



Course report 2019

Subject	Philosophy
Level	Higher

This report provides information on candidates' performance. Teachers, lecturers and assessors may find it useful when preparing candidates for future assessment. The report is intended to be constructive and informative and to promote better understanding. It would be helpful to read this report in conjunction with the published assessment documents and marking instructions.

The statistics used in this report have been compiled before the completion of any post-results services.

Section 1: comments on the assessment

Question paper 1

The question paper performed in line with expectations. The essay questions allowed differentiation by outcome and this was reflected in the spread of marks achieved by candidates.

The marking for essays was holistic and took into consideration the candidates' knowledge and understanding of the content, as well as their skills of analysis and evaluation. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers suggested the essay questions were fair and appropriately demanding. The introduction of scaffolding in the questions helped candidates to identify the course content they were being assessed on. This allowed them to show their skills and knowledge in response to the questions asked.

Question paper 2

The question paper largely performed as expected. Feedback from the marking team and teachers and lecturers indicated it was positively received by centres, and was fair and accessible for candidates. The majority of candidates understood what was required, and completed the three required sections in the allocated time.

In the arguments in action section, three questions were deemed to be more difficult than expected for a variety of reasons, making these marks hard to access for most candidates. These difficulties were thought to affect all candidates equally and so the grade boundaries for A-C were all reduced to take this into account.

Section 2: comments on candidate performance

Areas that candidates performed well in

Question paper 1

Candidates performed best in question 3 which was the Kant quotation essay. The average mark for this question was higher than the average mark for question 2. The two essays were considered to be of similar difficulty and so the reason for this difference is not clear. In both essays, candidates were good at describing the general principles of Kant's philosophy. They usually showed a strong understanding of the second formulation of the categorical imperative. They were somewhat able to apply the theory to moral issues and, in general, could provide description of some common criticisms.

In question 1, the Hume essay, candidates were usually able to provide a clear description of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas. They often described the distinction between internal and external impressions and the four processes of the imagination identified by Hume. Candidates usually made good use of Hume's examples, as well as their own original ones. Candidates also showed knowledge of the distinction between simple and complex ideas, but did not often show knowledge that this distinction also applied to impressions. Candidates generally showed good knowledge and understanding of the 'missing shade of blue' counter-example. However, they were not always able to articulate why it was problematic for Hume.

Question paper 2

Section 1: arguments in action

Question 1(a) and (b): question 1(a) on distinguishing arguments from statements was very straightforward and most candidates gained this mark. Most candidates gained the mark for identifying the statement in question 1(b).

Question 2(a): most candidates were able to identify why a premise was deemed to be acceptable in the argument presented.

Question 4: most candidates achieved full marks for this question on argument diagrams. They showed the ability to take a simple ordinary language argument and put it into diagrammatic form. Most candidates were able to identify premises and the conclusion, provide an appropriate key for their argument diagram, and represent the argument in the most appropriate form of diagram.

Section 2: knowledge and doubt

Question 11: most candidates achieved the 2 marks available for explaining clearly why Descartes considered the *cogito* to be a certain truth.

Section 3: moral philosophy

Question 15: most candidates were able to explain the meaning of higher and lower pleasures as described by Mill.

Areas that candidates found demanding

Question paper 1

Across the essays, candidates were less good at showing their skills of analysis and evaluation than their knowledge and understanding of the philosophical theories studied.

Question 1

This essay focused on section II of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Candidates found it difficult to explain the implications of Hume's empiricist philosophy. They could present criticisms or challenges to his theory in a superficial way, but many were not able to explain clearly why they challenged his philosophy, or to make a personal judgement about these criticisms and how they affected his theory. In general, essays that achieved marks in the highest mark range were the most successful at doing this.

Questions 2 and 3

Candidates performed least well in essay question 2, the Kantian ethics scenario question. To fully answer the question, candidates had to apply Kantian ethics to the situation and many candidates struggled to do this successfully. In both questions 2 and 3, most candidates showed understanding of the absolute nature of Kantian ethics and could articulate some of the foundations of the theory, including the sovereignty of reason and the good will. They often showed knowledge of the first two formulations of the categorical imperative but many did not demonstrate a full grasp of the first formulation, or how it should be applied in moral decision making. In particular, candidates struggled to demonstrate how the 'contradiction in conception' and 'contradiction in the will' related to the formulation of perfect duties and imperfect duties according to Kant. In question 2, if the candidate had not managed to apply Kantian ethics correctly to the scenario, it often meant evaluation of the theory was inappropriate or superficial.

Question paper 2

Section 1: arguments in action

Question 6(b) proved more challenging than expected. Very few candidates answered the question and so very few gained the 2 marks available. The question asked how ambiguity in a premise affects an argument. Instead of answering this question, the majority of candidates simply explained the ambiguity of the claim 'the lamb is ready to eat', which was the answer to question 6(a).

Question 7(a) and (b): very few candidates got the full 2 marks for either of these questions. Many candidates were not precise enough in their explanation of confirmation bias and seemed to describe a kind of general bias without explaining how this impacts the way a person with confirmation bias looks at information. Candidates who understood aspects of the bias often explained only one aspect, for example that people with confirmation bias seek information to support their current viewpoint. They did not mention that it also involves ignoring relevant information that goes against the person's current viewpoint, or vice versa. This meant such candidates only gained 1 of the 2 available marks.

Centres should encourage candidates to give full definitions or explanations of the concepts asked about, and to be aware of the marks available for a question.

Question 8(a) and (b) and question 10 required candidates to explain two different kinds of argument forms — appeals to emotion and attacking the person. In question 8, the focus was on fallacious appeals to emotion, while question 10 focused on non-fallacious *ad hominem*s. Description of these kinds of argument requires a degree of precision in the definitions and explanation. Candidates found this challenging.

Question 8(b) was done better than question 8(a), although it still proved difficult for many. This suggests that some candidates understood how this type of argument worked and could explain it in relation to an example, while not being precise enough in their definition.

Section 2: knowledge and doubt

This section required candidates to show a close knowledge and understanding of Descartes' *Meditations*. Candidates found questions 12–14 difficult. They were required to show knowledge of 'clear and distinct perceptions', as well as the reasoning that Descartes went through to come to his claim that 'whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true'. This was expected to be challenging and, as expected, only a minority of candidates achieved full marks across questions 12–14.

Section 3: moral philosophy

This section focused on a specific area of knowledge and understanding. To achieve full marks, candidates were required to understand the finer details in relation to the concepts of higher and lower pleasures.

Most candidates clearly knew the difference between higher and lower pleasures, and could demonstrate some knowledge of Mill's discussion in relation to them. However, only a minority could explain Mill's reasons for distinguishing between higher and lower pleasures.

In question 17, a common error for candidates was to suggest that higher pleasures created a greater quantity of pleasure, rather than recognising that it is the quality of pleasure that differs.

Question 18 required candidates to engage critically with an evaluative point about Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures. This was expected to be difficult. Many candidates were able to make some appropriate evaluative comments but struggled to develop these or find other relevant points to gain the full 3 marks available.

Section 3: preparing candidates for future assessment

As always, it is important to ensure familiarity with the most up-to-date advice and documentation. The course specification document was updated extensively and published on SQA's website in September 2018. It contains considerable advice to centres on preparing candidates for each section of the course. Appendices include information on the types of questions that might be asked, helpful textbooks and the mandatory text extracts. There are also some non-mandatory text extracts that teachers and lecturers may find helpful in giving candidates a greater depth of understanding. Teachers and lecturers can use their discretion to judge which resources will be most useful to prepare their own candidates. Further support can be found in the course support section of the Higher Philosophy webpage.

Question paper 1

Candidates cannot choose which theories they will be asked about in this paper and so teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are fully prepared on all areas of the course.

This paper is essay-based and so candidates will benefit from essay-writing practice as they develop knowledge and understanding of the course.

Centres should encourage candidates to answer the question asked of them, not to learn a generic essay response. Essays that do not answer the question cannot achieve top marks. Candidates who achieve the highest marks are able to explain fully the philosophies studied and discuss criticisms and rebuttals in depth.

Candidates should find the scaffolding of suggested content for the essay questions provides a useful guide to the kind of content they might include in their essay. However, it is not intended to provide an essay plan. Teachers and lecturers should encourage candidates to use these as a guide only. Candidates may approach essays in a variety of ways as there may be many appropriate ways to answer the question asked. Candidates should not feel constrained to include everything identified, or to exclude content not referred to.

In the arguments in action section, some candidates could explain an argument form in relation to an example but were imprecise in their definition. This aspect of course content has been updated in the course specification published in September 2018 to provide greater clarity. However, this emphasis may not have been fully appreciated. The course specification identifies *ad hominem*s in the mandatory content and adds, 'including ... discussion of when an attack on the person is not fallacious'. Similarly, with regard to fallacious appeals to emotion, it states 'including recognising the criteria that might be used to distinguish legitimate appeals to emotion from fallacious appeals to emotion'. Teachers and lecturers should note these points to help them prepare candidates for the 2019–2020 diet.

In the knowledge and doubt section, candidates should have in-depth knowledge and understanding of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. It is important that candidates are thoroughly familiar

with the detail of the specified texts. Candidates should be able to explain the various theories and arguments, paying particular attention to where fine distinctions are required.

For the moral philosophy section, candidates should show knowledge and understanding of the moral philosophies studied. Teachers and lecturers may find it helpful to provide opportunities for candidates to practise applying the moral theories to different moral issues and scenarios, as well as evaluating them.

Question paper 2

This paper is made up of short- and, sometimes, extended-answer questions. These types of questions require candidates to demonstrate precision and accuracy in describing and explaining philosophical ideas and arguments.

Teachers and lecturers should ensure that candidates are familiar with all the content identified in the course specification.

Candidates should also be made aware of the skills and knowledge assessed across this paper.

To ensure that candidates are fully prepared for this paper, teachers and lecturers may want to provide candidates with opportunities to practise answering questions across all areas of the course, as well as across the skill sets.

Grade boundary and statistical information:

Statistical information: update on courses

Number of resulted entries in 2018	742
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Number of resulted entries in 2019	656
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Statistical information: performance of candidates

Distribution of course awards including grade boundaries

Distribution of course awards	Percentage	Cumulative %	Number of candidates	Lowest mark
Maximum mark				
A	27.3%	27.3%	179	74
B	19.4%	46.6%	127	63
C	17.2%	63.9%	113	52
D	16.9%	80.8%	111	41
No award	19.2%	-	126	-

General commentary on grade boundaries

SQA's main aim is to be fair to candidates across all subjects and all levels and maintain comparable standards across the years, even as arrangements evolve and change.

SQA aims to set examinations and create marking instructions that allow:

- ◆ a competent candidate to score a minimum of 50% of the available marks (the notional C boundary)
- ◆ a well-prepared, very competent candidate to score at least 70% of the available marks (the notional A boundary)

It is very challenging to get the standard on target every year, in every subject at every level.

Therefore, SQA holds a grade boundary meeting every year for each subject at each level to bring together all the information available (statistical and judgemental). The principal assessor and SQA qualifications manager meet with the relevant SQA head of service and statistician to discuss the evidence and make decisions. Members of the SQA management team chair these meetings. SQA can adjust the grade boundaries as a result of the meetings. This allows the pass rate to be unaffected in circumstances where there is evidence that the question paper has been more, or less, challenging than usual.

- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted downwards if there is evidence that the question paper is more challenging than usual.
- ◆ The grade boundaries can be adjusted upwards if there is evidence that the exam is less challenging than usual.
- ◆ Where standards are comparable to previous years, similar grade boundaries are maintained.

Grade boundaries from question papers in the same subject at the same level tend to be marginally different year to year. This is because the particular questions, and the mix of questions, are different. This is also the case for question papers set by centres. If SQA alters a boundary, this does not mean that centres should necessarily alter their boundary in the question papers that they set themselves.