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Report on the Examination

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Introduction

What follows is a question by question commentary on some disenable trends in the performance of students in the 2018 series. In 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 has have been supplemented by evidence provided by senior examiners and their team members.

Summary Findings

There is quantitative and qualitative evidence of an improvement in student performance overall. The improvements were not evenly distributed, with students still performing better on the Philosophy of Religion section, but the gap has narrowed. It was pleasing to see how much better students did on the Epistemology section this year on most questions.

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 direct realism? [2 marks]

This question assessed students' ability to briefly explain one of the theories of perception on the specification (testing AO1 only). Most students were very concise in their answers, and fewer students are being penalised for 'significant redundancy'. There is still a temptation for some students, especially if they are typing their answers, to write far more than is necessary (100+ words in some cases). The more students write in response to these kind of questions, the greater the likelihood of introducing errors, imprecisions, and tangential material.

Students who did lose a mark typically failed to unpack one of the two key terms: for example, by framing their explanation of 'direct realism' as implying 'direct perception of the world', which did not explicitly distinguish the position from idealism. Where possible students should try to illuminate the meaning of *all* the key words in these (very) short questions. The best students tended to define 'direct realism' along the following lines: 'the view that we perceive mind independent objects (and their properties) immediately', or 'the view that we perceive a mind independent world without mediation (i.e. no sense data)'.

The minority of students who were unable to gain any credit either declined to answer or else they confused 'direct realism' with another epistemological concept or position on the specification (e.g. indirect realism).

Question 02: Explain the distinction between impressions and ideas [5 marks].

At the top end of the performance scale (Levels 4-5) students usually started off by associating 'impressions with sense experience' whereas 'ideas' were identified with 'our thoughts'. These students tended to associated 'impressions and ideas' with the empiricist philosophy of Hume specifically (thought this was not a requirement); they often utilised the 'copy principle' and explained how our 'ideas derived from impressions'; these students also

spoke of the 'vivacity and forcefulness' of impressions compared with the 'faint' ideas that are formed from them.

Responses further down the scale (3 marks) produced substantively correct responses but sometimes just repeated the same distinguishing point(s) without much logical development. They also tended to produce redundant material on the distinction between 'simple and complex ideas' without relating this to the relevant distinction between impression and ideas.

Weaker responses (1-2 marks) tended to make one or two points about the nature of impressions and ideas without much substantive material on the distinction. There was also some confusion whereby 'ideas' were associated exclusively with the 'rational' and the 'a priori' (or 'innate'), whereas impressions were associated exclusively with the 'empirical' and the 'a-posteriori'.

Students unable to score any credit on this question either failed to answer at all or were concerned exclusively with 'simple and complex ideas' and other tangential matters.

Question 03: Explain how the addition of a 'no false lemmas' condition responds to Gettier-style problems. [9 marks]

Almost all students began with an 'outline of the tripartite view': the 'view that propositional knowledge is constituted by justified true belief (JTB)'. Students then tended to outline a 'Gettier-style problem', usually the original 'Smith and Jones job interview' scenario, to illustrate how 'a lucky true belief' could arise which seems to fulfil the conditions of the JTB theory but which we would be reluctant to count as knowledge. The best students (7-9) were able to identify exactly where the 'luck' arose in the process of 'justification' which led to someone holding a true belief. A lemma was defined along the lines of a 'premise' or 'proposition' which is 'assumed' in the course of 'reasoning to a conclusion', and the 'false premise' in the Gettier-style problem' was clearly identified (e.g. ''the employer's false claim that Jones would get the job'). This 'no false lemma' condition was then 'added to the JTB theory' to bolster the justification condition and fortify it against 'Gettier-style problems.' Technical philosophical language was used correctly throughout: e.g. 'necessary and sufficient conditions', 'propositional knowledge', 'lemmas' etc.

Students lower down the assessment scale (4-6 band) were only partially accurate in their presentation of 'Gettier-style problems', which meant that when they came to apply the 'no false lemmas' condition it did not cohere very well. Others produced redundant material evaluating the relative success of the 'no false lemmas' condition on a variety of Gettier cases. Some students who did this could still get into the top band because enough of their answer was precisely focussed on the key issues, but others moved all too quickly from explaining how the 'no false lemmas condition responds to Gettier-style problems' to arguing that the 'no false lemmas condition fails to solve the issue of barn country'. This question did not require students to 'exercise reasoned judgement' (A02), just to explain an argument to show their 'understanding' (AO1).

Ohers in the 4-6 band managed to define a 'false lemma' and explain in the abstract how it amends the JTB theory, but they did not integrate this well with any 'Gettier-style problems'. Students who used the 'broken clock' example did not fair as well as those who used Gettier's original examples because they do not contain propositional premises, although some students were able to manipulate the example in such a way that a 'false premise' emerged in the reasoning of someone who has formed a luck true belief which appears to fulfil the JTB conditions.

Those who did not manage to get out of the bottom scoring band (1-3) tended to offer brief definitions of the tripartite definition of knowledge and / or make some brief attempt to outline a 'Gettier style problem', but the answers contained too many errors and imprecisions.

Question 04: Explain what 'innate knowledge' is <u>and</u> how Plato argues for it. [9 marks]

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focusing on another epistemological issue on the specification: innate knowledge and Plato's argument(s) for it.

The main reason students failed to access the top band was because while most were able to give a clear and correct explanation of 'innate knowledge' (e.g. 'a priori knowledge that we are born with'), not so many were able to give a precise and integrated explanation of Plato's argument(s) for it. Many students in the 4-6 band relied on descriptive explanations of Plato's 'theory of the forms' (which is certainly relevant) but without much material on *why* one might be persuaded of the need to posit 'innate knowledge' (and metaphysical 'forms') in the first place. Other students gave early modern accounts of innatism (drawing on Descartes, Locke, and Leibniz), which was fine in itself, but it sometimes resulted in imprecise accounts of Plato as they sought to present him in the terms of those later philosophers without simply allowing Plato's arguments to speak for themselves.

The best responses (7-9 band) focussed on Plato's argument in *Meno*, specifically the encounter between Socrates and the slave boy. We were not interested in students knowing the details of the mathematical knowledge 'recollected' by the slave boy (though of course if students did know this it added precision to their answer). We were only really interested in the logic of the argument. Students at this top end of the assessment scale were able to show that there was a process of elimination at work in the argument, such that if there was no reason to think that the boy had learned geometry through experience, then we are left with the only reasonable conclusion: the knowledge must be innate. The best responses to this question integrated the latter with Plato's doctrine of the forms and explicitly made the point that 'learning' is really a process of 'remembering'. Surprisingly few students made any use at all of the knowledge paradox in *Meno*, whereby (1) someone cannot pursue an inquiry into what they know (because they already know it), and (2) someone cannot pursue an inquiry into what they don't know (because they don't even know what the subject of inquiry is). Plato rejects (1): we *can* inquire into what we know because the search for knowledge is a process of recollection. Using this paradox would probably have helped more students to integrate the definition of innatism (knowledge we are born with) with Plato's argument in the *Meno*.

Some students were unable to get out of the bottom scoring band (1-3) on this question usually because of acute instances of the kind of errors already mentioned above: e.g. understanding something about 'innate knowledge', but sometimes not distinguishing it from 'a priori' knowledge in general; producing little or no accurate material on Plato; conflating Descartes's innatism with Plato's, and giving 'innate ideas of God' unwarranted prominence.

Question 05: How convincing is Berkeley's idealism? [15 marks]

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2. It was an open question which invited students to consider how convincing one of the epistemological theories on the specification is: Berkeley's idealism.

Most students argued that Berkeley's idealism was not convincing: the threat of solipsism, the role of God, the continuity and change in objects through time and space, and the failure to explain

illusions and hallucinations, were typical reasons why idealism was said to fail. Some students defended Berkeley's idealism against a variety of objections and concluded in its favour, while some others argued there it was more (or less) convincing that either 'direct realism' or 'indirect realism'. Students are sticking more closely to the content of the specification than they have done in previous years, and this has helped them produce more focussed essays with more detailed analysis. Students are also indicating the relative weight of their arguments more explicitly. Sometimes this is done very effectively, but sometimes it is more rhetorical than it is philosophically substantive.

Students who accessed the top band of marks (13-15) tended to integrate Berkeley's epistemology with his ontology / general metaphysics. Rather than understanding idealism in terms of a view the 'the world does not really exist' (which characterised even some otherwise good responses) these students understood Berkeley's position in terms of a view of reality as 'constituted by mind/spirit' and 'ideas/bundles of ideas'. In was within this immaterialist context that the best students understood the place of God in Berkeley's theory: the 'eternal mind or spirit' which accounts for the existence of our sense impressions. Some provided well-reasoned critiques of the place of God in Berkeley's theory, arguing that he tries (unsuccessfully) both to argue for idealism from (doubtful) theological premises, and to infer God's necessary existence as a consequence of the truth of the theory. Whatever position the students took, then best usually stated their stance at the outset with a clear statement of intent.

Some of the best arguments considered for idealism tended to focus on Berkeley's critique of Locke's primary and second quality distinction, where Berkeley collapses all primary qualities into mind dependent (secondary) qualities; the inconceivability of objects without secondary qualities; and the master argument. The best answers would respond to these arguments directly rather than simply raising other difficulties with the theory. High quality responses which rejected idealism's 'master argument' identified an unwarranted conflation of the act of perception and the object of perception (sometimes referencing Russel's critique), citing objective scientific measurements to defend primary qualities from sceptical attacks, and applying Russell's 'best hypothesis' argument: an inference to the best explanation, with the existence of a mind independent world a 'simple and intuitive' commitment.

Students in the 10 – 12 band often had good argument and counter argument, but they did not integrate their evaluative remarks into a fully coherent argument where all objections raised in the discussion were actually responded to (the 'master argument' frequently went answered, for example). They tended to produced some reasonable objections to Berkeley's use of God in his theory (e.g. 'problem of evil', 'paradoxes of omnipotence' etc).

Students in the 7-9 band would sometimes juxtapose 'idealism' with 'indirect realism' and 'direct realism', but without using the details of one position to critique the details of the others. In some cases, seemingly important objections like 'the threat of solipsism' were asserted rather than explained.These responses often represented Berkeley as appealing to a 'god of the gaps' and/or dismissed his use of God because the concept is 'incoherent', though this was rarely developed in terms of, say, paradoxes of omnipotence or the problem of evil. Sometimes these responses started with a very clear statement of intent, but the subsequent discussion did not actually cohere with this: e.g. 'the unacceptable use of God' would be presented as 'crucial', and yet it received limited consideration in the actual essay. This is an example where the desire of students to use language from the Mark Scheme does not actually help students fulfil its requirements.

At the lower end of the assessment scale (4-6) students' understanding of idealism was very limited, and 'solipsism' sometimes seemed to be built into the definition of idealism rather than,

say, an epistemological consequence of believing it. Berkeley was often charged with 'intellectual dishonesty' for his use of God, without any explanation of where exactly this dishonesty lay.

Students who failed to get out of the 1-3 band tended to present a few fragmented and juxtaposed points about different theories of perception, with no real argument.

Section B: Philosophy of Religion

Question 06: What does it mean to say that religious statements are 'verifiable eschatologically'? [2 marks]

This question assessed the students' ability to explain a concept which was introduced to twentieth-century philosophy of religion by Hick: his notion of 'eschatological verification'.

A typical response awarded top marks (2) would define the concept as 'meaning we can only know that a religious statement is true in the afterlife e.g. "we will know God exists once in heaven"'. Most students unpacked 'eschatological' very well (e.g. referring to 'the afterlife', 'heaven', 'the end of times' etc), but they were not so precise on 'verifiable'. One of the most frequent mistakes was for students to take 'verifiable' as indicating the possibility of demonstrating the 'truth *and falsity*' of statements, when of course it refers to the former only. For students typing their responses, there were examples of long paragraphs written which contained 'significant redundancy' and therefore cost those students a mark.

Where students were not awarded any marks at all it was either because they declined to answer, or they only recalled that it had something to do with 'the verification principle' or 'the meaning of religious language', which was just not precise enough for credit on a 2 mark question.

Question 07: Outline Aquinas' Second Way (his causal argument). [5 marks]

This question addressed AO1 only and centred on a classic argument for the existence of God: 'Aquinas's Second Way.'

Because we were asking for an 'outline' and not an 'explanation', students could progress to five marks with lean answers, and a minority did: identifying the 'second way' as a 'deductive cosmological argument for the existence of God', which begins 1) with an observation about the existence of an 'order of efficient causes', 2) the 'impossibility of something being the efficient cause of itself' (because it would have to exist before itself); 3) the 'impossibility of an infinite regress of efficient causes' (because without a first efficient cause there could be no subsequent efficient causes); and 4) the concluding inference: 'there must exist a first efficient cause: God.'

One of the main reason for student's losing marks was beginning their outline with a premise which is just not found in Aquinas: 'Everything that exists has a cause.' Some students recovered well from that, however, and produced otherwise clear and correct answers and were awarded 3 or 4 marks.

More damaging than a faulty first premise was the tendency to blur the 'second way' with Aquinas's 'first way' (from motion or change) and the 'third way' (from contingency); the 'Kalam argument' (from temporal beginnings) also made the occasional appearance. Sometimes there were elements of all four in a single answer. These responses tended to get 1 or 2 marks.

This was one of the questions where some students succumbed to the temptation to produce an awful lot of redundant material, with some writing about *all* of Aquinas' five ways. This did not enhance their answer, and it was not an effective use of their time in the exam.

Question 08: Outline and explain the Euthyphro dilemma. [9 marks]

This question required a more expansive demonstration of philosophical understanding (still testing AO1 only), focussing on a classic dilemma found in the specification: the Euthyphro dilemma.

There were some outstanding answers which explained the original Platonic version, rooted in the question of piety in a polytheistic context, which was a perfectly acceptable approach. Most students approached the dilemma in its adapted monotheistic form, however. Students who did best typically presented the dilemma in the form of a 'question' which grows out of 'classical monotheism': e.g. 'Are things morally good because God wills them, or does God will things because they are morally good?' This question, they claimed, yields two possible responses, neither of which is acceptance to the classical theist, hence the 'dilemma'. By contrast, some students went straight into explaining one or both 'horns' without every really teasing out the nature of the dilemma are how it arises in the first place. These responses tended to fall into the 4-6 band. Other responses oscillated between a text-based account from Plato's own version in the *Euthyphro* dialogue and the later monotheistic version in such a way that coherence was compromised. They also fell into the 4-6 band.

The best students tended to identify the dilemma as posing 'a challenge to God's supreme goodness and omnipotence', although there were outstanding answers which spoke to the former only. These high scoring responses (7-9) identified 'one horn' of the dilemma ('things are morally good because God wills them') as a problem of emptying morality of any substantive content, making it the arbitrary product of divine will and potentially counterintuitive. Some students illustrated the latter with morally counterintuitive commands by God in the Bible, others invented their own. The other 'horn' of the dilemma ('God wills things because they are morally good') was judged problematic because it questions God's essential relationship to moral goodness, placing God in the role of a 'supreme teacher only', and possibly challenging his omnipotence ('the power to create and change moral values'). The issues raised by 'both horns' challenged the 'appropriateness of worshipping such a God'.

Lower down the assessment scale (1-3 marks) some students showed only vague understanding of the dilemma, often seeing it as an issue with God's omnipotence only (and sometimes God's omniscience). There were occasional confusions with both the 'problem of evil' and the 'paradox of the stone', and some responses got caught up with trying to respond to the dilemma rather than just explain it.

Question 09: Outline and explain Paley's argument from design. [9 marks]

This question required students to demonstrate their understanding of a classic argument for the existence of God: Paley's design argument.

The most popular approach was to focus on the 'argument from analogy', with reference to 'parts organised for a purpose' in difference contexts. Paley's own 'watch maker' analogy was the preferred example. The best answers (7-9 band) illustrated their argument with reference to 'mechanisms within a watch' and 'mechanisms within the natural world' (e.g. 'the human eye'). These responses typically made use of relevant philosophical language which they used correctly: e.g. 'teleological', 'deductive', 'inductive', 'probable', 'inference to the best explanation' etc. These students also sought to infer / deduce some characteristics about the designer: e.g. 'power', 'knowledge', a 'mind/intelligence distinct from the universe' etc.

Lower down the assessment scale (4-6 band) students tended to be more descriptive than explanatory, taking a narrative approach to the question (which is fine as far as it goes) without teasing out the key philosophical details. Sometimes there was blurring with other design arguments, most notably Swinburne's. Some responses at this level of performance were less consistent in their use of relevant philosophical language: for example, they would start by characterising Paley's argument as an 'inductive' and/or 'probable' argument and then conclude that God '*must necessarily* exist'. There was scope on the Mark Scheme for inductive and deductive versions of the argument, but the best responses needed to be internally coherent. This question also attracted quite a lot of redundant evaluation, typically with responses to the argument drawn from the work of Hume. This did not help students gain credit; it stopped some of the better ones getting full marks (though they could still access the top band); and it was not a good use of students' precious time in the exam.

For students in the lowest scoring band (1-3), their responses tended not to get beyond one or two genetic points about design arguments and/or trying to describe the watch analogy.

Question 10: Can the problem of evil be solved? [15 marks]

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, taking as its subject matter one the major philosophical objections to the existence of God, and inviting students to consider potential solutions. Students were generally very secure in their understanding of the material. More students worked exclusively with material found on the specification, which provided them with a manageable range of material.

The best responses tended to start with a clear statement of intent which they duly delivered on in the course of their essay. There were some very strong responses which approached the problem as a general contradiction / tension, with the logical and evidential issues surfacing during the course of the discussion. But most of the strongest responses tended to make an explicit distinction between 'logical' and 'evidential' versions of the problem. A typical thesis was that while the 'logical problem of evil can be overcome' (for example though 'Plantinga's free will defence') the 'evidential version of the problem cannot be solved' (for example, because of the 'unequal distribution of evil', 'animal suffering' etc). The best students recognised that the crucial thing for Plantinga is that the 'free will' that God provides must be *morally significant* freedom: that is why evil has to be a possibility. There were some very sophisticated discussions of contrast defences/theodicies (metaphysical and epistemological) usually with reference to Mackie (making use of colour analogies); and there were some excellent discussions and evaluations of Hick's 'soul making' theodicy. Some of the better students made explicit distinctions between a 'theodicy and defence'; others showed their understanding of the difference during their discussion of the relevant issues but without an explicit distinction.

Most students interpreted the question as a problem which could be solved if and only if the God of classical theism could be shown to be consistent with the existence of evil. But a number of

students took the 'non-existence of God' to be the '*correct solution* to the problem'. Some students made the latter interpretation work well, though it did introduce an element of confusion into some discussions. In terms of the characterisation of the problem of evil, there seems to be a growing tendency among students to define the 'inconsistent triad' as a logical contradiction involving God's 'omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence' (with the problematic existence of 'evil' just presupposed). This wasn't especially damaging to students responses because those traditional divine attributes are all central to the problem, but the inconsistent *triad* actually concerns 'omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and evil', and the failure to recognise that made some presentations of the problem less precise than they should have been.

At the lower end of the assessment scale (7-9) students tended to set the problem up correctly, and then present contrasting perspectives on the problem (e.g. 'the value of free will versus the value of a world without moral evil') without produced much integrated evaluation whereby they used the arguments of one philosopher (or indeed their own arguments) to critique the specific details of another. Augustine's biblical version of the 'free will defence' was often discussion (which is fine), but it was often rejected through assertion only: the reason(s) *why* 'it cannot be accepted in the modern age' were omitted. If an argument is worth including in any essay then the reasons why we ought to reject it should be made clear. Some of the essays in this range of performance started with a clear statement of intent, or a clear confusion, which did not cohere very well with the main body of the essay. For example, 'animal suffering' would be identified as 'crucial' to the conclusion, but it was omitted completely from the actual analysis, or it must have simply been presupposed in the more general discussions of 'gratuitous evil'.

Few students made an attempt to utilise process theodicy or other versions of theism which qualify or deny God omnipotence. A number of students did allude to the possibility that 'God's goodness' should be understood as 'good in a metaphysical sense', though there seemed to be little understanding of what that meant. Students could have been referring to Aquinas's understanding of goodness as 'coextensive with being', with God understood as 'being itself', but it just wasn't clear enough to gain credit in most cases.

At the lower end of the assessment scale (4-6 band) students tended not to get beyond an explanation of the problem with a very brief and incomplete attempt to respond. There were occasional confusions with the Euthyphro dilemma and the paradox of the stone. Further down still (1-3 band) there were a few statements made of some (but limited) relevance to the topic, with some students trying to explain the existence of evil but without relating it to the nature and existence of God.

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