A-level
PHILOSOPHY

PHLS2

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 course of this commentary reference is made to anonymised responses, the question paper, the assessment objectives, the specification and the generic Mark Scheme. In compiling this report the observations of the lead examiner have been supplemented by the evidence provided by senior examiners and their team members.

Summary Findings

All questions discriminated well with even low tariff questions giving a good indication of a student's performance across the exam paper. There is quantitative and qualitative evidence of a fall in the average standard of performance although this fall was not consistent across the paper: the performance on Ethics improved quite significantly on two out of the five questions compared with last year, but it fell on four out of the five questions on the Philosophy of Mind. More encouraging, the performance at the top end of the assessment scale was the strongest it has been during the life of the current specification.

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: Ethics

Question 01: What is a hypothetical imperative? [3 marks]

This question assessed students' ability to explain a concept in Kantian ethics (testing AO1 only): the nature of a 'hypothetical imperative'.

The best responses tended to answer along the following lines: 'A hypothetical imperative is a command contingent on a desire for some end: e.g. 'If I want to pass my exams, I ought to revise.' Examples were neither asked for nor required, but they usually added value / clarity to responses.

Where students lost one mark it tended to be on the 'imperative' dimension, with students missing the linguistic and commanding character of this concept. We allowed a wide range of responses to cover this aspect: e.g. that it is a 'command', or a 'statement telling people what they ought to do', or an 'order instructing people on what they ought/should/must do'. Those that made it beyond 2 marks utilised versions of these formulations.

At the lower end (1 mark) students tended to know that a 'hypothetical imperative is a command', but not the kind of command it is with the relevant sort of conditions (i.e. that it is conditioned by what an individual wills). There were some students who confused a hypothetical imperative with a categorical imperative (a 'moral duty'); some erred in the other direction and presented hypothetical imperatives as 'always immoral'; and some confused a 'hypothetical imperative' with an 'imperfect duty'.

Question 02: Explain how a rule utilitarian would make a moral decision. [5 marks]

This question addressed AO1 only, but it required a more developed demonstration of understanding, this time applied to the decision-making process of a 'rule utilitarian'.

Students who answered this question well sometimes defined utilitarianism in general first, taking it to be concerned with the 'maximisation of pleasure/happiness and minimisation of pain/unhappiness'; but some began with 'rule utilitarianism' specifically, representing it as concerned with 'following those rules which (on the basis of past experience) tend to maximise happiness and minimise pain'. Some students found it useful to contrast 'rule utilitarianism' with the 'case by case' approach of 'act utilitarianism'. This was not in itself taken to constitute 'redundancy'. The best students usually illustrated their answer with rules such as 'don't lie' and 'don't kill'. They explained that 'experience has taught us that obedience to these rules promotes happiness (and minimises pain) when people follow them, even if there are individual cases when this may not hold.' With reference to the last point, some students distinguished between 'strong and weak' versions of rule utilitarianism, with the latter making exceptions to rules when in situations where following the rule would not actually maximise happiness.

There were some imaginative uses of examples by students, some of which worked very well indeed. Students do seem to want to use the 'murderer at the door scenario' for any Ethics question (see below). The best students are able to adapt this vivid Kantian thought experiment to serve multiple purposes, but some of the uses are rather more persuasive than others. For example, it was often presented as a plain fact that 'a strong rule utilitarian' would let a friend perish at the hands of an axe murder because of their unwavering commitment to 'truth telling'. There are of course other rules the utilitarian could be guided by which would not commit them to that course of action. Still, the example served to make the distinction between 'strong and weak rule utilitarians', and to that extent it was credit worthy.

One recurring error was a consequence of students' taking Mill as the paradigmatic 'rule utilitarian'. Of course we allowed this because it is one interpretation of Mill, but it does not commit a rule utilitarian to the rest of Mill's moral philosophy. For example, some students (without ever even mentioning Mill) made the 'distinction between higher and lower pleasures' central to their answer, but that distinction is not crucial to rule utilitarianism. Some of the very best students who did explicitly tie their answer to Mill did a good job of explaining how that distinction might inform general rules for action, but most did not. The latter tended not to get beyond 3 marks.

Students at the lower end of the performance scale (1-2) usually only managed a point or two about utilitarianism in general or occasionally rule utilitarianism specifically; they failed to address the 'moral decision' aspect; or they confused 'rule utilitarianism' with 'act utilitarianism'.

Question 03: Explain the issue of clashing/competing duties facing Kantian deontological ethics. [5 marks]

This item concerned an issue for Kantian ethics: clashing/competing duties (testing AO1).
Most students were able to demonstrate some understanding of Kantian ethics, rooted in 'duty and intentions rather than consequences', while describing (and illustrating) the basic problem: e.g. 'the

clash between a duty to protect life and a duty not to lie (which might save life)'. These responses got to Level 3.

Students performing at Level 4 and 5 were more precise in the philosophical details of their explanation: not just *describing* the conflict but *explaining* it using Kant's own moral theory, *based around the categorical imperative*. They could draw on clashes between 'perfect duties', between 'imperfect duties', or between 'perfect and imperfect duties' to make their point. These students explained that Kant's ethics allowed for certain 'universalisable maxims' which meant that situations could arise where moral agents couldn't possibly avoid falling into moral error. Some of these students invoked Kant's denial that 'conflicting duties' were possible and insisted that such examples showed he was mistaken. The best students made appropriate use of the 'murderer at the door' scenario, whereby a clash arises between the 'duty not to lie' and the 'duty to protect life'.

At the lower end of the performance scale (Level 1 and 2) students usually just made a couple of accurate remarks on the nature of Kant's moral theory, or else there was some attempt to describe the 'murder at the door' example but without any philosophical substance to the answer.

Question 04: Outline moral realism <u>and</u> explain how Mackie's argument from queerness opposes this view. [12 marks]

This question required a more expansive demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), with students required to outline the meta-ethical position of 'moral realism' and explain one of the critiques of that position: 'Mackie's argument from queerness'.

The 'moral realism' part of the question posed the least trouble for students. The best responses (10-12 marks) clearly brought out the realist and cognitivist nature of the position, associating it with making (at least some) 'true ethical statements' by referring to a 'mind-independent moral reality'. Some students then went on to give examples of both: utilitarianism as a naturalist form of moral realism, and intuitionism a non-naturalist form. Mackie's argument was sometimes introduced as part of his distinctive 'cognitivist error theory' approach to ethics, but some of the best just proceeded straight to the relevant argument. They explain that Mackie thought there is something 'odd' or 'strange' about this supposedly 'mind independent moral reality': there is (1) a metaphysical queerness to such 'objective moral values' (some students called it 'ontological queerness', which was fine), and (2) there was an 'epistemological queerness'. The 'metaphysical queerness' centred on the 'strange notion' that an objective feature of reality (e.g. something in the natural world) could be 'intrinsically motivating'. The 'epistemological queerness' centred on the (alleged) failure to identify a plausible process for discerning moral truths, sometimes with specific reference to the unsatisfactory nature of 'intuition'. These arguments were sometimes presented in a formal, step by step argument form, with an integrating paragraph at the end. Some just explained the arguments using continuous prose, and this worked just as well.

For students accessing the 7-9 band, they tended to define moral realism well, and then discuss the metaphysical dimension of Mackie's argument in some detail, but omit any discussion of the epistemological dimension. At the lower end (4-6) there was often some blurring with the argument from relativity. Some students operating at this level showed relevant understanding of the 'cognitive' dimension of moral realism, but were not as precise as they might have been about the 'realist' dimension. Others presented 'moral realism' in exclusively naturalistic terms thereby narrowing the meaning of the position. Some responses in these middle bands often treated 'moral realism' is greater depth than necessary, but then have relatively little to say on Mackie.

At the bottom end of the assessment scale (1-3 band) students would often just make some remarks on the cognitive dimension of moral realism, or else they completely confused the argument from queerness with the one from relativity. Some of these responses also mispresented Mackie as a 'non cognitivist' arguing for the 'meaningless nature of ethical statements'.

Question 05: How convincing is Aristotelian Virtue Ethics [25 marks]

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test AO1 and AO2. The question invited a discussion of the normative moral theory of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

Students typically began with a statement of intent. As always, however, it was the delivery on these stated intentions which determined their success. Most students argued against virtue ethics, but there were many strong defences too. At the level of understanding, students generally showed a good command of the material. They took various entry points when explaining Aristotle's ethics: eudemonia, virtue, the doctrine of the mean, the function argument. These concepts were generally well explained and illustrated. Arguments in its favour tended to centre on its 'holistic and character-based approach', its 'flexibility', and is concord with 'certain moral intuitions': e.g. that people are 'not born moral', the 'importance of education', and that 'single acts do not define a person's moral worth'. Arguments against virtue ethics tended to centre on the 'failure to give concrete guidance', 'conflicting virtues', the 'circular definition of virtuous acts' and, less frequently, Aristotle's 'elitism'. Most students did not venture beyond Aristotle's own philosophy, though there were discussions of Hursthouse, and to a lesser extend Anscombe, Foot, and Macintyre.

Some of the best responses (16 - 21 and 21 - 25) had a clear idea of what a 'convincing' ethical system would consist of: e.g. 1) theoretical coherence and strength against theoretical criticism; and 2) practical applicability. They then structured their essays around those two themes with brief summary conclusions at the end of each section: e.g. finding Aristotelian ethics 'convincing' in terms of its 'big picture of the moral life', but lacking in terms of 'practical guidelines for ordinary people'. Other students took a more standard approach, with arguments for and against the theory, and they did so with such vigour and detail and they were able to access the full range of marks. Some of these, though not all, defended Aristotle's arguments on their own terms and addressed the viability of virtue ethics in a modern context; these students rejected the 'genetic fallacy' of those who try to 'discredit Aristotelian ethics' because of some of the 'unacceptable cultural assumptions' of the society in which Aristotle's thought was cultivated. Some argued for the importance of virtues in the modern public life, and defended the absence of 'hard and fast rules' as a mature recognition of the complexity of moral life. In relation to the latter there were some excellent discussions of the Hursthouse's notion of the 'moral remainder' that is an inescapable part of an ethical life.

Some students did not realise their potential on this question, and were only awarded marks in the 11-15 band, because of the sheer amount of exposition over analysis and evaluation. Sometimes there would be several sides of detailed explanation of Aristotle's ethics before any evaluative point was made. For students who went on to write up to and beyond the nine sides provided, that wasn't necessarily an issue. But for shorter essays, such a sustained with focus on AO1 hindered their progress up the Mark Scheme. The quality of the evaluation was also less incisive. The ubiquitous 'murderer at the door' example was often used to illustrate a supposed 'clash of virtues', but students did not always adapt the example so that specific virtues were in conflict rather than specific duties.

For students operating in the 6 – 10 range, there was limited evaluation and the understanding of Aristotle's own position was inadequate. The 'function argument' was one of the more commonly

misrepresented, identified variously with 'being virtuous' or 'reaching eudaimonia' rather than with 'using reason'. Students' discussion of the 'doctrine of the mean' was generally good, but students did not always develop their evaluation in the most logical way: e.g. stating at the outset that Aristotle is 'not to be understood as recommending an intermediate in the sense of moderate, emotional reaction in all situations', before nevertheless pressing on with a lengthy criticism of Aristotle on those very terms. Better organised essays recognised different interpretations of Aristotle which they critically compared to form a judgment. Responses in this range often juxtaposed 'virtue ethics' with 'utilitarianism' and/or 'Kant's deontological ethics', but there was little integrated analysis or evaluation. Further down the assessment scale (1-5 band) students typically wrote very little at all about virtue ethics, preferring to outline its theoretical alternatives with a few comparative remarks.

Students are clearly trying to weigh their arguments more explicitly in these essay questions, identifying 'crucial ones' and distinguishing them from 'less crucial' as per the Mark Scheme. Some are doing this very well indeed, showing a clear and well-reasoned hierarchy in their philosophical priorities. But there is a growing tendency for students to introduce an argument with reference to its strength, and often it is to describe it as 'weak', 'very weak', 'incredibly weak' etc. Of course a student may well believe that, but very often the evaluation which follows does not support this assessment. Attacking 'very weak' arguments is not the best example of philosophical reasoning, or at least it's not as commendable as tackling 'stronger' ones. If a student really thinks all arguments on the table really are weak, then that should come through in the quality of their refutations, but these very definitive statements concerning an argument's strength (or weakness) jars with what some of them actually write. To balance things out, some students occasionally introduce an argument or objection as 'somewhat stronger', but it isn't always clear where this additional strength lies. This tends to be a feature of responses from the 11 – 15 band down. Students operating at this level should really focus on the quality of argument and counter argument and forming brief summary judgements as they move through their essay.

Section B: Philosophy of Mind

Question B6: What is epiphenomenalist dualism? [3 marks]

This question (testing AO1 only) assessed the ability of students to explain a concept in the Philosophy of Mind: 'epiphenomenalist dualism'.

For a 'full' answer which accessed maximum marks we were looking for students to recognise three features of 'epiphenomenalist dualism': (1) a commitment to the truth of (some form of) dualism; (2) the view that the mind is a by-product of the brain (or the physical body); and (3) the mind is causally redundant (at least with respect to the brain/physical body). Over two thirds of students were awarded at least two marks. Where students lost a mark it was typically for omitting the 'physical causes' or 'material origins' of the mind. A minority of students failed to gain credit, either by leaving the question blank or confusing 'epiphenomenalist dualism' with another position on the specification (e.g. 'eliminative materialism').

Question 07: Explain the issue of circularity that logical/analytical behaviourists face when defining mental states. [5 marks]

This question (addressing AO1 only) required students to show their understanding of an issue facing one of the theories within the Philosophy of Mind: the 'issue of circularity for 'logical/analytical behaviourists'.

There were marks available for students who showed some understanding of logical/analytical behaviourism, and most students did: e.g. 'the view that statements about mental states can be translated without loss of meaning to statements about behaviour or behavioural dispositions.' Where this was not fully exploited is where students showed no recognition of the 'linguistic' component and importance of 'meaning', claiming that 'mental states just are behaviour'. More seriously, some students blurred logical/analytical behaviourism with other materialist positions, quickly moving from talking about 'behaviour' to talking about 'brains', or about the 'causal relationship between behaviour and brain states.' Some attempt was made by most students to address the 'circularity issue', but all too often this was confused with the issue of 'multiple realisability'.

In order to progress to Level 3 students really had to show some clear understanding of the circularity issue, but few students were able to develop their answer beyond a brief outline of the problem. Those who did tended to use an example whereby the 'logical/analytical behaviourist' tries to exhaustively analyse a particular mental state (e.g. 'fear of snakes') by translating it into statements about behaviour, only to find themselves 'coming back round to mental states' because of all the complex mental variables and prior conditions which produced that particular 'mental state/behavioural disposition' in the first place. Some of the best examples managed to bring the inquiry back round to the specific mental state they started with.

Question 08: Explain what is meant by folk psychology. [5 marks]

This question required students to explain the meaning of a concept typically encountered through the study of eliminative materialism: the concept of 'folk psychology'.

Because folk psychology is so closely associated with 'eliminate materialism' we did not expect students to explain the concept without some mention of it. Where students lost marks, however, is where they wrote almost *exclusively* about eliminative materialism's theoretical ambition to transcend: e.g. 'a science of the brain will replace folk psychology just as the notion of phlogiston was replaced in modern chemistry…' These responses tended to access Level 1, 2, or occasionally 3 depending on how much light the rest of their answer shed on 'folk psychology'.

Students who progressed further up the assessment scale were able to explain the features of 'folk psychology' without simply announcing its imminent demise: the best (Level 4 and 5) tended to identify it as (1) an 'empirical system of predication and explanation' which presupposes an 'inner life of the mind' composed of 'beliefs', 'desires', and 'intentions' etc; (2) adopted by ordinary people (without knowledge of the latest neuroscience); and (3) in use for thousands of years with little or no change.

Question 09: Explain the problem of other minds facing dualism and how the argument from analogy responds to this. [12 marks]

This question required an extended demonstration of philosophical understanding (AO1), focussed on a classic problem with dualism and a classic response: (1) the problem of other minds; and (2) the argument from analogy.

Most students tended to break the question down into three parts which they took in order: (1) the nature of dualism; (2) the problem of other minds; and (3) the argument from analogy. There were some very good responses, however, that went straight into explaining the 'problem of other minds' in such away that their understanding of dualism was very clear. Ultimately, what separated students was the precision with which they explained each part of their response and the coherence and integration of their answer overall.

Students at the top end of the assessment scale (10-12 band) tended to give a relatively brief explanation of dualism ('substance dualism', 'property dualism', or occasionally both). The 'problem of other minds' was framed epistemologically as an issue which arises from first person priority, e.g. 'there is an asymmetry whereby we can know our own minds immediately through introspection, but we cannot know if others have minds, since we have no direct access to their mental states.' The problem was sometimes developed in such a way that the spectre of 'solipsism' arose for the dualist. The argument from analogy was associated with Mill, and it was framed epistemologically as an 'inductive argument' (sometimes presented in a formal step by step style with premises and conclusion(s)) which attempts to show that knowledge of the 'causal relationship between our own minds and behaviour' allows us to 'infer such a causal relationship in other beings' which are like us in so many respects. This was often illustrated with reference to experiences of pain and the their associated behaviours.

Further down the assessment scale (7-9 band) students tended to devote too much time and space to the first part of the question, not simply outlining dualism and explaining the problem of other minds but presenting *arguments for* Cartesian dualism (e.g. from indivisibility), explaining the 'problem of other minds' at length, and then producing a brief (but accurate) outline of the argument from analogy. Some of these arguments were not wholly coherent, either: for example, introducing the argument for analogy as 'inductive' and an 'inference to the best explanation', but concluding that the argument had shown 'others must *necessarily* have minds'.

Students in the 4-6 band sometimes produced precise and detailed explanations on the first part of the question but nothing at all on the second, or else they were not precise and detailed on either but presented at least some clear and correct content on the 'problem of other minds' and the 'argument from analogy'.

At the lower end of the assessment scale (1-3 band), students tended to just make one or two correct points about dualism and / or the problem of other minds, but with little detail or development.

Question 10: Are mental states identical to brain states? (25 Marks)

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, taking as its subject matter one of the modern theoretical stances: the identification of 'mental states' with 'brain states'.

The mean average was impacted this year by a rise in the number of students producing essays which did not progress beyond the 6-10 band: this was the most frequently utilised band this year

compared with the 11 – 15 band last year. The main reason for the dip in performance was students simply not answering the question. In many cases this was obviously because they knew so little about identity theories, and so quickly moved the discussion on to other theories on the specification. Other theories can of course be discussed but students only score marks if they utilised those theories to answer the specific question. Some students with apparently quite limited understanding of identity theories were able to produce good essays that did take them beyond the 6-10 band. They did this by producing a fairly accurate outline of 'type identity' theory which they then subjected to a sustained dualist critique, and an evaluation of dualism, but they did this in such a way that they kept bringing the discussion back round to the specific issue of whether one can identity 'mental states' with 'brain states', framing the 'objections to dualism' in such a way that suggested it made more sense to identity the mind with the brain than to be left with the 'nomological danglers' which characterise dualist conceptions of mental states. That kind of integrated critical comparison was rare. More typically students just outlined select theories and played them off against each other but without engaging with the specific issues raised by the question. Common mistakes included discussing 'eliminative materialism' as an 'identity theory'; misapplying famous thought experiments in an attempt to refute identity theories (e.g. the Chinese Mind); taking 'correlation' and 'identity' as one and the same idea; and confusing 'type' and 'token' identity theories (the latter was rarely well explained).

Those students who accessed the 11 – 15 band usually showed clear understanding of 'type identity' theory and grounded the authority of the theory in empirical science generally and neuroscience specifically, sometimes with reference to various experiments or medical cases which might suggest the identity of the mind and the brain. The position was then critiqued using 'Leibniz's law': the identity of indiscernibles, focussing on issues of 'spatial location' and 'divisibility'. Another of the more popular arguments against the theory rested on the 'problem of multiple realisability' and the charge of 'chauvinism'. This was often identified as the 'crucial argument' against the theory, though this was not always evident from the evaluation itself. The latter is an example of how more students than ever are clearly trying hard to meet all the demands of the generic Mark Scheme. Another is making judgments 'on an ongoing basis', and there were excellent examples of that, with clear and concise judgements made on particular issues following detailed analysis, which were dealt with decisively before moving the discussion on to other relevant matters. Other students, however, are producing lengthy provisional conclusions during their essay which add nothing in terms of evaluation: they are just summaries of the arguments considered so far and the conclusions reached; this material is then reproduced in the overall conclusion at the end. This is not an effective use of students' time in the exam, and it is not meeting the demands of the Mark Scheme: the relevant skill here concerns the ability to make 'reasoned judgements' in relation to the philosophical issues raise in the essay at the time of their discussion, but it does not necessitate a lengthy recap after each argument.

What tended to distinguish the responses described above from those in the 16-20 band, and of course those in 21-25 band, was the extent to which students were able to formulate responses to objections against identity theories (regardless of their final conclusion). But the reason they were able to do this cannot be separated from their understanding of the relevant philosophical positions. Some of the best subjected 'type identity theory' to rigorous discussion, typically representing it as a 'contingent identity', utilising the objections raised above, and then introducing 'token identity theory' as a credible response to the issue of 'multiple realisability.' Although it is not specifically on the specification, some students made excellent use of 'intentionality' as a feature of the mental which simply cannot be accounted for by identity theories. There were also impressive adaptations of anti-physicalist arguments (or arguments for property dualism) centring on the problem of qualia, which students targeted at identity theories specifically: the 'zombie argument', the 'knowledge/Mary' argument etc. The responses to these from the standpoint of identity theory

were very robust. A minority of students defended the physicalist explanatory ambition of identity theories, but they argued that a physicalist version of ‘functionalism’ is better able to fulfil those ambitions because its more liberal concept of mind gives it the ‘ability to overcome chauvinism and the problem of multiple realisability’. At this top end of the assessment scale students are handling technical philosophical material with confidence and sophistication, which is a credit to their own efforts and those of their teachers.

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