**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

Philosophy **PHIL3**

(Specification 2170)

Unit 3: Key Themes in Philosophy

Report on the Examination

PHIL3 Key Themes in Philosophy

General comments

The majority of students interpreted the questions appropriately and were able to demonstrate the level of their ability to deal with creditworthy material. Most also showed good awareness of the Assessment Objectives, meaning they attempted not just to demonstrate understanding of the issues raised by the questions; but also to explore arguments given in support of different theoretical positions; to examine their cogency; and to develop a sustained critical discussion.

In spite of this, the statistics suggest that the overall standard of the responses was slightly lower than last year. The general weaknesses identified last year still figured in this year's responses, so schools may want to refer to last year's report: the points made there being equally pertinent to a good number of this year's responses. Students may legitimately feel that there is no judgement that they can safely make on a particular topic. In this case it would help if they were explicit about this by, for example, making a summary of strengths and weaknesses of the arguments, or better explaining why the issue appears irresolvable. At the same time, though, many students would benefit from having a clear idea from the outset of the view they intend to support, as this would help them to organise their material more coherently and avoid the risk of their essay turning into a descriptive list of relevant (and often not so relevant) points. It may be worth emphasising that exam questions do not ask what judgements different philosophers have reached concerning a particular issue (although it is important that students know this); rather they ask the student to assess which judgement has the best support; students need to explore the arguments, rather than merely describe or explain viewpoints.

What was probably more significant, however, was the failure of many students to maintain focus on the precise question being asked. As the marking is positive, this tendency need not have had an adverse effect on stronger responses, but it was quite common to find weaker responses which were largely, or sometimes completely, tangential.

Responses on Epistemology and Metaphysics were the least well done on the paper, a tendency that has been in evidence, although less marked, in previous years.

However, it is worth emphasising that the most important factor differentiating the quality of responses is the detail and precision with which students understand the relevant material. A good knowledge base is essential if students are to score well on any of the Assessment Objectives, and even those who are relatively poor on AO2 and AO3, but who have a detailed knowledge of the terrain, still do well, and will often attain high grades.

Question 01

This question was much more popular than Question 2. The claim in the question invites students to explore arguments for and against the possibility of reducing mental states to physical states of the brain and many of the stronger responses did just this. It was more common though for students to work through a few theories in the philosophy of mind and examine what each would say about such a reduction. Typically responses would begin with substance dualism, and then move on to materialist theories (the best focusing on identity theory, biological naturalism, and/or anomalous monism). Responses of this sort were often very good, but less able students did not maintain focus in various ways. Some focused too much on dualism throughout their answer, examining general arguments for and against it, and were often side tracked from the central issue (eg by including lengthy discussions of the problem of interaction, animal spirits, parallelism and the role of God); the problem of other

minds and possible solutions to it (analogy, behaviourism) the possibility of disembodied consciousness (near death experience, etc). Others included behaviourism in their list of theories, but treated it as offering support for the claim in the question. Very few who discussed behaviourism used it relevantly as providing arguments *against* the claim. Eliminativism often figured, but again, usually in a slightly confused way as a kind of reductivism. Functionalism also figured, but again it was rare for students to be clear about whether and why functionalism might be thought to support or undermine the claim (plausible cases for both were made by some of the better responses).

Question 02

This was far less popular than Question 1 and was done slightly less well. A surprising number of students chose to work through different theories of the mind and assess how each would address the problem – an approach which was not well suited to the question. The better responses focused on the issue and were able to deal confidently and precisely with a range of arguments and thought experiments. The poorer responses tended to describe a range of thought experiments more or less accurately, but either did not know, or failed to draw out, the supposed implications for the question. The poorest responses had very little philosophical content and tended towards asserting without argument that computers cannot think, feel, understand, have free will or individuality. Many found it very significant that computers don't eat or procreate but without explanation.

Question 03

Most students chose this rather than Question 4, although they were done equally well. As expected most students worked through different ideologies and their views of the state – typically beginning with Anarchism and Marxism and then moving on to Conservatism with most students ending up supporting a broadly liberal position. This approach is not inappropriate with this type of question, but as has been said before, the risk of producing a 'list-like' juxtaposition with little critical depth is high. Poorer responses became overly descriptive and failed to explain or examine the arguments presented by different theorists. Often such responses would merely describe how a liberal state could be considered oppressive or not; how a conservative state might be considered oppressive or not and so on. A good number of the better responses avoided this approach and focused on the arguments. Marx figured in most responses, but often there was some confusion between so-called 'communist' regimes of the 20th century and Marx's own conception of a communist society, so that Marx was often credited with advocating centralised planning and a police state.

Question 04

This was the first time a question had been asked on this topic and the few who chose it generally had a good grasp of pacifist arguments, just war theory and/or realism and so were able to develop a cogent discussion of the topic. Most drew on a range of real life examples which was encouraging; the better responses were able to use these to illuminate the points made. A few, however, had very little philosophical knowledge in the area. Some students tried to turn what they had learned on justice within the state to the question, with varying degrees of success, whereas others only were able to give very generalised and shallow discussions of the merits and demerits of war.

Question 05

Epistemology and Metaphysics is the least popular option, and both questions again this year were less well done than the other questions on the paper. A few students scored well on this question, but the question also attracted responses which misconstrued what was being asked, so that students discussed justified true belief or realism about universals. It was often hard to find any material that could be credited in such responses. This topic is new to this specification, and it is expected that students will be prepared to respond to questions on it.

Question 06

This was the more popular of the two epistemology questions, and while it was answered better than Question 5, responses still fell short of the level on the other units. Those who did best had a detailed and precise understanding of phenomenalism and maintained focus on the question. The poorer responses were often confused about phenomenalism, or, which was surprisingly common, focused on scepticism generally and discussed which approach to overcoming scepticism (mitigated scepticism, common sense, transcendental arguments, etc) was the most successful. The poorest versions of this sort of response ignored phenomenalism altogether.

Question 07

Just under a third of those doing ethics chose this question and yet it was marginally better done than Question 8. Most had studied emotivism rather than prescriptivism. Most were well focused although some tended to be rather thin on philosophical detail. Many poorer responses devoted very little space to either emotivism or prescriptivism and offered a general discussion of non-cognitivism or anti realism (such responses could score reasonably well, since the question only asks them to discuss 'with reference' to emotivism or prescriptivism. Nonetheless some grasp of one of these theories was expected so that responses which merely discussed relativism (which was not uncommon) were considered narrow. Some responses discussed both emotivism and prescriptivism, which, while not expected, was fully credited.

Question 08

As has been the way with this type of question in recent years a good number of students changed the focus from a discussion of the merits of one theory into a comparative discussion of three: Virtue Ethics versus Utilitarianism versus Deontology. Often such responses were rather general and lacking in detail. If these other theories are to be made relevant it is important that they are used to show the inadequacies of virtue theory as a way of resolving moral problems. The better responses were able to give an in depth analysis of Virtue Ethics as a practical ethical theory along with internal criticisms of its success, and then would use deontological approaches (typically Kant) and/or Utilitarianism exclusively to make criticisms of the virtue approach. Better responses made clear the connection to practical moral problems either by drawing on the particular problem they had studied or by making points through a range of different problems.

Question 09

The two Philosophy of Religion questions were equally popular, Question 8 however, was answered noticeably better than Question 9. Indeed, this was the best answered question on the paper, as students tended to have a good grasp of a range of positions and there was little evidence of conceptual confusion. Students generally had a good understanding of verificationism and began with detailed discussion of Ayer's thesis and the difficulties with it, before working through a selection of arguments from Hick, Flew, Hare, Wittgenstein and so on. A good proportion, however, tended to outline the verification principle but without explanation. Students should explain what it means for a proposition to be analytic/ empirically verifiable, particularly when raising the objection that the VP fails its own test. Similarly, a fair number of students said that the VP claims a proposition has to either be analytic or synthetic to be meaningful. This obviously covers all propositions.

Poorer responses were confused about the precise nature of the positions they discussed, although possibly this was less common than in other questions.

Question 10

This was the least well done question other than the Epistemology questions and the reason seems to have been that a good number of students ignored the second clause in the quotation and focused their attention on whether arguments for and against the existence of God are compelling. Discussion of whether or not there is 'enough evidence to establish God's existence' is not irrelevant since this forms part of the quotation they are asked to discuss, but students do need to read questions carefully and it was clear to those that did could recognise that the question is asking for more than this. The better responses focused on pragmatic arguments, possibly with some supporting discussion of the first clause. Most students did discuss Pascal's wager; fewer were familiar with James. A good number focused on fideism, which, while not irrelevant, was not the best approach to address the 'nuance of the question'. As in previous years, schools might consider encouraging their students to pause when answering a question with a quotation to reflect on what the examiners are directing them to discuss.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades
Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results statistics page of the AQA Website.

UMS conversion calculator: www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.