

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/01 Summer 2023 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate answers is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from OCR.

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Paper 1 series overview

The Philosophy of Religion paper assesses AO1 knowledge and understanding (40% of the marks available) and AO2 analysis and evaluation (60% of marks).

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embedded the evaluation throughout the essay, using the material as a vehicle for discussion • focused directly on the question rather than more general issues raised by the topic • outlined what was going to be argued at the beginning of the essay with a hypothesis and reasons, and developed this through the essay • carefully selected relevant material rather than all material around the topic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wrote everything they knew from a section of the specification without tailoring it to the question being asked • presented a confusion of philosophical ideas • evaluated by juxtaposition of different views, rather than developing reasons why one was stronger or weaker.

General comments

The questions were more specific in nature this session and pre-prepared responses were less successful because of this. Most candidates were able to write three full-length essays without much difficulty. Sometimes timing or knowledge issues were evident as a few candidates only answered one or two questions instead of three. An absence of planning at the start of essays was noticeable; some responses would have benefitted from this before writing.

Overall summary

Candidates performed well on Question 4 as they were able to apply a breadth and/or depth approach to various approaches to natural evil. There were some excellent responses to Questions 2, 3 and 1, but Question 1 was the least popular. In general, successful responses were able to focus on the question set throughout the essay rather than shifting the attention towards the general topic during explanation or analysis. This was noticeable in all the questions answered.

Where candidates were less successful in Questions 1, 2, 3 and 4 it was due to a lack of developed explanations of the ideas being presented, sometimes including misconceptions of the subject matter. On occasions, there was a tendency towards underdeveloped explanations leading to analysis that could have benefitted from a firmer grasp of the details being assessed. AO1 marks are given for the quality of the explanation of ideas. This becomes difficult if the development is only found in parentheses.

Question 1*

1* Evaluate the verification principle.

[40]

This question saw a real mixture of responses. Some excellent responses concisely and accurately examined the role and application of the verification principle and its significance to the religious language debate. Stronger responses were able to explain the role of cognitive/non-cognitive language and gave clear explanations of why only synthetic and analytic statements can be meaningful to the Logical Positivists. Many successfully explained the problems of strong verification and hence the need for weak verification. The most effective responses demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the verification principle. They were able to differentiate between the development of the Vienna Circle and the work of Ayer, and in turn between different aspects of Ayer's thought.

Less effective responses juxtaposed the whole movement as one homogenous mass and focused only on one formulation of the principle, or the idea of empirical verification. Some candidates spent more time writing about falsification, possibly intending to do as a contrast, yet with little to no direct evaluation being made.

At times the analysis of the debate focused too generally on religious language. Many students wrote about everything they knew for religious language without really linking it to the evaluation of the verification principle as asked by the question. One third of this paper centres around the discussion of language and writing without focus on the question set did not allow responses to achieve marks in the higher levels. Weaker responses presented a variety of language theories and made some or no direct comparisons between them. There was some effective use of Popper's view of falsification in science to contrast but sometimes asserted rather than developed. Many responses included Hick's eschatological verification, but some didn't consider if this was successful or not.

The most effective responses combined a detailed knowledge of the principle with a recognition of the debate surrounding it. They were able to show how developments within the debate correspond to previous critiques and to comment insightfully as to whether issues with the previous iterations have been successfully resolved. There were some excellent responses that looked at how the term 'meaningful' was used in the verification principle and how this didn't necessarily correlate as factually significant. These responses discussed how the verification principle could be seen as adhering to scientific imperialism, and that religious language sits with other forms of language (e.g., emotions, ethics & aesthetics) that are meaningful but not necessarily captured in empirical fact.

Misconception



The verification principle is more than a debate about 'meaning'. It stresses whether statements should be considered by the scientific community as 'factually significant' and so worth of scientific enquiry.

Exemplar 1

Ayer's main argument is based on a development of the logical positivist movement in the 1930s Vienna circle, originally asking how much we can say about God, if anything at all. Ayer goes on to claim that there are only two types of meaningful or factually significant and verifiable statements. A priori statements and tautologies - things that are true by definition - and empirically verifiable statements that can be tested and proven. He claims that if a statement cannot be 'proven' - then it is essentially 'meaningless' as it is non-cognitive and does not reflect a true or false statement about the world. He argues that statements outside of these two sentence types are not even worth discussing as there is no point of argument - this clearly leads into religious language as these arguably do not reflect a truth about the world that can be verifiably proven. Someone such as Sagan would support Ayer's views as he ~~has~~ claimed that any statement that cannot be tested is 'veridically worthless' - arguing further that there is ~~little~~^{no} point to statements with no factual value or significance. Ayer ~~is~~ further expands on his theory by

Exemplar 1 is an example of a response that scored full marks. This exemplar illustrates how the candidate was able to show accurate use of technical terms present in the verification debate. The inclusion of the term 'factually significant' shows excellent understanding as the response uses the language Ayer himself uses. The brief extract of the Exemplar also shows development of the ideas being discussed rather than a short sentence. Marks are given for the quality of explanation rather than mentioning key ideas without development.

Question 2*

2* Critically assess the views of William James about religious experience.

[40]

Many responses were able to explain James' four characteristics of a mystical experience, although these are not always well applied when trying to explain them. The most effective responses were able to move beyond parentheses when writing about these. Others demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the multi-faceted nature of James' ideas about religious experience. Concepts such as pluralism and pragmatism were explored meaningfully. Likewise, knowledge of James' characteristics of mystical experience were used as a prompt for further debate rather than as an end to themselves.

A notable proportion of responses did not address specifically James' views but wrote about religious experiences in a more general sense and showed little direct knowledge of James' views. Some responses applied this information to specific examples which helped them to develop their AO2, but weaker ones just described and listed various examples of religious experiences. Several responses focused on corporate religious experiences as a juxtaposition even though James does not address these.

Due to some of the confusion mentioned above this led to some less effective analysis of James' thought. More effective responses considered how complete or effective an explanation of religious experience James offers. Some good evaluation involved looking at each of James' four characteristics of a mystical experience and applying them to examples of famous experiences to critique how effective they are.

Many candidates across the levels of response identified the contrasting view of religious experience as having a psychological explanation, including the views of Dawkins, Freud and Persinger. Better responses explored how these approaches could account for some of James' points. Weaker responses didn't show understanding of James' psychological starting point and thus were unable to make nuanced points about the differences. A few excellent responses were able to critically assess that James did not view the faulty mind argument as a successful challenge and his view that the drunken consciousness is part of the mystical consciousness.

Overall, if the candidate didn't have detailed knowledge of James' view, they were unable to access higher levels as direct evaluation of James was lacking in favour of more general topic points.

Misconception



James' classifications of religious experience apply to mystical experiences rather than all religious experiences. James did **not** comment on the Toronto Blessings or corporate religious experiences. There was some confusion as to the purpose of James' writing – James did not write with an evangelistic purpose as evidenced by his pragmatism.

Assessment for learning



William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is available as a free PDF. You can use the 'ctrl' + 'f' function to find specific parts of the text to be used as gobbets or to find sections quickly.

Exemplar 2

William James' criteria for religious experiences begins with the notion that they must be ineffable - cannot be adequately expressed through language alone. ~~Thus~~ Thus may appear valid given God is metaphysical and therefore human flawed reason cannot adequately describe God's actions. Otto argues that humans are material and are therefore naturally unable to explain or understand the immaterial so should not attempt to do so, thus "ineffability stands". James' approach here is similar to the concept "via negativa"

in which humans can only express God through what He is not; stepping into Pseudo Dionysius' "cloud of unknowing" and thus the epistemic and ineffable nature of God is a widely accepted Christian view. Yet, the Bible does describe religious experiences and thus James is wrong in his criteria. Through the Bible, we are told of Paul's conversion to Christianity, Jesus reappearing to his disciples and stories of many other religious experiences. Arguably, religious experiences are

Exemplar 2 is an example of a response that scored full marks. It illustrates how the candidate was able to use one of William James' criteria for mystical experience and critically engage with the idea being raised. There is clear development of understanding and a judgement about how successful the concept of ineffability is. In contrast, where responses simply listed the characteristics, with little development, they were not able to reach the highest marks in the levels of response.

Question 3*

3* 'Descartes offers a coherent solution to the mind/soul and body problem.' Discuss.

[40]

The most successful responses included detailed knowledge of how Descartes arrived at this view in reference to divisibility, conceivability, hyperbolic doubt and an application of Leibniz's Law. In turn the relationship to other perspectives including from Plato, Aristotle or Dawkins were explained carefully and purposefully. The ubiquitous quote of 'I think therefore I am' was used by most students, but not always explained as to the relevance for the question.

Some responses showed more knowledge of Plato and Aristotle rather than Descartes, and there was a tendency of some more general description of Plato's views beyond the soul in a way that did not support Descartes' views. There was some confusion between general viewpoints illustrating a superficial knowledge of Descartes'.

Some excellent responses considered carefully what a 'coherent solution' to the mind/soul and body problem would entail and were able to consider whether this would mean satisfying the demands of science, philosophy or both. Gilbert Ryle's 'ghost in the machine' was used by many students to explain the criticism made of Descartes that he was making a category error. Dawkins and Aristotle were used as an alternative view to Cartesian dualism. This was done best when in evaluation of Descartes rather than just presenting an alternative view of the soul/mind and body. There were some students that showed an extended approach of the views of the metaphysics of mind and contemporary understanding of physicalist explanations.

Less effective responses coupled a general approach to AO1 with a superficial analysis of the success or otherwise of viewpoints.

Assessment for learning



Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* is available as a free PDF online for students or teachers who enjoy getting to grips with the primary source. Meditations One and Five are of particular interest for this section of the specification. They are short and easy to read.

Misconception



Although Leibniz's Law applies to Cartesian thought, Descartes wasn't making use of Leibniz's work. Leibniz was born three years before Descartes' death. It is helpful to know the chronology of philosophers and philosophical ideas in order to avoid misconceptions.

Exemplar 3

Descartes was a substance dualist, arguing that the corruptible and corporeal physical body is far less great and ~~inferior~~^{inferior} to the incorruptible-indivisible and incorporeal mind. He uses this basis to form his approach to the mind and body problem, ultimately arguing that we must reject all that is physical. The phenomenological and sensory world which often deceives us, and tricks the mind. He believes that hyperbolic doubt should be used ~~then~~ in relation to our sensory experience - there is no way of being certain of our senses, and they should be constantly questioned, as they ~~can~~^{can} deceive us. For example in our dreams when we may believe something is real only to find it was imaginary. He claims that the only thing we ~~to~~ can know ~~of~~ absolutely is that we are alive - 'cogito ergo sum', or 'I think therefore I am' summarises his belief that as we can know we are thinking, this therefore proves we are alive. Plato would agree with Descartes' theory of hyperbolic doubt as he ultimately believed that matter is evil - and the soul must pre-exist all matter and physical embodiment as it is simple-indivisible and rational compared to the corporeal weaknesses of the body.

Exemplar 3 is an example of a response that scored full marks. It illustrates how important it is to develop the knowledge and understanding being discussed. The detail flows coherently rather than being presented in a list or superficial form. In contrast, where responses simply listed Descartes' ideas with little development, they were not able to reach the highest marks in the levels of response.

Question 4*

4* 'Natural evil has no purpose.' Discuss.

[40]

The breadth of this particular question led to a range of approaches that could be successful. The use of theodicies such as Augustine, Irenaeus and Hick provided a good basis for many to consider the ways in which these approaches seek to find a purpose for natural evil. The use of Rowe or Mill, with a particular focus on the view that natural evil has **no** purpose, proved very effective for some. Students were also able to outline the logical problem of evil coherently, but fewer students were able to adequately outline the evidential problem of evil clearly. In many cases Augustine's theodicy was used in defence of God, with a clear understanding of The Fall and evil as a punishment for sin. Some responses showed understanding of evil as a *privatio boni* or absence of good. While many were able to clearly explain Hick's theodicy of soul-making, few could clearly explain the relevance of epistemic distance. Better responses referred throughout to 'natural' and 'purpose' and this allowed a closer focus on the question.

Less effective responses sought to give a superficial overview of The Problem of Evil topic with only a passing regard for the question. There was a tendency among some candidates to explain possible purposes of moral evil without a comparison to natural evil, and some responses seemed to confuse the two. A small number of responses answered that a possible purpose of natural evil was to prove that God didn't exist at all. This seemed to be a confusion of Hick's development that the experience of natural evil is to ensure a genuine belief, however either this was misunderstood or poorly explained.

Successful responses focused on the range of issues posed by the different theodicies and their specific defence of natural evil. They also evaluated the nuances of the theodicies and highlighted that even though natural evil may have a purpose it is still not justified. The very best responses created a coherent overall response to the question, with argument running through the piece as a golden thread.

Less successful responses tended to fall back on the use of the inconsistent triad and a more general answer that evil may show God doesn't exist, which didn't directly answer the question. In a similar vein, there was some superficial analysis considering broadly whether theodicies are successful or not rather than answering the question posed.

Misconception



The logical problem of evil's inconsistent triad does not include the attribute of omniscience. It is omnipotence, omnibenevolence and evil in its traditional formulation.

Assessment for learning



A development of the logical approach can be found in the excellent introduction of the Adams and Adams work ***The Problem of Evil (Oxford Readings in Philosophy)***. This presents a more philosophically robust exposition of the traditional logical problem of evil in the form of the inconsistent quintet. This is on page 1-2 and is viewable through Amazon's 'Look inside' feature.

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