
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 the 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.

Question 1: What is the difference between a necessary truth and a contingent truth? (3 marks)

General observations

Students generally coped well with the demands of this question, with the most commonly awarded mark being '3' and over half of students scoring 2 marks or higher. The mean average score on this question was higher than the overall mean average for the paper. On the other hand, around 20% of students scored a mark of '0' on this question and just under half of students scored either '0' or '1' marks, suggesting that a significant number of students struggled to provide substantively correct responses.

Where students performed well

To score full marks on this question, students were required to provide a clear and precise definition of each term – there are numerous examples listed in the indicative content of the mark scheme. The full range of these responses was observed in student work, with the most common high-scoring responses explicitly focusing on the fact that necessary truths *must* be true and cannot be false, whereas contingent truths *could* be false.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

One of the most common and serious mistakes evident in student responses was the confusion of necessary and contingent truth with either a) necessary and sufficient conditions or b) necessary and contingent existence. Where students confused necessary and contingent truth with necessary and contingent existence they tended to make the points such as 'necessary truths do not depend on anything else whereas contingent truths do depend on something'. Where the confusion was with necessary and sufficient conditions, students tended to make points such as 'necessary truths are needed for something (else) to be true'. Students may also have failed to achieve top marks due to a lack of precision rather than an obvious mistake – for instance claiming only that necessary truths are 'always true' and therefore failing to capture the 'necessity' of such truths.

Question 2: Explain the reliabilist definition of knowledge. (5 marks)

General observations

Students performed very well on this question, with the mean average mark being significantly above the overall average for the paper. The vast majority of students (just over 80%) managed to

score at least 3 marks on this question, and students could achieve this mark with a relatively short and concise response. Just under 30% of students were awarded the maximum number of marks on this question, and the most commonly awarded mark was '4'. Most students presented reliabilism as a modification to the tripartite view and/or response to J+T+B not being jointly sufficient conditions for knowledge.

Where students performed well

Students were generally able to correctly identify that reliabilism requires that knowledge must involve a true belief arising from a reliable cognitive process. Where students scored beyond 3 marks they tended to be able to clearly and precisely explain what a reliable cognitive process might be (e.g. one that tends to produce a high proportion of true beliefs) and often provided further detail in the form of additional philosophical points relating to reliabilism (e.g. how it might accommodate infant knowledge, how it does not require conscious awareness of and/or justification for the process itself so long as it is reliable).

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

It was quite common for students to access but not exceed 3 marks either because they did not go beyond stating the key idea in reliability to *explaining* it (see '*where students performed well*'). Where students did not score full marks despite providing further explanation this was often due to imprecision or lack of clarity in the explanation. Where students made reference to knowledge coming from a reliable 'source' rather than a reliable cognitive process their responses tended to be less full and precise. A significant number of students who responded like this provided examples of what might be a reliable source of information (e.g. The Guardian newspaper or an expert in a particular field) but did not provide any significant explanation to accompany the example.

Question 3: Explain how the argument from hallucination presents an issue for direct realism. (5 marks)

General observations

Students generally coped well with the demands of this question, with around 75% of students scoring a mark of 3 or more, and 3 was the most commonly awarded mark. Almost all students (over 99%) scored at least 1 mark.

Where students performed well

In the vast majority of cases students were able to provide a correct definition of direct realism. The best responses were able to clearly link this definition to the problem of hallucinations with a focus on showing how hallucinations challenge the claim (or knowledge of the claim) that the immediate objects of perception are mind-independent objects and their properties. The best responses took a number of different forms – some students selecting to set the argument out in standard form using numbered premises and others opting for a more continuous prose – and both approaches were appropriate.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Some students provided a relatively limited and imprecise definition of direct realism which was carried over into the attempted explanation of the issue (e.g. direct realism says everything we see is exactly as it is, so they must believe that hallucinations are a part of reality). These responses also tended to be brief in comparison to higher-scoring responses and so were often judged to be 'not full or precise'.

Question 4: Outline indirect realism and explain Berkeley's objection that mind-dependent ideas cannot be like mind-independent objects. (12 marks)

General observations

To access 7 marks or above on this question, it was essential for students to provide relevant and correct material relating to both parts of the question. A response that only addressed the requirement to outline indirect realism but did not provide any relevant material on Berkeley's objection (or the other way around) could not demonstrate the level of detailed understanding required for marks higher up the mark scheme and could at best be described as 'largely correct' with 'most points made clearly' – assuming that the content of the partial response was clear and correct.

Just under 40% of students scored a mark of 7 or higher, with approximately 15% of students scoring a mark in the top level. At the bottom end, just under 25% of students scored a mark of 3 or lower. It is clear that although some students performed very well on this question and also the question differentiated very well with the full range of marks being awarded, students performed less well on this question than on the previous three overall. This is also supported by the fact that the mean average score for this question was lower than on any of the previous three questions, with students scoring an average of just under 50% of the available marks.

Where students performed well

Students tended to manage the requirement to outline indirect realism very well. Many students were able to provide a clear and logical explanation of the theory by focusing on the different 'components' in this model of perception (perceiver, sense data, external world) and how they are related. As was anticipated in the indicative content, the best accounts of indirect realism identified both the causation and the representation claims. Many students went beyond these points to provide a very detailed account of the theory which often included Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

A very significant number of students did not provide any correct explanation relating to Berkeley's objection. In some cases students did not attempt to address this part of the question at all. More commonly, students explained some other aspect(s) of Berkeley's idealism (e.g. the theory itself, the Master Argument, Berkeley's rejection of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities). In some cases these responses did not contain any directly relevant material and were awarded no credit. However, where there was relevant information this was credited accordingly. Where there was creditworthy material in responses that focused on some other aspect of Berkeley's philosophy, this tended to take the form of fragmented relevant points where the direct relevance was implicit / not made clear by the student. In some cases, students did correctly identify and provide an explanation of the correct issue but this was blurred/conflated with other points that Berkeley made. This could be classed as minor imprecision or redundancy depending on the extent of the blurring / conflation.

Question 5: To what extent is Descartes' intuition and deduction thesis successful? (25 marks)*General observations*

With students on average picking up around 42% of the available marks on this question, it was the second lowest-scoring question on the paper by this measure – second only to question 10. Around 4% of students achieved a mark in the top band with over 20% of students scoring at least 16 marks. The most commonly awarded mark on average was between 10 and 11. At the bottom end, just over 17% of students scored a mark in the bottom level.

Where students performed well

The most common structure of responses involved students working through the self, God and external world as three knowledge claims arising from the intuition and deduction thesis and assessing whether Descartes' argument in relation to each were convincing. Many student responses showed a confident and detailed grasp of relevant material and an ability to integrate arguments and counter-arguments. The very best responses engaged in detailed argument and counter leading to well-supported judgments throughout and overall. The best responses sustained a clear and coherent line of argument and explicitly attributed appropriate weight to arguments being considered.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Lower-scoring responses often superficially resembled those that scored more highly in that the overarching structure was similar to that outlined above moving from self to God to external world. What distinguished lower-level responses from higher was the level of clarity, detail and precision of points raised, the depth of the argument and counter-argument provided and the coherence of the overall line of argument. Common examples of weaknesses included students not clearly understanding what intuition and deduction are (which often carried through into explanation of a wide range of points raised), juxtaposing and describing a range of views without sufficient engagement in ongoing evaluation or replacing argument and counter-argument with very brief assertion with little supporting reasoning.

It was not common to see material that was irrelevant or entirely redundant in response to this question, but there were some examples of material being included that did not generally add much value. Firstly, sometimes students spoke at length at the start about what they intended to discuss (i.e. provided an outline plan of everything they were going to say before going on to say it – sometimes running onto a side or more) and this often contributed little to the response despite taking a lot of student time. A second examples was with Descartes' sceptical arguments and waves of doubt – sometimes students explained these at length but with no obvious purpose or integration with the discussion of the intuition and deduction thesis.

Question 6: What does Kant mean by 'hypothetical imperative'? (3 marks)*General observations*

Students performed better at the top end on this question than on question 1, with just under 50% of students achieving the maximum '3' marks and almost 70% of students achieving a mark of 2 or higher. At the bottom end, student performance was more similar to question 1 – with around 16% of students being awarded a mark of '0'.

Where students performed well

A significant number of students clearly and precisely addressed both the 'hypothetical' and the 'imperative' parts of the question – providing full-mark responses such as those provided in the indicative content of the mark scheme.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

In the lowest scoring examples, some students were not able to provide any correct content on the definition although almost all students did attempt the question. Common significant mistakes in these responses included simply defining hypothetical as 'something that isn't really the case but could be'. Some students defined hypothetical in terms of thought experiments, along the lines of 'hypothetical imperatives are made up a scenarios to provide that we should / shouldn't do X'. At the bottom end, some students did also mistakenly claim that for Kant hypothetical imperatives were moral duties.

In higher scoring examples that did not achieve full marks, this tended to be a result of imprecision on one or both parts of the question. There are examples listed in the indicative content – all of which were observed in student responses. One of the most common examples of imprecision was stating that hypothetical imperatives only apply in some situations / don't always apply / depend on the situation but failing to link this to the ends/desires of the agent.

Question 7: Explain the 'skill analogy' that Aristotle uses in his account of virtue. (5 marks)

General observations

Around 75% of responses were awarded three marks or more, with more than 45% of students achieving 4 or 5 marks. At the bottom end, over 6% of students failed to score a mark and around the same proportions scored only 1 mark.

Where students performed well

The best responses to this question (those scoring 4 or 5 marks) clearly explained how the analogy is used in Aristotle's account of virtue, rather than just providing an outline of what the analogy is. There were some excellent examples of top level responses in which there was detailed and skillfull integration of the analogy with Aristotle's account of virtue and this often drew upon technical terminology appropriately such

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Where students failed to score more than 2 marks and responses were judged not to contain a ‘substantively correct explanation’ the response tended to be very brief and/or did not pick up on the *analogy* – either just explaining that virtues require practice or writing generally about how skills require practice. Also, a significant number of students at the bottom end did not say anything of direct relevance to the skill analogy but did write generally about Aristotle’s virtue ethics – suggesting a generally sound broad awareness of the theory but no clear awareness of the particular focus of the question.

Question 8: Explain the criticism that Kant ignores the value of certain motives. (5 marks)

General observations

This was the worst performing 5 mark question on the paper with a mean average of around 57%. Low performance was especially evident on this question more than in any other 5-markers – with more students providing responses that were not creditworthy at all or contained only fragmented relevant material than on any other 5 mark question on the paper – Just under 20% of candidates scored 0 or 1 mark. Despite this, almost 40% of students managed to score 4 or more marks.

Where students performed well

The best responses to this question provided a clear and precise account of Kant’s view (e.g. the role of reason and rationality as a moral motivation, the importance of acting out of rather than merely in accordance with duty, the nature of hypothetical and categorical imperatives) and then clearly explained why he might face an issue relating to the value of other motives that linked closely to the theory as stated. There was clear evidence at the top end of many students doing this skilfully and in detail, with excellent logical linking and deployment of technical vocabulary.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Where students scored above 3 marks but did not score full marks this was often as result of a lack of detail and precision – especially in relation to logical linking. More seriously, a significant number of students did not go beyond stating what Kant’s position was and left the criticism implicit (e.g. simply stating that Kant disregards emotion as a moral motivation but not explaining what the criticism might be).

Question 9: Explain hedonistic utilitarianism and explain the criticism that it ignores the moral integrity of the individual. (12 marks)

General observations

To access 7 marks or above on this question, it was essential for students to provide relevant and correct material relating to both parts of the question. A response that only addressed the requirement to explain hedonistic utilitarianism but did not provide any relevant material on the issue of integrity (or the other way around) could not demonstrate the level of detailed understanding required for marks higher up the mark scheme and could at best be described as ‘largely correct’ with ‘most points made clearly’ – assuming that the content of the partial response was clear and correct.

Student performance on this question was remarkably similar to that on question 4. Around 35% of students scored a mark of 7 or higher, with approximately 15% of students scoring a mark in the top level. At the bottom end, just under 25% of students scored a mark of 3 or lower. As was the case with question 4, students performed less well on this question than on the previous three questions on the paper with the mean average score for this question being lower than on any of the previous three questions, with students scoring an average of just under 50% of the available marks.

Where students performed well

number of students provided detailed and comprehensive top-level responses showing a confident grasp of both parts of the question and an ability to logically integrate these. Many of the strongest responses provided a full explanation of the issue through the use of a detailed example (usually Jim and the Indians or the pacifist accepting a job) and, importantly, were able to state precisely what it would mean for integrity to be to be compromised and why this is a problem for hedonistic utilitarianism (usually with reference to deep moral convictions, core beliefs, lines in the sand that cannot be crossed, the importance of the whole person as a free moral agent and not simply a utility producing automata).

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

On the whole students tended to cope better with the first part of the question, with many being able to provide a thoroughly detailed explanation of Hedonistic utilitarianism which usually focused on Bentham and even where this was not done very well, most students were able to provide an accurate statement of the key ideas at least. However, some students did not focus sufficiently on hedonistic utilitarianism in particular (rather than utilitarianism generally) and some students provided only a very brief statement of the key idea rather than providing an explanation. A significant number of students not providing an account of the relevant issue. Sometimes students did not attempt to explain the issue at all, but much more commonly there was an attempt to either blurred the correct issue with other different issues, or confused the issue entirely with another. Two of the most common examples of this were the confusion of the issue of 'individual rights and liberties' with the issue of integrity, and also the confusion of the issue of 'partiality' with the the issue of integrity.

Question 10: Is moral anti-realism the correct metaethical view? (25 marks)

General observations

When considering the percentage of marks available that students scored on average, this was the lowest scoring question on the paper with a mean average mark of 40%. Approximately 2% of students scored a mark in the top level and just over 15% of students achieving a mark of 16 or higher. At the bottom end, around 22% of students scored a mark in the bottom level.

Where students performed well

The most common approach to answering this question was to structure responses around the three anti-realist theories and the three issue listed in the specification. On the whole, students showed a good level of knowledge and understanding of these theories and issues – especially if these are considered in isolation. In a small number of cases, students responded to the question by focusing on evaluating realist theories, which was a legitimate approach. A large proportion of

students deployed Mackie's arguments from queerness and relativity and this was often done very effectively, showing detailed understanding of the argument and its significance to the question. The best responses to this question were able to select judiciously from the wide range of relevant theories and arguments and provide a coherent line of argument to a well supported conclusion about anti-realism. Compared to question 5, fewer students were able to do this – partly due to the fact that whereas question 5 provides a very clear focus for students, the more open nature of question 10 proved challenging for many students.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Where students were scoring marks in the bottom level they tended to produce very short responses. It was possible for a long response to score in the bottom level if there was very little/no evaluation or line of argument offered and/or there was serious misunderstanding. Responses that scored in the 6-10 band tended to have a generally sound degree of knowledge and understanding and raise relevant points in a mostly coherent structure, but often were typified by a lack of detail and precision in points raised as well as limited meaningful engagement with

In a large number of responses a coherent line of argument was not offered even where the content raised was accurate and detailed. This was for a variety of reasons but two of the most common examples are outlined here. Often, responses would outline the three anti-realist theories interspersed with the three issues with the logic being unclear. For instance, claiming that emotivism faces the challenge of progress, prescriptivism faces the issue of moral language and error theory faces the issue of nihilism and then concluding that anti-realism can be defended because error theorists can simply embrace nihilism. Approaches such as these often failed to meaningfully engage with the issues and did not usually provide weight to arguments – so for example in the approach outlined above, not acknowledging that error theory could be affected by the earlier issues raised as well as nihilism. Another common issue with coherence arose from the fact that students sometimes tried to defend anti-realism by defending multiple versions of anti-realism without acknowledging that they cannot all be accepted at the same time. For instance, a common line of argument was that error theory as a cognitivist theory can solve issues relating to moral language, and emotivism can overcome the issue of progress – leading to a conclusion that anti-realism can therefore be defended.

A significant number of students attempted to write about every meta-ethical theory on the specification and these approaches were often lacking detail and depth both in explanation of points raised and engagement in argument and counter compared to response that focused on a sub-set of theories.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.