AS

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Component 1: Philosophy of religion and ethics
Report on the Examination

7061
June 2017

Version: 1.0

General comments

Schools and colleges have done very well in getting to grips with the demands of the new specification. Performance across all the questions was similar, with a number of students obtaining maximum marks on the paper. Very few students suffered from timing issues, with most completing all eight questions in similar detail.

There are a few key points to take note of where appropriate:

- Performance across the two sections of the paper was not always even; some students performed significantly better on philosophy, others on ethics.

- Some students included irrelevant material in their answers, and examples are given in the comments on individual questions. In particular, many included statements of intent at the beginning of every essay; and in a few cases these accounted for a quarter or more of the essay. Statements of intent gain no credit and in effect are a self-imposed penalty in terms of time. This was particularly the case in AO2 questions, where the statement often included (i) a repetition of the question wording; (ii) a commitment that various points would be included in the answer; and (iii) an assurance that the student would reach a conclusion.

- Students should bear in mind that in order to reach a mark of more than Level 2, 6 marks, an AO2 response must show "different points of view" concerning the statement to be discussed. There were some well-written answers to all of the questions but where students limited their achievement in this way.

- There was some evidence of students revising a narrow proportion of the specification in the hope that preferred questions would come up. Some articulate and knowledgeable students gave no answer to one or more of the questions, which affected their total mark for this paper.

Question 01

01. 1 Explain the approach to proving the existence of God taken by Anselm's ontological argument.

The key word here is 'approach'. The ontological argument is a logical approach: it is deductive / a priori – aiming to prove that the claim that God exists is analytic – true by definition. It is an 'armchair' argument, meaning that you could sit in an armchair and argue logically to the existence of God without the use of any sense experience. Weaker responses tended to confuse deductive and inductive, a priori and a posteriori, analytic and synthetic (and, occasionally, contingent and necessary).

Most students handled the main arguments well, dealing with the two main strands of Anselm's thought. Anselm defines God as 'that than which none greater (more perfect) can be conceived'. Once this definition is understood, then (the argument goes) no doubt remains as to God's existence: it is greater to exist in reality than in the mind alone, so God must exist in reality. Most backed up this part of the argument using Anselm's further claim that where all things have contingent existence, God's existence is necessary.

Some students did more than the question asked, and gave versions of the argument from Descartes, Malcolm and Plantinga, for example, none of which were relevant. Equally, some described objections to Anselm from Hume, Kant and others, but none of this material was relevant either.

01.2 'The design argument proves the existence of God.' Assess this view.

One impressive feature of many answers was that most students dealt specifically with the issue of what constitutes a 'proof', with many making the good point that the design argument is inductive, and inductive arguments deal in probability rather than deductive proof.

To counterbalance that, most students spent at least half of their time writing out Paley's design argument and Hume's objections to design arguments, and most of this material was AO1 where the question is AO2. The question asks, 'Does the design argument prove God's existence?', and that means analysing the argument rather than explaining it. Repeating parts of the argument is useful only in order to use them as a springboard for analysis and evaluation. Doing anything else is not an effective use of the examination time.

Since the question refers just to 'the design argument', students had the option to refer to any version or versions of it, and some made particularly good use of Swinburne's version, pointing out that it avoids most of the difficulties with Paley's argument, not least in the way in which it deals with evolution and the attack on the argument from Dawkins.

Question 02

02.1 Explain the free will defence.

For some reason, many students did not arrive at an explanation of the free will defence until three-quarters of the way through their essays, with the result that most of what was written up to this point often addressed a number of questions that had little to do with the free will defence; hence some confined their answers to a discussion of libertarianism, determinism and compatibilism. With questions as specific as this, beginning with an accurate definition is a good approach, since what follows then addresses the question.

The free will defence argues that God is justified in allowing evil to exist in the world because this preserves genuine free will, and that free will is worthwhile because it allows humanity to develop into moral and spiritual beings capable of a relationship with God. At the same time, God is 'defended' by being absolved of blame for not removing evil from the world. Many students knew what the argument said, but not so many knew why it is used.

Most referred to one or more theodicies: mainly Hick, but also Plantinga and Mackie. Mackie's explanation of the free will defence was often accepted as an adequate justification of God.

02.2 'Natural evil is a greater challenge to faith in God than moral evil.' Assess this view.

Nearly all students made the valid point that whereas the free will defence goes a long way towards explaining why God allows moral evil to go unpunished, natural evil is outside human control, so there is no obvious reason why an omnipotent God does not eliminate it.

The quality of responses really hinged on whether or not students could think of arguments that might go some way towards justifying God in not getting rid of natural evils such as: epidemic

diseases, hurricanes, tidal waves and the like. Without some such argument, students could only agree with the statement given in the question. Students should make careful note of the Levels Descriptors, since Level 3 requires "Different points of view". Without those different points of view, no answer can reach more than Level 2, 6 marks.

Students who had got to grips with Process Theology had a simple and powerful justification for God allowing natural evil, namely that the Process God is not omnipotent and is not the Creator, so God's ability to control natural evil is limited in the extreme. The question of whether or not the Process view is correct led some students into a lengthy defence of the omnipotent God of Christian theism, which generally went off the point of the question. Students can demonstrate awareness of different arguments and acknowledge their persuasive power without needing to subscribe to any of them.

Question 03

03.1 Explain the approach to moral decision making by situation ethics. Your answer must be illustrated with reference to theft.

Students should take note that where questions have two parts, both parts must be addressed. For students who answered only one part, the maximum mark available would have been Level 3. Some did in fact give a very detailed explanation of the approach of situation ethics, but got so carried away that the second part of the question was not addressed.

In situation ethics, the key word is 'situation', where any moral decision depends precisely on the situation concerned. Some students ignored this and laid down a blanket rule that situation ethics would always disapprove of theft. Most, however, had a good understanding of the situational approach being underpinned by its four presuppositions and six principles. Some knew and applied Fletcher's methodology of asking (i) What **end** do we seek? (ii) What **means** do we use to obtain it? (iii) What **motive** is behind our act? and (iv) What are the foreseeable **consequences**? – and this was used to good effect with reference to theft. Most used the example of theft being the means of feeding a starving family.

A few students confused situation ethics either with act utilitarianism or with virtue ethics.

03.2 'Situation ethics cannot approve of the use of non-human animals for food.' Assess this view.

Some argued that in situation ethics, no acts are intrinsically right or wrong, so depending on the situation, eating meat of any kind cannot be intrinsically wrong.

Much of the discussion centred on the implications of **personalism**, which were generally held to show that the needs of persons override those of non-human animals, although there was much debate about where the line should be drawn. Some argued that **agape** leads us to conclude that it is not loving to kill an animal where it is not necessary to do so, whereas for others, ideas about stewardship tended to make this nothing more than a personal preference.

Most referred to the cruelties of factory farming, and argued that where animals have been mistreated, there can be no justification for the final indignity of eating them. Quite reasonably, the general conclusion was that it depends on the situation, so the word 'cannot' in the question goes against the situational basis of the theory.

Weaker responses tended to focus on what the Bible says, which is not particularly symptomatic of the approach of situation ethics. The strongest answers, as in all other AO2 questions, were those which analysed and evaluated a number of responses, using them to reach a preferred conclusion which could be seen to come out of the reasoning.

Question 04

04.1 Explain how virtue ethics may be applied to the issue of assisted suicide.

Quite a number appeared not to read the question with sufficient care, and so spent at least half their time explaining virtue ethics in detail, which was not what the question asked for. Reference needs to be made to what the theory says, but this would be in order to show how various parts of the theory apply to assisted suicide. As noted earlier, there was some confusion between virtue ethics and situation ethics, with quite a few students referring to 'the most loving' action in the situation.

The question gave students the option of using only Aristotelian virtue ethics or of including more recent accounts of the theory. In practice, the majority stuck to Aristotle. The weakest responses tended to discuss the issue of assisted suicide as a general ethical issue, often describing Aristotle as a good Christian, or as following God's rules (including the Bible).

The best answers considered which Aristotelian (or other) virtues were most applicable to the case of assisted suicide: the general consensus opting for courage and compassion, contrasted with their respective vices, although some made useful comments about the ambition of doctors, and about justice for the person wanting assisted suicide.

04.2 'From the perspective of natural moral law, abortion is always wrong.' Assess this view.

The crucial phrase here is: 'From the perspective of natural moral law', and some responses appeared to ignore this, giving instead a general monologue concerning the supposed rights and wrongs of abortion. The majority, however, dealt with the whole question, and nearly all responses made good use of the relevant primary and secondary precepts.

Most responses referred to the principle of double effect, although quite a number were unsure how the principle applies. Even less secure were responses involving proportionalism, which was used to justify abortion for just about any reason.

The weakest responses tended simply to cite scriptural verses as opposed to engaging with natural moral law, although there were comparatively few such answers.

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.