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. All these statistics should be treated as provisional, but they are unlikely to change significantly due to the amount of data already collected.

Summary Findings

Overall, there is clear quantitative and qualitative evidence of an improvement in the overall standard this year, judged against the 2019 and 2022 papers. The (mean) average performance rose above 50% whereas it was well that in both 2019 and 2022. This represents a significant improvement, helped in large part by much improved performance on both of the 12 mark questions.

On average, students tended to perform better this year on Epistemology than on Moral Philosophy on all but two questions: the essay (testing AO1 and AO2), and the 5-mark question (testing A01) on Bentham and Mill (students performed better on this than on question 03 on 'Hume's fork' and equally as well as on question 02 on Locke's primary and secondary quality distinction).

As stated above, the improvement this year is most evident on the 12 mark questions, where students performed significantly better than in previous years. It is clear that students found both questions – on Gettier and 'no false lemmas' and on Kant and the issue of lying - more accessible than previous years, and they were able to draw on their knowledge and understanding of the theories, concepts and issues involved to answer these questions very effectively. Students also did slightly better this year on the 3 mark questions than in 2022, whilst performance on the 5 mark questions was broadly similar. There was evidence of higher performance on AO2 this year on the Moral Philosophy question, where more students accessed the top band of marks (21-25), but this was offset by a slightly lower level of performance on the Epistemology 25 mark question, although only very slightly.

Two general observations were made by senior examiners this year centring on issues that have been previously raised: a perceived decline in the quality of handwriting and, in some of the essays, exaggerated evaluative remarks about 'incredibly weak/strong' arguments, which are not supported by the reasons provided.

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.

Question 1: What is the difference between direct realism and indirect realism? (3 marks)

General Observations

This question tested students' knowledge and understanding (AO1) of the difference between the two realist theories of perception referred to in the specification - 'Perception as a source of knowledge' (3.1.2). Students were slightly more effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding 3 mark question on the Moral Philosophy section, and this was the best performing question on the paper. The most commonly awarded mark was 3, with 45% of students gaining full marks and just under 35% of students scoring 2 marks: 80% of students gaining 2 or above marks. Only 3% of students scored 0. With 17% scoring 1 mark, this meant that the overwhelming majority of students (97%) were able to write something worthy of credit.

Where students performed well

To score full marks on this question, students were required to provide a clear and precise definition of each theory. Some of the best answers simply gave the specification definition of both direct realism and indirect realism. Some students expressed explicitly the difference between direct realism and indirect realism, however, this was not a requirement as long as it was clear from their response that the student understood the difference through a clear and precise definition of both theories. A significant number of students took this latter approach and were awarded full marks. There are a number of examples listed in the indicative content of the mark scheme that illustrate both approaches. The full range of these responses was observed in student work, with the most common high-scoring responses explicitly focusing on the key issue of perceptual immediacy vs perceptual mediation/representation.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

There were a number of reasons why students failed to gain full marks. These ranged from only showing a clear understanding of one theory and a partial or imprecise understanding of the other (typical of responses awarded 2 marks), or showing a partial and/or imprecise understanding of both theories (typical of responses awarded 1 mark). There are numerous examples listed in the indicative content of the mark scheme that exemplify these types of response.

Some common errors of understanding included straightforwardly conflating direct realism with naïve realism (eg by erroneously stating that direct realism is simply the view that 'what you see is what you get', or some other variant) or confusion regarding the nature and/or role of sense-data. There was some unnecessary discussion of issues such as 'time lag', etc, that didn't necessarily detract from the answer if the rest of it was precise, but which added nothing further: giving straight-forward definitions was sufficient.

Question 2: Explain Locke's distinction between primary qualities and secondary qualities. (5 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a key philosophical distinction (as presented by Locke) from the 'Perception as a source of knowledge' section of the specification (3.1.2). Students performed very well on this question, with the mean average mark being significantly above the overall average for the paper. This was the joint best performing 5 mark question on the paper (the other being question 7 on Bentham and Mill). The vast majority of students (just under 80%) managed to score at least 3 marks on this question, showing that they had grasped the substantive content. In order to do this, they needed to explain that primary qualities are inherent/intrinsic, mind-independent properties of objects whereas secondary qualities are nothing but powers that objects have to produce sensations in us, and so are mind-dependent properties. Typically, students would then go on to give relevant examples of each, such as size, shape, colour, etc. Just over 21% of students were awarded the maximum number of marks on this question and 27% were awarded 4, which meant that nearly half of the students this year scored 4 or above on this question. At the lower end, just under 15% were awarded 2 with 4% being awarded 1 and only 2% failing to pick up any marks.

Where students performed well

At the upper end of the performance scale, students who had grasped the substantive content were then able to go on to give fuller, clearer and more precise accounts, which demonstrated a deeper understanding of Locke's distinction. This could involve the addition of further key features of the distinction (eg in terms of resemblance / no resemblance, can be measured / can't be measured), by showing a mastery of key philosophical terms, and/or by using some of Locke's examples to bring out salient features of the distinction (eg the grain of wheat).

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Responses that gained 2 marks lacked the substantive content, giving some relevant points but not precisely, so not enough to demonstrate sufficient knowledge and understanding of Locke's distinction. For example, some students mixed up the definitions and examples (eg giving colour as an example of a primary quality or mass as an example of a secondary quality), whereas others gave a correct definition of primary qualities and an incorrect or confused account of secondary qualities, or vice versa. Another common error was to straightforwardly conflate secondary qualities with sense-data, suggesting that they were one and the same, and so failing to grasp the distinction between qualities and the ideas that qualities (as powers) can produce.

Question 3: Explain Hume's Fork. (5 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters fact (Hume's Fork) from the 'Reason as a source of knowledge' section of the specification (3.1.3). As with question 2, students performed well, with the mean average mark being above the overall average for the paper. At 69%, the majority of students managed to score at least 3 marks on this question, showing that they had grasped the substantive content of the question. In order to do this, they needed to explain that Hume's Fork is an epistemological distinction concerning two types of knowledge / propositions – what Hume labels 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact'. Relations of Ideas are known a priori and are necessary truths, whereas matters of fact are known a posteriori and express contingent truths. Typically, students then went on to give relevant examples of each, such as tautologies, the truths of maths or logic and standard empirical claims. Just over 20% of students were awarded the maximum number of marks on this question and 25% were awarded 4, which meant that nearly half of the students this year scored 4 or above on this question. At the lower end, just under 14% were awarded 2, with 8% being awarded 1 and 9% failing to pick up any marks.

Where students performed well

At the upper end of the performance scale, students who grasped the substantive content were then able to go on to give fuller, clearer and more precise accounts, which demonstrated a deeper understanding of Hume's distinction. This could involve the addition of further key features of the distinction - eg that relations of ideas are intuitively or demonstratively certain whereas matters of fact are not, that negation either leads to, or does not lead to, contradiction, or that the distinction is mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Often, these answers were expressed in precise philosophical terminology using Humean and non-Humean terms (eg analytic and synthetic).

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Responses that gained 2 marks lacked the substantive content, giving some relevant points but not precisely, and so not demonstrating a sufficient understanding of Hume's distinction. Some students mixed up the definitions and examples and did so haphazardly. However, quite a few students explained the distinction clearly but got the terms the wrong way round – eg by ascribing the characteristics of relations of ideas to matters of fact and vice versa. In these cases, if their ascriptions were consistently misattributed, then the substantive content was classed as being present but the answer imprecise and so they could be awarded a maximum of 3 marks. Some students expressed Hume's epistemological distinction in a purely semantic way (eg similar to the way in which Ayer presents the analytical dimension of the verification principle).

Question 4: Explain <u>one</u> of Gettier's original counter examples <u>and</u> explain how the addition of a 'no false lemmas' condition responds to it. (12 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a key philosophical counter-example and related response from the 'What is knowledge?' section of the specification (3.1.1). It tested students' ability to not only explain both parts, but also to logically integrate these into a coherent response. This was the best performing 12 mark question and the third best performing question on the paper, with the mean average significantly above the overall average for the paper. There was a significant improvement in comparison to the corresponding 12 mark Epistemology question on the 2022 paper, which suggests that this is a topic that students understand well, and so they were better able to better meet the specific demands of the question. Nearly three quarters of all students scored a mark of 7 or higher, with approximately 38% of students scoring a mark in the top level. 17% of students attained a mark in the 4-6 band, whilst at the bottom end, less than 5% of students scored a mark of 3 or lower.

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 one of Gettier's original counter examples but did not provide any relevant material on 'no false lemmas' (or vice versa) 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. Equally, students were asked to respond to one of Gettier's *original* counter examples, and it was therefore expected that students would respond to one of Gettier's examples from the anthology text underpinning the specficiation. Students who gave a different example could not be expected to be put into the top band as this did not demonstrate sufficient relevant knowledge. However, students who did not use one of Gettier's original counter examples (eg Henry in Barn County) could still access the 7-9 band if their chosen example was clearly explained, linked to the sufficiency issue and they explained how the addition of a 'no false lemmas' condition addressed the sufficiency issue: when done well, this demonstrated the skill of logical integration, which is a key requirement of the 7-9 band.

Where students performed well

The best answers were those that not only explained one of Gettier's counter examples but also explained that the counter examples aim to show that the conditions of the tripartite account are not jointly sufficient. This was often done by outlining the tripartite account although there was no requirement to do this in detail as long as students were able to address the sufficiency issue clearly and directly. Most students focused on the first counter example – Smith, Jones and the job interview - and the best answers precisely explained why Smith's belief that 'the person with 10 coins will get the job' is a justified, true belief that does not constitute knowledge. In particular, good responses explained why both of Smith's beliefs – that 'Jones will get the job' and 'Jones has 10 coins' are justified (ie by the boss telling Smith and by Smith counting, or seeing Jones count, the coins). There were some excellent answers that explained this by citing the two claims that Gettier outlines in his article – namely that a person can be justified in believing a proposition that is false and that the deduction from that proposition preserves justification. Having explained a Gettier counter example, successful student responses were then able to accurately identify the false lemmas in the respective cases (ie that 'Jones will get the job' or that 'Jones owns a Ford'). Counter example 2 – the Smith, Jones and Brown scenario – is a trickier case, but there were some very good answers that used that counter argument and some of the students who did so were able to explain the disjunctive nature of it very well. Some of the others who attempted counter example 2 were less successful and, as a result, their answers lacked the necessary detail and precision for the top level.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Students who performed less well did so for a number of reasons, some already outlined (ie by not giving an original Gettier counter example or by only explaining one part of the question). Other common weaknesses involved incorrect explanations of a Gettier case (eg that Smith is told by the boss that 'the person with 10 coins will get the job' or by getting muddled on example 2) or by not understanding what the false lemma was or, in some cases, what a lemma is. In other cases, some students drifted off into discussions of reliablism, which tended to happen if they had outlined Henry in Barn County rather than one of Gettier's original counter examples.

Question 5: Are the claims of philosophical scepticism true? (25 marks)

General Observations

This was the first of two questions on the paper designed to test both A01 and AO2, with the majority of marks for A02. The question centred on assessing philosophical scepticism, which is the main focus of the topic: 'The limits of knowledge' (3.1.4). Statistically, this was the hardest question on the paper to score marks on: students did not perform as well on this question as the corresponding 25 mark question on Moral Philosophy. The mean average was slightly lower than on the corresponding question in 2022 (just under 11), with slightly fewer students accessing the top range of marks (21-15). The most frequently accessed bands were 6-10 and 11-15.

Students took a range of approaches, answering in the affirmative, in the negative, and in more qualified and nuanced ways. Students mostly discussed the philosophers and arguments on the specification with Descartes, Locke, Russell and reliabilism featuring most prominently, although there were quite a few discussions of Berkeley and Hume, and, less frequently, Moore and Wittgenstein. A large number of students started off by distinguishing between philosophical scepticism and normal incredulity, before moving on to local and global scepticism. When done well, this was integrated into the overall argument (particularly when distinguishing between local and global scepticism) but, more often than not, students did not utilise this introductory material to advance or support their arguments and, in these cases, it was less effective. In the vast majority of answers, students made reference to Descartes' three waves of doubts, and many made references to the 'Brain in a vat' scenario and / or the veil of perception.

Where students performed well

Students that accessed the top bands did so through a careful balancing of objections and counter-responses 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. The very best answers offered a robust defence of the position they were advancing and often made clear reference to a crucial argument in the introduction before expanded on it later in their essay.

Some answers covered a lot of ground and did so very well, whereas other responses were shorter, more selective, but equally effective in constructing complete and coherent arguments with a careful balancing of positions. Some students went for breadth, dealing with the three waves of doubt fairly quickly so as to allow themselves time to fully engage in discussion and evaluation of a range of responses, including Descartes' intuition and deduction thesis (the cogito, arguments for God and his proof of the external world featured prominently), empiricist responses (from Locke, Trotter-Cockburn and Russell) and reliabilism. These responses looked at a range of critical issues to do with the cogito, the Cartesian Circle and Descartes' arguments for God, or in the case of empiricism, issues surrounding the involuntary nature of perception or the fact that such responses are probabilistic. Others took a different approach, for example by engaging in a detailed evaluation of each of the three waves of doubt, arguing that because none of them are effective, philosophical scepticism is not true. There were some good discussions of the evil demon argument and the extent to which this is a genuine hypothesis. Alternatively, a few students avoided Descartes' wave of doubt and came at the question by focusing on the veil of perception and various responses to it from different theories of perception and from Descartes.

The vast majority focused primarily on global scepticism but there were some very good responses that focused on local scepticism, or came to the conclusion that whilst global scepticism is unsustainable, various forms of local scepticism are more promising.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

hat distinguished lower-level responses from higher was the level of clarity, detail and precision of points raised, the depth of the arguments and counter-arguments provided and the coherence of the overall line of argument.

Common examples of weaknesses included students not clearly articulating scepticism as a philosophical problem and/or philosophical position, or simply dismissing it as too fanciful without giving any real reasons why, beyond asserting that it flew in the face of common sense or was impractical. Some answers focused on Descartes' proof of the existence of God but didn't tie it in to the problem of scepticism: the impact such arguments had on the question were thus unclear. Others focused on theories of perception as a solution to the problem of scepticism but this was at times ineffective because the arguments were not grounded in the issue of proving an external world exists. Russell's best hypothesis argument was often presented in quite basic terms and with a lack of detail, not really explaining why the hypothesis that there is an external world is the best hypothesis. A significant number of students cited Ockham's razor without really articulating the main point, which is to do with ontological and epistemic parsimony. Too many presented it in overly simplistic terms, along the lines that the simplest explanation, understood as the easiest or most convienent to accept, is the best.

At other times, students gave lengthy descriptions but failed to engage in any detailed evaluation: this involved 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. Too many of these essays ended up being a list of points – one after the other without integration and without development - trying to get lots of criticism in rather than really creating an argument. There are still a number of students asserting that a particular position was 'stronger' or 'weaker' without explanation and, similarly, too many stock uses of phrases such as 'this is a strong response' or 'this is a weak argument' without ever explaining why it is weak/strong with evidence / clear supporting reasons.

Question 6: What is the difference between moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism? (3 marks)

General Observations

This question tested students' knowledge and understanding (AO1) of the difference between the two moral realist theories referred to in the specification - 'Meta-ethics' (3.2.3). Students performed better at the very top end on this question than on question 1, with 54% of students achieving the maximum 3 marks compared to 44% on question 1. However, they performed less well overall, with 71% gaining 2 or above compared to 80% on question 1. This trend continued at the bottom end, where 16% of students were awarded a mark of 1 and, more significantly, 13% failed to gain any marks compared with only 3% on question 1. However, the vast majority of students (87%) were able to write something worthy of credit.

Where students performed well

To score full marks on this question, students were required to provide a clear and precise definition of each theory. Some of the best answers simply gave the specification definition of both moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism. Some students expressed explicitly the difference between the two, however, this was not a requirement as long as it was clear from their answer that they understood the difference through a clear and precise definition of both theories. A significant number of students took this latter approach and were awarded full marks. There are a number of examples listed in the indicative content of the mark scheme that illustrate both approaches. The full range of these responses was observed in student work, with the most common high-scoring responses explicitly focusing on the key issue of whether moral properties are natural or non-natural properties, or whether moral properties were reducible (to natural properties like happiness) or were irreducible (and sui generis).

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

There were a number of reasons why students failed to gain full marks. Similar to question 1, these ranged from only showing a clear understanding of one theory and a partial or imprecise understanding of the other (typical of 2 mark responses), or showing a partial and/or imprecise understanding of both theories (typical of 1 mark responses). Those that failed to gain any marks either showed no understanding of either theory or a very partial and/or imprecise understanding of one theory. In such cases, this meant that the student was unable to demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the difference between the theories. In some cases, students simply gave an example of one or both (eg utilitarianism and/or intuitionism) but without defining or explaining the theories. Examples are fine if the correct definition is given but alone they are insufficient. There are numerous examples listed in the indicative content of the mark scheme that exemplify these types of response.

Some common errors of understanding included students stating that one theory was a 'realist theory' and the other an 'anti-realist', or similarly that one was a 'cognitivist theory' and the other 'non-cognitivist'. The tendency was for students to have a better understanding of moral naturalism than moral non-naturalism.

Question 7: Explain the difference between Bentham's <u>quantitative</u> hedonistic utilitarianism and Mill's <u>qualitative</u> hedonistic utilitarianism. (5 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of the difference between two different versions of hedonistic utilitarianism from the 'Normative ethical theories' section of the specification (3.2.1). Students performed very well on this question and it was the joint best performing 5 mark question on the paper (the other being question 2 on Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities). Over three quarters of students managed to score at least 3 marks on this question, showing that they had grasped the substantive content of the difference between the two theories. In order to do this, they needed to explain that Benthan is concerned only with the quantity or amount of pleasure produced, whereas Mill is concerned with the quality or type of pleasure produced (expressed in terms of higher and lower pleasures). Just over 20% of students were awarded the maximum number of marks on this question and 33% were awarded 4, which meant that over half of the students this year scored 4 or above on this question. At the lower end, just under 14% were awarded 2, with 7% being awarded 1, and only 2% failing to pick up any marks.

Where students performed well

At the upper end of the performance scale, students who grasped the substantive content were then able to go on to give fuller, clearer and more precise accounts, which demonstrated a deeper understanding of the key difference between Bentham and Mill. This typically involved development of each of the philosophers' respective positions – eg that Bentham utilises the hedonic / felicifc calculus to enable us to calculate the amount of pleasure, and examples of higher and lower pleasures, sometimes with relevant quotes from Bentham and Mill that further illustrated the differences (eg pushpin and poetry, pigs and Socrates). These answers explicitly addressed that there is a morally important difference between types of pleasure for Mill but not for Bentham.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Responses that gained 2 marks lacked the substantive content, giving some relevant points but not precisely, and so not demonstrating a sufficient understanding of the difference between Bentham and Mill's versions of hedonic utilitarianism. Common errors occurred when students focused on rule utilitarianism rather than Mill's qualitative assessment, or explained the distinction between act and rule utilitarianism without explaining the quantitative and/or qualitative aspects.

Question 8: Explain Hare's prescriptivism. (5 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of Hare's moral anti-realist theory from the 'Meta Ethics' section of the specification (3.2.3). This was the worst performing 5 mark question on the paper with the mean average below the overall average for the paper. Low performance was especially evident on this item – more students did not even attempt to respond to this question than any other on the paper, and nearly 15% failied to score marks whether they attempted it or not. Almost 9% were abe to score a mark for some fragments of relevant material, with over 15% scorring 2 for a couple of clear points. Despite this, there were some excellent responses, and 61% of students managed to score at least 3 marks, showing that they had grasped the substantive content of the position in question. In order to do this, they needed to address the non-cognitive features of Hare's theory as well as the prescriptive dimension. At the top end, just under 10% of students were awarded the maximum number of marks and 20% were awarded 4 marks.

Where students performed well

At the upper end of the performance scale, students who grasped the substantive content were then able to go further and give fuller, clearer and more precise accounts, which demonstrated a deeper understanding of Hare's meta-ethical position. This typically involved students explaining the distinction between commanding and commending, that there is a logical relation between moral judgments, and that moral prescriptions are universalisable.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Responses that gained 2 marks lacked the substantive content, giving some relevant points but not precisely, and so not demonstrating sufficient understanding of the essential character of Hare's prescriptivism. For example, some students knew that Hare was an anti-realist and non-cognitivist but said nothing about the prescriptive dimensions of his theory. Other common errors included students mixing up key terms and theories (eg claiming that Hare was 'a cognitivist, anti-realist'), straightforwardly confusing Hare with Ayer, or, in a few instances, using material from the Metaphysics of God (eg there were referenes to 'bliks').

Question 9: Explain how Kant's deontological approach to ethics might be applied to the issue of stealing. (12 marks)

General Observations

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of how a key normative ethical theory might be applied to the issue of stealing from the 'Applied ethics' section of the specification (3.2.2). The question was well answered, with the mean average mark being above the overall average for the paper. As with question 4 on the Epistemology component, there was a significant improvement in comparison to the corresponding 12 mark Moral Philosophy question on the 2022 paper, although students did not perform quite as well on this 12 mark question as the Epistemology question. Over two thirds of students scored a mark of 7 or higher, with approximately 33% of students scoring a mark in the top level. Just under 18% of students attained a mark in the 4-6 band, whilst at the bottom end, 7% of students scored a mark of 3 or lower.

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 explained Kant's deontological position but did not clearly address how his approach might apply to the issue of stealing 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. In reality, however, where students demonstrated good knowledge and understanding of Kant's deontological approach, integration with the issue of stealing was pretty much a given for this question.

Where students performed well

Most students tended to apply both the first and second formulations of the categorical imperative to the issue (with a few also making reference to the 'Kingdom of Ends' formulation) although there was no requirement to do so and some students managed to get into the top level by giving very clear, detailed and precise explanations of how the first formulation could be used to provide a response to the issue of stealing. Some students gave detailed accounts of Kant's deontological approach first and then proceeded to apply this approach to the issue, whereas other students got straight down to the task of applying Kant's approach to the issue where they were able to demonstrate their understanding and to tease out the salient features through their application. Both approaches were perfectly acceptable and awarded marks accordingly.

Answers in the top band used Kantian terminology very precisely and set out the logic of Kant's approach in precise detail. Students tended to say more about the first formulation and how the contradiction in conception entails a perfect duty not to steal, but there were also some very good explanations of the humanity formula, rationality and autonomy.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Those who performed less well did so for a number of reasons. Some of these included a lack of clarity and/or detail in their responses, eg by giving confused accounts of Kant (eg by claiming that stealing 'passes the first formulation but not the second', or that 'it doesn't lead to a contradiction in conception but does lead to a contradiction in will'), blurring Kant's approach with other normative approaches (eg consequentialism), or by including irrelevant material alongside insufficient relevant material (eg criticisms of Kant's approach or lengthy discussions of stealing but very little on Kant).

Question 10: To what extent can Aristotelian virtue ethics be defended? (25 marks)

General Observations

This was the second of two questions on the paper designed to test both AO1 and AO2, but mainly A02. The question centred on assessing the extent to which Aristotelian virtue ethics - one of three main theories from the topic ‘Normative ethical theories’ (3.1.2) - can be defended. With students on average picking up around 44% of the available marks on this question, it was the best performing 25 mark question but the second lowest-scoring question on the paper overall – second only to question 5. However, the mean average was higher than on the corresponding question in 2022, with more students accessing the top range of marks (21-15). The most commonly awarded marks were 12 and 13, and the most frequently accessed band was 11-15. Just under 12% gained 5 marks or less. Just under 3% picked up no marks or did not attempt the question.

Unlike question 5, which invited students to draw from a broader palette of material and so to construct a more varied set of responses, answers to this question were quite similar in structure and involved students working through the main objections and defences. Students tended to take one of two approaches, either answering in the affirmative or in the negative. Very few went for a more nuanced approach. All approaches were equally credit worthy as long as students provided justification for their conclusions.

A large number of students started off by explaining Aristotle’s virtue ethics and some answers gave very lengthy descriptions. As such, it took some students a long time to get down to their evaluation (which in some cases never happened or was very brief). This was to the detriment of the answer if the student did not utilise this material later in their essay – eg by referring back to it in their evaluation when presenting defences against objections. Better responses did do this. However, the best responses tended to start off with either a very brief account of the theory, or none at all, before considering objections right from the off and then bringing out the key details of Aristotle’s virtue ethics in their evaluation when defending the theory against objections. As is to be expected, the vast majority of students stuck to the main objections from the specification – circularity, no clear guidance and the relationship between virtues and eudaimonia – and illustrated these with many of the same examples - the ‘unfortunate nurse’, the ‘merciful judge’ and the omnipresent ‘mad axeman’. The function argument featured prominently and was presented with varying degrees of success, as was the doctrine of the mean. As stated above, better responses integrated these into their evaluation rather than treating them purely descriptively.

Where students performed well

Students who accessed the top two bands did so through a careful balancing of objections and defences leading to well-supported judgments throughout and overall. These responses sustained a clear and coherent line of argument and explicitly attributed appropriate weight to arguments being considered. The very best answers offered a robust defence of the position they were advancing and often made clear reference to a crucial argument in the introduction and then expanded on it in their conclusion. As mentioned above, better answers went straight into their evaluation once they had stated their intent and analysed key concepts as part of their evaluation of the theory. Some very strong answers referred to Julia Annas and Rosalind Hursthouse’s responses to key criticisms. Some students effectively discussed the strengths and weaknesses in relation to other normative theories but were very careful not to juxtapose, stray into irrelevance or get bogged down in a general discussion of the other theories (which was often the opposite with answers in the lower bands). Some students used meta ethics in their response to good effect, eg arguing that virtue ethics failed because naturalism fails, or alternatively defending virtue ethics against similar objections.

Common / noteworthy weaknesses in student responses

Where students scored marks in the bottom level they tended to produce either very short responses with substantial gaps in the content, or a longer response that had very little/no evaluation, no clear line of argument and/or where there was serious misunderstanding. Responses that scored in the 6-10 band tended to have a generally sound degree of knowledge and understanding (often through lengthy descriptions of the theory) and raised some relevant critical points in a mostly coherent structure, but often these were typified by a lack of detail and precision in the points raised, as well as limited meaningful engagement with the issues. Weaker answers also tended to juxtapose criticisms rather than critically engaging with them and so the logical linking between objections and defences was not always clear.

In some cases, it seemed that essays had been learnt by rote, rehearsing the same set of examples but without really explaining how they illustrated the point they were making and without evaluating the example. Sometimes the examples students used were not well suited to the point they were trying to make. In contrast to those essays that scored in the higher bands and which made effective references to other normative ethical theories, students who scored in the lower bands who tried to utilise Kant and utilitarianism to criticise Aristotle often incorporated far too much description of these theories rather than using them to specifically demonstrate a critical point.

As with question 5, some essays ended up being a list of points – one after the other without integration and without development. Also, there are still a number of students asserting that a particular objection or defence was ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ without explanation and too many stock uses of phrases such as ‘this is a strong response’ or ‘this is a weak argument’ without ever explaining why it is weak/strong with evidence / clear supporting reasons.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results Statistics page of the AQA Website.