallacy' was frequently applied to the 'conceivability argument', but with very variable degrees of precision. These arguments and (occasionally) Cartesian replies were sometimes robust enough for candidates to penetrate the 16 – 20 band; more frequently, the lack of sustained evaluation meant students tended to score in the 11 – 15 range.

Because most students took a chronological approach, discussions of 'property dualism' and 'epiphenomenalist dualism' often appeared rushed and lacked integration with the rest of the essay. The most popular arguments used in this context were Chalmers's 'zombies argument' and the 'knowledge/Mary argument'. Some excellent responses also drew on the work of Nagel. There were some outstanding discussions of the problem of 'interaction' between mind and body, covering both logical/conceptual and empirical/scientific versions of the problem. Some of the best responses also discussed the challenge of 'intentionality' for all materialist theories, and incorporated complex concept such as 'supervenience' into their analyses.

Lower achieving students (6 – 10 marks) tended to juxtapose dualist claims and counter claims (often lots of them) without detail or development. Although most students ostensibly approved of physicalist theories of mind, very few used any particular theory to critique dualism effectively, or to show how physicalist theories overcome problems within dualism. Some of the very lowest achieving answers (1-5 marks) tended to juxtapose dualism with several physicalist options with little, if any, connecting analysis.

### **A Note:**

Students and teachers should let the space allocated within the exam booklets be a guide to the required length of answers, especially (but not only) on 3 and 5 mark questions. The increased philosophical demand of the A2 paper on, for example, the 5 mark questions, manifests itself in argumentative and explanatory precision, not in the amount of material required. There were examples this year of students who had obtained full marks in the space provided before continuing their answers in an additional booklet for a further page (or more). These responses were usually so well focussed on the relevant argument that they did not lose marks for redundancy, but they did waste considerable exam time on producing this superfluous material.

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

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