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Introduction

What follows is a question by question commentary on some discernible trends in the performance of students in the 2017 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 understanding of the core concepts and methods of philosophy

AO2: Analyse and evaluate philosophical argument to form reasoned judgements

Section A: Epistemology

Question 01: What is solipsism? (2 marks)

This question assessed students' ability to explain the radical sceptical position of 'solipsism' (testing AO1 only). With a mean mark of 1.25, students were less effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding item last year. Nevertheless, 2 marks was the most frequently awarded score, achieved by those students who answered the question clearly, correctly, and without significant redundancy. There was scope for students to answer the question metaphysically, epistemologically, or in terms of linguistic meaningfulness. Most answered metaphysically. Students could, and some did, include more than one definition, and this did not constitute significant redundancy so long as precision was maintained.

One of the more common reasons for students not achieving full marks was the tendency to answer the question in the plural ('we', 'us', or 'minds'), suggesting that solipsism allows for the existence (or knowledge) of more beings than it actually does. Some students also seemed to suggest that, for the solipsist there is more to one's existence than the mind: e.g. 'solipsism is the view that the only thing that exists is me, myself and my mind'. It was not uncommon (and not surprising) for students to confuse solipsism with idealism. The extent of this confusion determined whether students were awarded 1 or zero. Another more serious (and surprising) confusion was with nihilism.

Question 02: Explain Russell's claim that the existence of the external world is the 'best hypothesis'. (5 marks)

This question also concerned scepticism (or the threat of it), and assessed AO1 only. This time students were required to demonstrate their understanding in relation to the claim of a specific philosopher (in a set text) on the current specification. With a mean mark of 1.87 performance was significantly down on the performance of students on the corresponding item last year, and this was reflected at every level of performance on the marking scale.

At the upper end of the performance scale (4-5 marks) students tended to associate Russell with indirect realism, and the position that 'all we perceive is mind-dependent sense data'. From this, they deduced that, if all we ever perceive are 'mind-dependent sense-data, then we have no direct experience of the mind-dependent physical objects that make up the external world, and so the question arises: Does such a world exist?' These students acknowledged that, for Russell, there is no definitive proof that such a world exists (it is not a logical absurdity to deny it), but it is by far the 'best hypothesis' because it makes most sense of continuities and changes in our own perceptual experience. Russell's example of observable changes concerning his cat (location, hunger etc.) were applied effectively. Some students made good use of the 'rotting apple' example. Although it wasn't a requirement, credit was available for students who characterised the form of philosophical reasoning underscoring Russell's claim, and yet very few students made any suggestions here: 'abductive reasoning' (or inference to the best explanation), and 'inductive reasoning' were both credited when used.

Responses further down the scale (3 marks) produced substantively correct responses, outlining the candidate hypotheses from Russell's perspective: either 1) our experiences (or sense data) are caused by an external world, or 2) our experiences (or sense data) are not caused by the external world. They then pointed out (correctly) that Russell saw 1) as 'the simpler explanation' of the two hypotheses, but there was little explanatory development beyond this.

Weaker responses (1-2) marks) often invoked 'Ockham's razor' as the rationale for Russell's claim. Although this philosophical concept is indeed associated with 'simplicity', the kind of simplicity Russell was talking about in this case is rather less technical, and it does not concern ontological parsimony (by presupposing 'sense data' and an 'external world' Russell's approach to perception is hardly parsimonious). For Russell, it is simpler because it makes the most obvious sense of our experiences and is in accord with our instinctive beliefs about the world. Few students exploited the significance Russell gives to our instinctive/common sense beliefs and the need for compelling reasons to give them up. Other students tried to explain Russell's claim using the very argument that he raises in The Problems of Philosophy but quickly rejects as an unsuitable strategy: the common/shared perceptual experiences of different human beings. For Russell, that begs the question by assuming that other conscious subjects exist in the first place, so we must construct our 'best hypothesis' on this matter out of the evidence provided by our own experience.

Question 03: Briefly outline the tripartite view of knowledge and explain how a case of a lucky true belief (a Gettier-style problem) can be used to argue against this view. (9 marks)

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1) focussing on a seminal critique of the classic 'tripartite view of knowledge': that knowledge is justified true belief (JTB). With a mean mark of 5.37, students performed significantly better on this question than on the corresponding item last year, and a record number of students (29.9%) accessed the top band on a 9 mark Epistemology question.

Almost all students began with an 'outline of the tripartite view', often associating it (correctly) with 'propositional knowledge', rather than 'ability knowledge or acquaintance knowledge', and tracing it back to Plato. Most students were able to get to the top of the bottom scoring band (1-3) on this part of the question alone. Those who went into particular detail - for example, not only identifying the 'individual necessity' and 'joint sufficiency' of the three conditions, but explaining why they have traditionally been judged to be the defining characteristics of knowledge - could get to 4 marks, but no more than that: the weight of expectation on these questions falls on the second part (*explain* rather than *briefly outline*) and the ability of students to integrate the relevant issues arising on both parts of the question.

Higher achieving students typically introduced Gettier's argument as a challenge to the sufficiency of the three conditions. In terms of the examples used, there were some excellent renditions of the 'Smith and Jones job interview' scenario (one of Gettier's original examples), whilst effective use was also made of 'Barn County', telling the time using 'broken clocks', and the formulation of propositions about the whereabouts of various (otherwise misidentified) farmyard animals. The best students often rounded their answer off by identifying where and when the three conditions were met in their examples, and exactly where and how the luck arose in the formation of a particular true belief. Some students could not resist the temptation to amend the tripartite view in the wake of Gettier-style critiques (for instance by adding a 'no false lemmas' condition); this was redundant, but in and of itself it would not stop students from accessing the top band of marks.

Students in the 4-6 mark band tended to produce clear and correct content in response to both parts of the question, but they did not produce well integrated explanations which made use of relevant philosophical terminology. For example, students who did not identify the 'necessity' and 'sufficiency' of the three conditions were typically unable to produce a precise explanation of exactly what the problem was with the tripartite view (in the light of Gettier-style examples). Some responses also failed to bring their explanations back round to the role of 'luck' involved in the formation of the 'justified true beliefs' within their chosen examples, and instead blamed the failure of the tripartite view on 'false lemmas' - this was especially problematic when students used 'Barn County' or 'broken clocks' as their illustrations, where (propositional) false lemmas are not involved but good fortune clearly is.

Relatively few students failed to progress beyond the 1-3 band this year (7.1%). Those who did not manage this typically produced sketchy, inaccurate or incomplete outlines of the JTB theory with little or nothing on Gettier-style examples. These students also had a tendency to confuse the 'necessity' of the individual conditions with their collective 'sufficiency'. A few students tried to begin their answer with a Gettier-style example, but the theory it was designed to attack was never clearly defined.

Question 04: Briefly explain direct realism and explain how the 'argument from hallucination' can be used to argue against this view. (9 marks)

This question also required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focusing on an epistemological position ('direct realism') and the reputed weaknesses exposed by the 'argument from hallucination'. With a mean mark of 4.22, students did not perform as well as last year's cohort on the corresponding item. This was mostly felt at the top end, with fewer students accessing the top band (12.1%). At the lower end, however, more students were able to get beyond the 1-3 mark band than last year (61.1%). In short, there was more bunching within the middle scoring band of 4-6.

One of the reasons there were so many middling answers is that the first part of the question was treated so cursorily. As noted above, the emphasis falls on the second part of these questions and the ability to integrate the relevant issues, but if a student produces a very weak response to the first part of the question this gives them a lot of ground to make up with the second part. Very often, students addressed that first part by simply rephrasing and only slightly expanding on the relevant terms in the question: e.g. 'direct realism is the view that we see the world directly.' Some students also took 'direct realism' to mean that our perceptions are 'infallible', and so 'direct realism' was taken to be synonymous with 'naive realism'. Some students went further and explained that it was 'the view that we perceive physical objects and their properties directly.' Relatively few students brought out the point that, with direct realism, there is 'no intermediary', and so we have immediate access to the physical world of objects and their properties. Hallucinations were often characterised as 'non veridical perceptions', the very existence of which was presented as refuting direct realism. But the (philosophical) direct realist position does not deny the possibility (or actuality) of non-veridical perceptions; rather, it argues that they must still be accounted for by our direct (unmediated) perceptions of physical objects and their properties. Although these questions do not require illustrations, illustrations often add value to responses. Hallucinations are phenomena that would seem to lend themselves to illustration, so it was surprising that more students did not make good use of them.

The best explanations (7-9 marks) were able to provide the kind of detail that was missing from the majority of responses. Sometimes they framed the whole issue as a debate between 'direct realism and indirect realism', with the existence (or not) of 'sense data' the key battle ground. The argument from hallucination tended to be presented through the application of the 'phenomenal principle' (sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly). Some of the best responses were presented in a step by step format, drawing out the supposed implications of the existence of such perceptual phenomena: because 'hallucinations cannot be distinguished from veridical perception', this calls into question 'the direct/immediate/unmediated' character of all other perceptions; and, as such, 'it calls into question direct realism itself'. Hallucinations were illustrated by (among other things) the ever popular pink elephants, a variety of strange visual phenomena caused by hallucinogenic drugs, and mirages.

At the lower end of the assessment scale (1-3 marks), some students did not get beyond brief and imprecise explanations of direct realism, or brief definitions of hallucination followed by inaccurate or incomplete explanations of what the supposed implications are. Some students confused the 'argument from hallucination' with the 'argument from perceptual variation'; others confused the argument with more general (and radical) sceptical concerns of the kind associated with Descartes' method of doubt in the Meditations.

Question 05: Are concept empiricists right to claim that all concepts derive from experience? (15 marks)

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2. The question centred on a specific claim by one of the epistemological theories featured in the specification: empiricism. With a mean mark of 6.58, students did not perform as well as on the corresponding item on last year's exam, although once again the 7-9 band was the one most frequency accessed by students.

One of the main reasons that fewer students were able to access the higher levels this year (10-12 and 13-15) was because of the tendency to conflate or confuse *concepts* with *knowledge* (mostly propositional knowledge, but sometimes acquaintance and ability knowledge). Some blurring did not stand in the way of some students accessing those higher marks because most of their essays were well focussed on the central issue of concepts, but for others the confusion was more damaging. This especially seemed to impact discussions of Plato and Descartes. The former's 'slave boy' scenario in the *Meno* was often described at length, but the philosophical point relating to innate concepts was not clearly elucidated. Descartes's reflections on 'wax' and its properties in the *Meditations* were also discussed by students, but few were able to draw from then the specific implication that was relevant to the question: that the concept of 'body' or 'physical substance' must be innate.

There was a pronounced tendency among students this year to try and cover as many philosophers who they knew contributed something to this debate as possible. Sometimes a student would try to discuss Plato, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Condillac, Kant and Chomsky. Few students working in exam conditions can do justice to that range of thinkers in terms of 1) explaining their ideas clearly and correctly and 2) integrating that breadth of material to answer the question effectively. We do not discriminate against students who synthesise a wider range of material than others when answering a question: they can do equally well as those who analyse a narrow range of material in greater detail, and some of those reaching the 13-15 band this year did just that. But there is obviously a balance to be struck here, and, this year, some students were just trying to cram too much in, and in doing so sacrificed precision, integration, coherence and sustained intent. Teachers and students are under no obligation to restrict themselves to philosophers on the specification, but there shouldn't really be a need to discuss a greater number of philosophers in a single essay than the number of philosophers included in the specification on the relevant topic. Indeed, some students focussed on fewer still but had clearly cultivated the habit of sustained argument and counter argument between a set of positions they identified for the purposes of their essay: for example by just focussing on Plato, Descartes, Locke and Leibniz.

Certain philosophers presented particular problems for students. Some adopted the aforementioned Locke's position against that of Leibniz, which is a perfectly plausible stance to take: there are rich pickings in the positions of Locke and Leibniz on this issue, so much so that a really good student could have made that debate the focus of their whole essay. But there often seemed to be no awareness from students that Leibniz had subjected Locke's own specific arguments against innatism to sustained criticism, and so Locke was often presented as a partial / fragmentary respondent to Leibniz's innatism, rather than the provocative catalyst for Leibniz's own contribution: in short, neither philosophers' arguments were presented on their strongest terms (although there were notable exceptions). When discussing Hume the better students used him very well on 'simple and complex ideas', and again when critiquing the existence of 'innate religious ideas'. The 'missing shade of blue' argument proved more problematic, however. Most (but not all) students recognised that this problem was an objection raised by Hume himself, but

there was widespread disagreement over what (if anything) its significance was: for students who thought they were following Hume by dismissing it as an inconsequential anomaly, it wasn't clear what purpose the objection served in the argument; at the other end of the spectrum, some students took the objection to be a straightforward argument for innatism, which introduced incoherence into their discussion of Hume elsewhere. The best essays tended to acknowledge that it was a problem to be reckoned with, and tried to overcome it by (following Hume's own example) appealing to the 'imagination' and the 'prior perceptual experiences' which feed the imagination.

Condillac, a radical empiricist, was sometimes called on by students in favour of innatism, seemingly because they judged that his thought experiment involving a human 'statue' bombarded with sense impressions couldn't possibly lead to the formation of concepts. At this point, Kant was often introduced as if to bring the whole debate to an end: we acquire knowledge (including concepts) from experience, but we need 'concepts' or 'categories of understanding' to organise our sense experience. Sometimes this was done very well, but students often found it difficult to maintain the focus on concepts. Kant isn't actually on the specification for this particular topic, and objections to him were often absent. It is perfectly acceptable for students to engage philosophers not included in the specification (Chomsky would be another example), but the same expectations remain in terms of analysis and evaluation. The best students did evaluate Kant, sometimes drawing on ideas from Hume (for instance on the concept of 'causation').

At the lower end of the mark scale (4-6 marks), the aforementioned confusion between 'knowledge' and 'concepts' was all-pervasive. Some students did not get beyond an extended description of Locke's 'tabula rasa' proposal and some imprecisely formulated objections to it. At the very bottom (1-3), a limited range of (often tangential) points about empiricist or rationalist epistemology were raised with no argument to a conclusion.

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

Question 06: What does Hare mean by the term 'blik'? (2 marks)

This question assessed the students' ability to explain a concept introduced to twentieth- century philosophy of religion by Hare: his notion of a 'blik'. With a mean mark of 0.69 this was statistically the hardest question to score marks on this series.

The two components we were looking for in responses to award full marks (variously worded) were: 1) a 'blik' is an attitude towards the world; and 2) a 'blik' it is not held on the basis of empirical evidence (it is not falsifiable/verifiable). Some students managed this with economy and precision, with no example given. Others quite reasonably offered 'religious bliks' as the paradigmatic examples of 'attitudes which produced meaningful beliefs, but which cannot be proved true or false by the empirical evidence'. Students typically failed to achieve more than one mark because they only included one of the two components (the second was omitted most frequently), so gave only a partial answer.

Some students associated the 'bliks' so closely with Hare's most famous example (during his response to Flew) they that defined the term as a 'paranoid belief', or, more frequently still, as 'an irrational belief that we refuse to give up.' These responses did not receive any marks because a 'blik', as presented by Hare, may or may not generate paranoid (or any other irrational) beliefs: it forms no part of the definition. Other students made the mistake of framing their answer in precisely the terms Hare rejected by claiming that 'bliks are assertions about the world'. For Hare, 'assertions' are propositions that make factual claims about the world; they are subject to evidential enquiry and can be found wanting (falsified). By contrast, 'bliks' are attitudes towards the world that

can survive ‘any finite number of tests’; they are compatible with wildly different factual states of affairs, helping (or hindering) our interpretive relationship (our ‘whole commerce’) with those facts: rational or irrational, religious or irreligious.

Question 07: Outline the Kalam cosmological argument. (5 marks)

This question also addressed AO1 and centred on a classic argument for the existence of God on the current specification: the Kalam cosmological argument. With a mean mark of 2.91, students performed better than on the corresponding question last year, with a record number of students awarded maximum marks on a 5 mark question since the launch of this specification (32%).

Some students placed the argument firmly within its original Islamic context; others made mention of this before moving on to more recent formulations by Craig. As always, some students misidentified ‘Kalam’ as a ‘Muslim philosopher’ rather than an intellectual tradition within Islam. The distinctive and defining feature of this version of the cosmological argument centres on causality and (temporal) beginnings: we require a causal explanation of anything (including the universe) that begins to exist. The extent to which students grasped this essential point determined how well they outlined the argument for a ‘first cause’ of the universe.

Most students who grasped the substantive content outlined above (the requirement for 3 marks) progressed easily enough to 4 or 5 marks. Students could and did reach maximum marks by writing in continuous prose, but the top scoring answers tended to present the Kalam version in a concise, step-by-step format, of a kind well suited to responses to this type of question. Some top scoring answers were very lean indeed, which was fine, as we were only asking for an *outline* and not an explanation. Some students supplemented their outline with additional premises about the relationship between the universe and its ‘first cause’ (God), or by drawing inferences about the probable (or necessary) character of that first cause. Some responses included brief arguments for the ‘impossibility of an actual infinity’, which is true to the spirit of the original Kalam argument, and some relied on the modern empirical evidence provided for the ‘big bang'. None of these additional features were necessary, but they certainly did not count as redundancy. Where students did lose marks was where their outline of the Kalam argument became blurred with features of other theistic arguments (typically Swinburne’s argument for a sustaining cause of the universe).

Students who did not reach 3 marks tended to offer a generic (and straw man) version of the cosmological argument, starting with the premise: ‘Everything that exists must have a cause.’ Having set the argument up in this way some of these students could not resist the temptation to explain exactly why that argument does not work, adding redundancy to an already imprecise answer. Some responses confused the Kalam argument with one or more of Aquinas’s first three ways, although there were often sufficient relevant overlaps for a response to score 1 of 2 marks. At the very bottom end, marginally more students failed to score any marks compared with last year, mainly because of thoroughgoing confusion with the ontological or design argument.

Question 08: Outline the problem of evil and explain Hick's soul-making response to it. (9 marks).

This question required a more expansive demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussing on a notable modern contribution to theodicy: 'Hick's soul-making response' to the problem of evil. With a mean mark of 5.53 we saw a major improvement in the quality of responses compared with the corresponding item year.

Nearly all students began with an outline of the problem of evil: sometimes given in its logical form; sometimes given in its evidential form; sometimes given in both. As noted above, the accent on this type of question falls on the second part from the point of view of assessment, and the ability of students to explain and integrate the issues they raise. Nevertheless, a good outline of the problem provided a crucial foundation on which to build the rest of a successful answer: students who did not, at some point, identify God's 'omni-benevolence' and 'omnipotence' (or 'supreme goodness' or 'supreme power' etc) could not access the top band of marks, since their explanation of Hick's theodicy just never connected with the precise details of the problem he was trying to overcome. This was not, however, the main reason that students did not get beyond the 4-6 mark band: most students outlined the problem well; it was the limited content on Hick's soul-making theodicy that tended to compromise the answer. For example, Hick's view of evil was sometimes just characterised as 'necessary for the good', or something that was 'required to build character.' Some students also framed the soul making argument in terms of 'God *creating* evil'; for Hick, God 'permits evil' rather than wilfully creating it as an additional feature of the world. The significance of 'free will' (though not irrelevant to Hick's position) was also over-emphasised.

Students who accessed the top band of marks (7-9) often began their treatment of Hick by emphasizing the immaturity of created beings: 'made in the image of God, but not yet in the likeness of God.' These responses continued to explain that in order to 'become more like God' we need to pass through various stages of moral and spiritual development, and because that moral and spiritual development is rarely (if ever) complete in our lifetime, there is an important 'eschatological dimension' to Hick's theodicy, which students brought out with different degrees of sophistication. Students explained the supposed moral and spiritual gains from natural suffering (including natural disasters) very well. The discussions of animal suffering were not so convincing. Some students made excellent use of Hick's concept of 'epistemic distance', without which 'we could not become free and independent creatures capable of accepting or rejecting a relationship with God'. The very best students brought their explanations back round to the specific details of the problem of evil as they'd initially presented it, summarising exactly how Hick's theodicy is designed to justify the omnipotent and omnibenevolent character of God in the face of evil.

At the lower end, where students did not get out of the bottom scoring band (1-3), this tended to be because they were only able to provide an outline of the problem, but knew nothing about Hick. Some only got as far as describing and illustrating the different kinds of evil (moral and natural) but without getting into the philosophical details of the problem. Occasionally students associated Hick (rightly enough) with 'eschatological-verification' (which featured in a question on the 2015 paper), and they wrote about that instead, but with little or no connection made to the matter at hand.

Question 09: Briefly define 'omniscience' and then explain the argument that human freedom is impossible if God is omniscient. (9 marks)

This question required students to consider the possibility of human freedom given the truth of divine omniscience. With a mean mark of 5.24, students performed significantly better on this item than on the corresponding one last year, and although fewer students accessed the top band of marks, more achieved maximum marks than on any other 9 mark question on the paper this year (5.7%).

The best answers (7-9) tended to define omniscience along the lines of 'a divine attribute which suggests God knows everything, including all past, present and future states of affairs.' Occasionally, students discussed divine omniscience with reference to God's relationship to time (eternal, everlasting etc). This was not considered redundant because the precise character of divine omniscience is, for many philosophers, closely connected with God's relationship to temporal being. Surprisingly few students sought to clarify what their understanding of human freedom was for the purposes of the question - this wasn't a requirement, but it could and sometimes did add value to an answer in terms of precision and integration. Some students connected the human capacity for freedom with God's benevolence, noting that freedom is often taken by theists to be 'a gift from God'. This added an interesting dimension which sometimes served to enrich a student's explanation of the philosophical tensions which attend consideration of human freedom and God's omniscience; on other occasions, however, it led to confusion with separate philosophical issues (see below).

Most students implicitly took freedom to refer to the capacity of human beings to shape their own futures by choosing between genuinely open possibilities. The argument was then framed in terms of the 'impossibility of choosing feely if God already knows what my choices are.' Some students chose to lay the argument out in such a way that the reader was presented with two equally problematic scenarios for classical theism: 1) God is indeed omniscient, and therefore human beings are not free in any meaningful sense (however free they may feel when making decisions and contemplating their futures); or 2) human beings are indeed free (their sense of autonomous agency is not illusionary), and therefore God is not omniscient. Surprisingly few students offered good illustrations of the argument; but the ones that did often centred on 'changing one's mind at the last minute' concerning some course of action - an instance of spontaneous autonomy which, they argued, is undermined as soon as one takes seriously the idea of divine omniscience.

Lower down the assessment scale (4-6), students would often produce clear and correct philosophical content on both parts of the question, but this was marred by some conspicuous blurring of the issue of 'God's 'omniscience' with problems concerning 'predestination', typically framed in terms of 'God choosing our actions for us'. There is of course a relationship between divine knowledge, will and action, but the most precise responses maintained their focus on God's knowledge; after all, it is conceivable that an omnipotent God could determine the destiny of people without being omniscient in the sense of knowing all true propositions concerning the past, present and future.

At the very bottom end (1-3), some students did not get beyond a brief definition of omniscience ('God is all knowing'), before inferring that 'this means we can't be free because God knows everything we're going to do anyway'. When students at this lower end tried to connect human freedom with God's benevolence, they had an unfortunate tendency to drift into tangential discussion of the problem of evil.

Question 10: Does the ontological argument prove the existence of God? (15 marks)

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, taking as its subject matter a family of arguments for the existence of God featured on the current specification. On the basis of the mean mark (7.54), the performance of students was slightly below last year's cohort on the corresponding item (on the problem of evil). But perhaps a closer comparison in terms of question type would be the one on the cosmological argument in 2015, and students performed significantly better on the ontological argument at every level: more students accessed the top scoring bands (10–12 and 13-15); fewer found themselves in the bottom band (1-3), and far fewer were unable to score marks at all (students seemed much less likely to confuse ontological arguments with design arguments, for example).

Most students argued that the ontological argument did not prove the existence of God (in any form), though defences of the argument (or some version of it) were well represented. Some of the more nuanced responses argued that while the ontological argument does not prove the existence of God, it demonstrates that *should* God exist (as conceived by the philosophers under discussion), then this would be a necessary form of existence; the question of *whether* God exists, however, could only ever be established by *a posteriori* arguments (the influence of Aquinas and/or Hume were prominent in these kind of discussions). In terms of the specific arguments (and counter-arguments) discussed by students, all the philosophers on the specification featured, sometimes all in the same essay and resulting in similar overcrowding to the kind observed in responses to item 05. Overall, however, students were much less likely to discuss arguments outside the specification. Some of the best concentrated on fewer arguments, but they were clear on a) what the specific differences are between the versions they did discuss were, and b) what their relative strengths and weaknesses were. The philosophers who featured most frequently as advocates for the ontological arguments were Anselm and Descartes (with or without reinforcement from Leibniz), although Malcolm and (to a lesser extent) Plantinga were also discussed. The objections tended to come from Gaunilo, Hume and Kant. Schopenhauer also featured as a critic, although his characterisation of the argument as 'a conjuring trick' was sometimes just asserted without supportive analysis.

Students often began with a general characterisation of the ontological argument as a 'deductive and *a priori* argument for the existence of God'. The best students (those in the 10-12 and 13-15 bands) demonstrated clear and detailed understanding of the arguments they discussed, representing them on their strongest terms (at least relative to the cohort). When discussing Anselm, for example, these students grasped that, at least as far as he himself was concerned, Anselm wasn't simply asserting a *definition* of God which accords with his own theological tastes (though of course it did accord with them); rather, he takes as his starting point the idea that the theist and 'the fool' (who denies there is a God) are in honest disagreement about the same thing: the ontological status of 'a being greater than which nothing can be conceived'. If the atheist has no such idea in mind (however inadequate) when he 'says in his heart there is no God', then there is no meaningful dispute between them. When discussing Descartes, the best students understood the relationship between his ontological argument, his innatism, and his notion of clear and distinct ideas, *without* confusing this with the Trademark argument. As far as Descartes was concerned, he no more *defined* God as 'a supremely perfect being' than he *defined* a triangle as a three sided polygon with interior angles adding up to 180. He found himself with these ideas ('clear and distinct ideas') which he perceived through the natural light of reason. Having acknowledged this idea of a supremely perfect being early on in his *Meditations*, Descartes was concerned to demonstrate a) where this idea comes from (the subject of the Trademark argument); and b) what follows logically from that concept (the subject of the ontological argument).

When countering Anselm, the best students were not only able to apply Gaunilo's 'most perfect island' parody, but they were able to show precisely how the argument was designed to emulate the same logic as Anselm's ontological argument but yield absurd conclusions, just as Anselm's own argument was intended to be a *reductio ad absurdum* against 'the fool'. Kant's classic objection that 'existence is not a (real) predicate' was typically targeted against Descartes, which is historically and conceptually appropriate, and it was done very well at the top end, with students illustrating the difference between existential/ontological claims on the one hand, and claims about the natures or essences of things on the other. There were good discussions of Malcolm's ontological argument, although few students recognised that, from his point of view, he was simply reformulating and defending Anselm's argument rather than offering an entirely new one. Some of the best answers did take him to be defending Anselm against Kantian critiques, arguing that while 'existence is not a (real) predicate', 'necessary existence' is. The best criticisms of Malcom tended to focus on his (alleged) conflation of different uses of the concept of 'necessity': 1) 'necessity' as a characteristic of God's nature *if* such a being were to exist; 2) and 'necessity' as a truthful proposition asserting *that* God exists. Some students also called into question the coherence of God as conceived within the classical theistic tradition, mainly to critique Malcolm and Plantinga's arguments, but occasionally Descartes'. There were also some very good explanations of Leibniz's argument for the coherence of God.

Lower down the assessment scale (7-9), students were typically able to 'stack up' the arguments reasonably well (although there was frequent blurring of Anselm's and Descartes' arguments), but, having given fair accounts of the arguments, they would only provide some brief critical remarks drawn from the relevant literature (e.g. Gaunilo's 'perfect island' or 'Hume's folk'), before passing on to another version. There just wasn't the same kind of robust argument and counter argument which characterised the stronger essays, whereby particular arguments and objections were really tested. Some of these responses were also lacking in overall integration. For example, Anselm's argument would be laid out (more or less accurately) at the start of the essay before they applied Gaunilo's criticism. Students would then offer quite a good response on behalf of Anselm (detailing, say, the differences between the 'island as a contingent being and God as a necessary being'), and claim that 'despite first impressions, Gaunilo's argument does not refute Anselm.' The essay would then take leave of the eleventh-century debate, Descartes's version would be introduced and Kant's criticism applied (possibility with the assistance of Hume) before the essay concluded overall by before pronouncing the failure of the ontological argument *per se*. So the status of Anselm's original arguments were never satisfactorily resolved (the applicability of Kant's objection was typically assumed rather than demonstrated).

Students further down still (4-6) offered brief and only partially accurate accounts of certain ontological arguments, while any criticisms would be stated rather than developed as counter arguments. Some students tried to question the coherence of the concept of God, referring reasonably enough to things like 'the problem of evil', the 'Euthyphro dilemma' or 'the paradox of the stone', but the relevant issues were never actually explained. At the very bottom (1-3) students blurred the ontological argument with other arguments for the existence of God (usually cosmological arguments, occasionally design arguments), or else they were only able to characterise the argument formally as an 'a priori proof' which uses 'deductive reason'.

Overall, however, students had clearly learned the relevant arguments and understood a good deal of what is at stake philosophically: not least the contested capacity of reason alone to instruct us on matters of existence.

Use of statistics

Statistics used in this report may be taken from incomplete processing data. However, this data still gives a true account on how students have performed for each question.

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