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# A-LEVEL PHILOSOPHY

7172/1: Paper 1 – Epistemology and Moral Philosophy  
Report on the Examination

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## Introduction

What follows is a question-by-question commentary on the key trends in the performance of students on component 7172/1: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy. In the course of this commentary, reference is made to student responses, the question paper, the assessment objectives, the specification and associated readings 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. Reference is also made to statistical evidence to provide contextualisation to the qualitative judgments and findings outlined in this report.

## Assessment Objectives

**AO1:** Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the core concepts and methods of philosophy, including through the use of philosophical analysis.

**AO2:** Analyse and evaluate philosophical argument to form reasoned judgements.

## Section A: Epistemology

### Question 1: Define (a) acquaintance knowledge, (b) ability knowledge, and (c) propositional knowledge. (3 marks)

For a full response to this question, students were required to provide a precise statement of each of the three types of knowledge stated in the question. Students found this the most accessible question on the paper, and the most commonly awarded mark was 3.

One mark was awarded for a correct definition of each type of knowledge, and therefore the overwhelming reason why some students did not score full marks was the provision of an incomplete response. In the case of responses awarded 2 marks, the vast majority of students were able to define propositional and ability knowledge, but there were some less successful attempts to define acquaintance knowledge in a way that clearly distinguished it from the other two types. For example, a number of students attempted to define acquaintance knowledge as 'knowledge based on experiencing a thing' or something similar, which does not provide a clear definition that distinguished this type of knowledge from the other two. As one mark was awarded for each correct definition, students were not awarded partial credit for definitions that were unclear or doubtful.

This question did not require examples, although many students chose to provide them and this was fine. Some students integrated the definition into their account of the example, which again was fine and was mostly very well done. In some cases, students were able to state correct examples of each type of knowledge but there was confusion or imprecision in the corresponding definition. In these cases, students were not given credit for the statement of a correct example, and the focus of awarding marks was centred on the quality of the definitions provided.

### Question 2: Explain Berkeley's 'Master' Argument. (5 marks)

This question required students to provide a full, logical and well-integrated account of the Master Argument and students' performance was mixed. There was a very broad range of responses and correspondingly the full range of marks for this question were used in similar proportions, although around 56% of students managed to score 3 marks or above, suggesting an ability to provide a substantively correct explanation of the correct argument.

Students who answered this question successfully and scored more than 3 marks tended to be able to draw out the logic of the argument and make it clear why Berkeley thought that a mind-independent reality was inconceivable. Although it was not necessary, the more effective responses tended to make some link between this key idea and the implications either for idealism or for anti-realism more generally. Again, although not necessary, higher scoring responses tended to use examples to effectively illustrate how the argument works and in doing so were able to provide 'full' explanations. Where students scored 4 rather than 5 marks, this tended to be due to some form of imprecision rather than an omission or an error. For instance, some students did not capture the inconceivable/contradictory/impossible nature of imagining an unperceived object precisely in their explanation of the Master Argument.

At the lower end, a significant number of students did not appear to know the correct argument, and instead provided an explanation of a different argument. Most commonly, students chose to explain the argument that God perceives all things and can therefore guarantee the apparently objective nature of space and time – with God being referred to as 'the Master' by many students attempting to make the link back to the question. In responses such as this, students were awarded marks for fragmented relevant content appropriately. Pleasingly, very few students provided redundant material in the form of responses to the Master argument, which can sometimes be a flaw in responses to this question type.

### **Question 3: Explain Descartes' cogito as an example of a priori intuition. (5 marks)**

The mean average mark on this question was higher than that on question 2 which suggests that students performed better on this question than on question 2. However, this is not true across the whole range of marks. The difference in mean average performance was largely due to the distribution of marks at the lower end being significantly different. On this question less than 10% of students scored 1 mark or lower (compared to around 32% on question 2). The fact that over 90% of students scored at least two marks can be explained by the fact that there were three distinct elements in the question and even where students could not do all three well, they tended to be able to address one or two (the three elements being the cogito, what is meant by a priori knowledge and the Cartesian notion of intuition).

Most students were able to state the cogito in some form and were able to state what it meant for this to be an example of a priori knowledge, with many making effective links to Descartes' rationalist generally and his 'demon' argument in particular to explain the cogito. Students could score highly but could not access full marks by *only* addressing these first two elements of the question. To score full marks, students were required to show an understanding of the notion of intuitive knowledge. A minority of students were able to this, and very few successfully explained why Descartes considered the cogito be an example of an intuitive truth. Some responses explained the cogito as an example of a truth that is arrived at through deduction or demonstration, which was treated as imprecision. Despite this, some top level responses did clearly explain why the cogito was considered by Descartes to be an intuitive truth (rather than a deductive one).

### **Question 4: Outline how indirect realism leads to scepticism about the existence of mind-independent objects and explain Locke's response based on the involuntary nature of our experience. (12 marks)**

There were a number of elements to this question which provided most students with the opportunity to score in the mid-range of marks by successfully addressing some elements (around 66% of students scored at least 6 marks), and a significant proportion of students addressed all elements well (around 22% of students scored in the top band).

The most successful responses explained the correct sceptical problem and integrated this effectively with indirect realism, using a precise definition to clearly show how the problem affected the theory. They then went on to provide a clear explanation of the correct response from Locke and integrated this effectively with the first part of the response to explicitly state how Locke's response might serve as a solution.

In less successful responses, students often employed a wide range of material relating to scepticism and sceptical arguments generally (eg illusions, hallucinations, evil demon and philosophical scepticism) but did not use this material to precisely state the problem relating to the existence of mind-independent objects faced by indirect realism. Some students either blurred or confused this problem with the related issue of whether indirect realists can know the nature of the external world (rather than its existence). In these responses, students typically spoke at length about the primary and secondary qualities distinction but either failed to make this explicitly relevant to the sceptical problem required in the question, or did so in an unclear way. That said, some students did persuasively use Berkeley's critique of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities to motivate the claim that there are no mind-independent properties of objects and related this convincingly to the sceptical problem in the question. In relation to the final element of the question, a number of students did not identify the correct response from Locke and some students blurred or confused this with his related argument about the coherence of the senses. In some low-scoring responses, indirect realism was confused with idealism.

#### **Question 5: Do we have innate knowledge? (25 marks)**

In this question, students were being assessed in relation to both AO1 and AO2, with weighting of assessment objective being such that 80% of marks are awarded for AO2. The most frequently awarded mark was 13. This statistic suggests that the average student was able to draw on mostly well-integrated argument and counter-argument in order to provide a response to the question. Slightly over 10% of responses were awarded a mark in the top level, which required consistently detailed engagement with argument and counter-argument as well as weighting and appropriate balance, strong integration and a clear and sustained line of argument in support of a robustly defended conclusion.

The most common approach to answering this question was to consider Plato's Innatism (usually his 'slave boy' argument and/or his theory of recollection) and reject this position, before proceeding to outline one or more of Leibniz' arguments in support of Innatism and discuss whether these can survive one or more of the challenges presented by empiricists (usually Locke). Students often made very clear links between Locke's universal consent argument, his argument relating to the transparency of ideas and Leibniz's 'veined marble' analogy. Students who adopted this approach but did not score above 15 marks tended not to fully develop points raised or explanation involved a lack of clarity/precision.

There were a couple common mistakes worth noting. The most serious of these was the conflation of innate with a priori knowledge. Some discussions focused largely or entirely on the possibility of a priori knowledge and therefore did not directly address the issue in the question (often starting out by defining innate as a priori). Other students made this mistake within the course of an otherwise reasonable response which undermined the logic and coherence of the argument to varying degrees, depending on how integral the confusion was to the overall argument. A second mistake that some students made was to confuse or blur innate propositional knowledge with innate abilities. Although it was possible for students to deploy this distinction successfully as part of an argument and some responses did this well (eg we have no innate propositional knowledge

but could possess some innate abilities to form such knowledge), many responses simply blurred the two together.

For those students scoring in the 6-10 band or below who did not make one of the mistakes outlined above, it was often the case that they were able to draw on a range of relevant material but only very briefly, so that where argument and counter-argument were attempted this really amounted to assertion and counter-assertion. It was also often the case with responses in these two levels that arguments were misrepresented or not stated precisely.

## **Section B: Moral Philosophy**

### **Question 6: What is moral anti-realism? (3 marks)**

To gain full marks, students were required to provide one definition that was clear and precise with no significant redundancy. On the whole students did not perform well on this question with around 20% of responses awarded the top mark of 3, and the most frequently awarded mark being 0 (around 31% of responses).

The best response tended to be short and concise (eg 'Moral anti-realism is the view that there are no mind-independent moral facts or properties'). As students wrote more, they tended to start to draw on material that was redundant and/or highlighted some misunderstanding of the anti-realist position. One especially common mistake was for students to confuse moral anti-realism with moral non-cognitivism, with many responses focusing on the nature of ethical language rather than the issue of whether mind-independent moral facts exist.

### **Question 7: Explain Kant's distinction between acting in accordance with duty and acting out of duty. (5 marks)**

This was the best performing 5 mark question on the paper, with a mean average score of around 62% of the total marks available, and three quarters of students scoring 4 marks or above.

The vast majority of students were able to clearly state the distinction and also provide some explanation of the distinction. Although it was not necessary, the most effective responses tended to use an example to illustrate the difference. Full and precise responses that scored in the top level tended to use relevant philosophical terminology relating to Kantian deontology during the course of an explanation. For example, students made reference to the notion of the good will/rational will, to the nature of motivation and how this related to hypothetical and categorical imperatives. At the lower end, some responses appeared to understand the difference but got the distinction the wrong way round. These responses scored a maximum of 2 marks (logic unclear, not substantively correct) so did gain some credit for relevant points of explanation. A small minority of responses showed limited understanding of the distinction, with some students thinking that acting 'out of duty' was acting in a way that did not conform to our duties as determined by the categorical imperative.

### **Question 8: Explain why Hume thinks that moral judgments are not beliefs. (5 marks)**

This was the lowest-scoring question on the paper. The most frequently awarded mark on this question was zero (around 33%) with less than 2% of students not attempting to provide a response. Only around 37% of responses were awarded 3 marks or above.

There were a number of equally valid approaches to answering this question – as indicated in the mark scheme. In responses that were awarded some marks, all three of the main approaches were common and some students attempted to explain more than one reason/argument which was perfectly valid. Students most frequently focused on Hume’s argument relating to the motivational properties of moral judgments, followed by Hume’s fork and then his is-ought gap. Out of these three approaches, the least successful one was Hume’s fork – many students could outline the distinction in Hume’s work, but a significant proportion made incorrect links between this and the question (eg suggesting that for Hume moral judgments were relations of ideas but not matters of fact and that only matters of fact could form the basis of belief).

A significant number of responses focused exclusively on stating what Hume thought moral judgments *were* (usually stating that Hume was an emotivist) rather than explaining why he thought they were *not* beliefs. This approach tended not to score above 2 marks.

The marking statistics for this question confirm the qualitative reports from examiners that many students did not know why Hume thought that moral judgments were not beliefs. Those responses scoring zero marks tended to say something about Hume but nothing that had a clear bearing on the question. A significant number of responses in this group that scored zero made the mistake of claiming that Hume was a realist and therefore thought that moral judgments were universal facts in the word rather than mere beliefs which are subjective.

**Question 9: Explain how Aristotelean virtue ethics might be applied to the issue of simulated killing. (12 marks)**

The mean average score on this question was just over 50%, with the most common mark awarded being 6. Almost 12% of responses were awarded a mark in the top band.

In explaining how Aristotelian virtue ethics (AVE) might be applied to the issue of simulated killing, students were not required to provide a complete explanation of the theory. However, to access marks in the top level, students had to provide sufficient relevant material in relation to the theory in order to provide a detailed *explanation* as to how it could be applied – rather than simply stating what an AVE might say about the issue of simulated killing. In other words, students were expected to show a detailed understanding of the element(s) of AVE they had chosen to apply in order to score a mark in the top level.

Students drew on a wide range of material to answer this question, with almost all responses making the point that the theory suggests that we should develop virtues, before going on to make a link to simulated killing. The lowest scoring responses did no more than this and often presented an overly simplistic application which blurred simulated killing with actual killing (eg AVE would object to killing in real life and simulated killing is just developing this vice). Some responses at the bottom end wrote a lot about AVE but made limited links back to the issue to explain how it could be applied. A smaller number of responses focused solely on discussing whether or not simulated killing is good or bad in more general (often utilitarian) terms (eg it doesn’t lead to suffering, so is not morally wrong).

In contrast, responses at the top end tended to provide a more nuanced and sophisticated judgment based on a range of possible applications of different elements of AVE (most commonly the doctrine of the mean and the role of habituation and training). Responses at the top end also tended to make the point that whether AVE would be able to justify simulated killing might depend on the nature, extent and frequency of the simulated killing as well as on the nature of the person engaging in the activity. A number of students suggested that even if AVE would not object to

simulated killing in itself, there are question marks about whether a virtuous character could be developed more fruitfully through engagement in other activities and therefore frequently engaging in simulated killing might be deemed wrong.

Responses that scored in the mid-range of marks tended to identify features of AVE and provide an outline of how they could be applied to the issue (often lacking precision – especially in logical linking/integration) rather than a detailed and precise explanation which would be required for a higher mark.

**Question 10: Are utilitarians correct when they say it is morally right to maximise utility? (25 marks)**

In this question, students were being assessed in relation to both AO1 and AO2, with weighting of assessment objectives being such that 80% of marks are awarded for A02. The mean average mark for this question was approximately 9.94, which equates to around 39% of the overall available marks. Around 3% of responses were awarded a mark in the top level and the most frequently awarded mark was 8. This statistical evidence clearly shows that question 10 was less well answered than question 5, and this finding correlated to the qualitative judgments of senior examiners who marked both questions.

The best answers to this question stayed clearly focused on utilitarianism and issues with it, and critically discussed different versions effectively, with clear weighting and evaluation throughout. A common approach was to explain act utilitarianism and the problem of tyranny of majority and/or the problem of calculation before considering rule utilitarianism as a position that could avoid these problems. Students often then proceeded to raise a number of problems with utilitarianism more generally such as Nozick's experience machine and the issue of moral integrity. Some responses considered preference utilitarianism and judged this to be the most successful of the different versions of utilitarianism. As an approach, this was occasionally done very well and it could form the basis of a top level answer where there was sustained argument and counter-argument throughout.

However, students taking this kind of approach quite often failed to score in the top band due to one or more of the following reasons: a lack of detail and precision in points raised, limited integration of points, unclear weighting of arguments or a lack of clarity about the logic of the argument overall. A common feature of responses in the 11-15 band was that developed evaluative judgments were replaced with assertion in which students tended to just say a particular issue was effective or ineffective without any attempt at justifying their position. Where there were attempts at weighting in this level, they often did not fit coherently with the overall line of argument and/or were not defended or justified.

In the 6-10 band, students quite often drew on a wide range of points but did so very briefly so that arguments were stated in weak forms/asserted rather than explained – these responses tended to be relatively short. Responses in this level often juxtaposed different types of utilitarianism without considering the individual strengths and weaknesses of each one, then plumping for a 'winner' overall without clear or credible justification. There was also evidence of misunderstanding in this level as well as a lack of clarity about the logic of argument when argument/counter was attempted (eg asserting that rule utilitarianism can avoid the problem of calculation faced by act utilitarianism but instead of explaining why, outlining the distinction between higher and lower pleasures/presenting preference utilitarianism as a theory that is not concerned with maximising utility). Furthermore, a number of students chose to juxtapose utilitarianism with other normative theories and defend one of these instead after a brief outline of some of the problems with

utilitarianism. This was not a successful approach and often students lost sight of the question and it was difficult to see the relevance of points raised.

In the 1-5 level, some students were able to recite a wide range of relevant arguments, but offered an almost entirely one-sided response with little or no engagement in argument and counter-argument (eg. explanation of different versions of the theory before providing an explanation of problems such as tyranny of the majority, role of intentions, problem of calculation). These students typically scored very low marks, as they did not demonstrate many of the skills required in the 6-10 band. Also in the 1-5 band, some responses were very short (around 1-2 sides) with students not writing enough to clearly demonstrate critical engagement with argument or many of the other skills required for a score of 6 or above.

Finally, it is worth noting the fact that some students chose to write about meta-ethical arguments and issues in relation to this question and did so especially well. For instance, considering Mill's proof and the success or otherwise of this (eg using the open question argument, is-ought gap etc.) was often well deployed to make a justified critique of hedonistic utilitarianism. However, a minority of students attempted to argue that utilitarians are wrong to make the claim in the question since there is no such thing as 'morally right' and proceeded to provide a discussion of moral realism (usually a defence of error theory). Such responses tended to lose focus on the question and where there was very little attempt to engage directly with utilitarianism and the issues related to this theory specifically, this approach did not score highly.

### **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.