



A Level

Philosophy

7172/2 - The metaphysics of God and the metaphysics of mind

Report on the examination

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Introduction

What follows is a question-by-question commentary on some of the trends in performance by students in 2025 on component 7172/2: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind. This commentary refers to student responses, the question paper, the assessment objectives, AQA's *A-Level Philosophy (7172) Specification*, associated readings, and the Mark Scheme. In producing this report, the observations of the lead examiner have been supplemented by the evidence provided by senior examiners and their team members. The primary point of comparison will be the same component in Summer 2024. We are now advised against using precise statistics (e.g. mean averages for each question) given the inevitable (albeit small) variations between awarding and results day. We will therefore refer to statistical trends in more general terms, offering provisional data on the distribution of marks on each item of assessment.

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 arguments to form reasoned judgements.

Summary Findings

On the basis of the data collected at the time of writing this report, the (mean) average is over 50% and higher than in previous years. This is accounted for by marginal improvements across all question types and on both philosophical themes, but with greatest improvement on the Metaphysics of God, and especially questions 04 and 05.

Students performed exceptionally well on both 3-mark questions. All but one of the 5-mark questions averaged over 50% of available marks: Question 03. Overall, students performed better on the Metaphysics of Mind on the latter question type this year.

The mean averages of both 12-mark questions improved this year, after several years of lower scores relative to past performance. The questions this year were no less challenging, but the topics featuring in those questions were perhaps more familiar from prior examinations. Question 04 (Metaphysics of God) performed better on average, but Question 9 (Metaphysics of Mind) performed better at the higher end of attainment, with more students accessing the top band of marks (10-12 marks)

On the 25-mark essay questions, the mean average rose to a record high on Question 05 (approaching 13) and remained stable on Metaphysics of Mind (over 11). Nearly 8% of students accessed the top band of marks on both questions – another record. The quality of essay writing continues to improve.

Although many scripts were escalated due to the low quality of handwriting, examiners expressed fewer concerns about that this year. I would foreground two areas for

development from examiner feedback, which I will expand upon commenting on the relevant questions.

1. **The importance of making precise logical connections between what one might call ‘memorable narrative’, of a kind which often features in philosophical arguments (e.g. though experiments, analogies, parables etc) and the relevant philosophical points they were designed to make.** This impacted short-form and long-form questions, especially 03, 05, 08 and 10.
2. **The importance of students clarifying exactly how a theory or argument is defined/understood and explaining why, to ensure that the (internal) logic of arguments are sustained.** This impacted both essay questions.

Section A: Metaphysics of God

Question 01: State the difference between God being everlasting and God being eternal? (3 marks)

This question tested students on AO1, with the focus on their ability to explain the difference between two conceptions of God featured on the *Specification* (3.3.1): the notions of God being eternal or everlasting. This was an accessible question for students, statistically, who found it easier to score marks on this item of assessment than any other on the paper.

A fraction under 40% of students scored **maximum marks (3)**, with an almost identical proportion achieving **2 marks**. The vast majority of students grasped the essential difference: the relationship of God to time. Most students approached the question by giving definitions of the two conceptions of God, leaving the differences implicit: e.g. ‘An eternal God is timeless. An everlasting God exists within and throughout all time.’ This was fine, and worthy of maximum marks. But the main reason students got 2 marks rather than 3 was the presence of imprecision in their definitions of ‘everlasting’. One of the more common errors was suggesting that an ‘everlasting God’ is not merely temporal but is limited by time: i.e. either ‘coming into existence with time’ or ‘ceasing to exist at the end of time’. Less frequently, students blurred ‘everlasting’ with ‘omnipresent’ or ‘immanence,’ locating God not merely within time but within space and the material world. But these answers were still substantively correct, so 2 marks were awarded.

Fewer than 15% of students scored **1 mark**, typically because they gave inverted definitions. Students got credit here for recognising the centrality of the relationship of God to time, but such answers could not of course be judged substantively correct.

Fewer than 6% of students failed to score marks on this question. Those scoring zero either omitted to answer, or else gave definitions of other attributes – e.g. omniscience.

Question 02: Explain Aquinas' Second Way (his argument from atemporal causation). (5 marks)

The question tested students on AO1, with the focus on one of Aquinas' cosmological arguments featured in the *Specification* (3.3.2). Students performed well: the mean average was well over half, and **3 marks** was the typical score. This mirrors student performance on the counterpart question on the paper in 2024: Descartes' cosmological argument based on his continuing existence.

Students at Level 3 tended to understand the logical structure of the argument ('deductive', relying on some 'a posteriori' premises). They also demonstrated knowledge that this argument was concerned with 'cause and effect', 'that it ruled out an 'infinite series of causes without a first cause', and identified God with this 'first cause'. Some of these responses contained elements of blurring with other of Aquinas' cosmological arguments – i.e. from 'motion/change' or from 'contingency and necessity'. Some response got off to a bad start by presenting Aquinas' first premise as 'everything that exists has a cause' but then pulled it back with some of the aforementioned details.

Where students went beyond Level 3 and scored **4 or 5 marks** (typically distinguished by degrees of precision and fullness of explanation), this tended to be for the following reasons:

- Response identified 'efficient causation' as the focus on Aquinas' argument, which they sometimes associated with 'an order of vertical', 'hierarchical' or 'sustaining' causes.
- They avoided temporal/horizontal references in their explanations as far as possible (some is almost unavoidable and was accepted: for example, we allowed students to use 'before' in place of 'prior' when describing the order of efficient causes in the world).
- There were outstanding answers in both continuous prose, which is how Aquinas presents his argument, and in step-by-step presentations with numbered premises to a conclusion.
 - Even step-by-step approaches *explained* key premises: e.g. *why* 'nothing can be the cause of itself' (because it would have to exist prior itself) and/or *why* 'there cannot be an infinite regress of efficient causes' (because there would be no first cause and therefore intermediary or ultimate causes. This filled out the *explanatory* dimension of the response.
- These students often showed familiarity with the language used by Aquinas in the Second Way as typically translated into modern English from the *Summa Theologica*.

Students who only managed **2 marks** typically made generic points about the nature of Aquinas' cosmological arguments, sometimes with a reference to some aspect of the Second Way – e.g. 'an argument from cause and effect'. Others associated the Second Way with the 'first cause of the beginning of the universe,' thereby confusing it with the Kalām argument. Some were able to identify the logical form – i.e. 'deductive' and 'a-posteriori' - but little else.

Students awarded **1 mark** possessed only generic and often fragmentary knowledge of the general character of cosmological arguments or knew that Aquinas was arguing for a 'First Cause'.

Fewer than 8% of students failed to score any marks on this question, either because they did not attempt an answer, or they confused Aquinas' Second Way with an ontological argument or a design argument.

Question 03: Explain Basil Mitchell's view about religious language using his 'Partisan' story. (5 marks)

This question focussed on Mitchell's view of religious language (*Specification 3.3.2*). Among short-form questions, testing AO1 only, this was the most challenging question on the paper, with a mean average well below 50% of available marks. It differentiated sharply: almost 14% of student accessed Level 5 (higher than Question 02); but over 22% of students failed to score any marks at all. Although students performed well on the essay question on religious language in 2024, they did often struggle on Mitchell, who offers a subtle version of cognitivism which some students find difficult to understand/explain.

Just under 49% of students accessed at least **3 marks**. Students who reached this level and no further knew that Mitchell was 'responding to Flew's falsificationist challenge' as a fellow 'cognitivist', defending the 'meaningfulness of religious language', and they made some logical links to the details of the 'Partisan story' – often this was the persistence of faith in the face of evidence that the Partisan/believer 'recognised counted against his belief'. That falsification *could* occur in this scenario was implied if not explicitly stated.

Students who went beyond this to score **4 or 5 marks** tended to have the following features (distinguished by levels of precision and fullness of explanation):

- Students were *explicit* throughout that, according to Mitchell, 'religious claims could be falsified' – albeit the precise conditions and circumstances 'could not be known in advance'. Some students supplemented this with examples of people 'abandoning their belief in God' due to some unforeseen circumstances.
- There was a clear recognition of *the ambiguity* of the evidence presented to the Partisan/believer, avoiding an overemphasise on the role of 'faith' or 'trust' (which is necessary but not sufficient).
- Drawing plausible links between specific features of the Partisan story and instances of religious commitment – e.g. 'the Stranger represents God; the Partisan represents the believer; the suspicious behaviour of the Stranger represents the problem of evil etc.'
- Distinctions were drawn between disinterested 'provisional hypotheses, 'vacuous formula,' and 'significant articles of faith,' with the situation of the Partisan/believer clearly identified with the latter.

Students who were awarded **2 marks** were often able to situate Mitchell within the debate with Flew, defending the 'meaningful' status of religious language, and they knew some features of the story. But they misrepresented Mitchell as a non-cognitivist – either implicitly

or explicitly – and so missed the substantive content of his stance. Some students tended to leave out mention of any evidence that might suggest there was reason to trust the Stanger/God in the first place.

Students scoring just **1 mark** often not get beyond identifying Mitchell as opposing Flew in defending the ‘meaningfulness of religious language’, recognising he was ‘cognitivist’, or they knew some details of the story and that it was supposed to mirror religious commitment.

Among those students who scored **zero**, more students were recorded as having failed to attempt this question than any other question on the exam paper. Others confused Mitchell’s view of religious language with that of Flew or Ayers, and the story of the ‘Partisan’ either with Hick’s parable of the ‘Celestial city’ or Hare’s parable of the ‘lunatic student.’

Question 04: Explain the evidential problem of evil and explain how Hick responds using the idea of soul-making. (12 marks)

This question was a more complex assessment of AO1: a two-part item of assessment requiring an explanation of the ‘evidential problem of evil’ and Hick’s ‘soul making response’ (*Specification* 3.3.2). After a couple of years when students have underperformed on 12-mark questions, this series was a good return to form, with a mean average well above 50% of available marks. It was also an accessible question at the lower end of performance, with almost 99% of students able to score some marks.

Students were most likely to be placed in the **7-9 mark** range, with **8 marks** the typical score. This was often achieved by students showing clear evidence that they understood the distinctive nature of the *evidential* problem of evil – as an ‘inductive’ argument concerned with the ‘likelihood of God’s existence’, as classically defined, given the ‘severity and distribution’ of suffering – and they were able to respond with clear and accurate points drawn from Hick’s thought. The latter’s ‘soul making’ argument was correctly characterised as a ‘theodicy’, and the emphasis was placed on the necessity of some evil and suffering for the ‘development of virtues’ as we ‘grow closer to God’ and exercise moral agency as ‘free and mature’ beings. Students sometimes related Hick’s theodicy to the thought of Irenaeus, and cast the human journey in terms of a ‘vale of soul making’.

Almost 13% of students progressed to the top band, scoring in the **10-12 range of marks**, and tended to be characterised by some (if not all) of the following features:

- Precise and detailed accounts of the *evidential* problem of evil, sometimes explicitly distinguishing it from the *logical* problem (e.g. ‘inductive not deductive’), sometimes with concrete examples of ‘gratuitous suffering’ experienced by the innocent, including non-human animals (Rowe’s ‘fawn in the forest fire’ was sometimes used).
- Accounts of Hick’s theodicy which spoke directly to the problem of ‘dysteleological’ suffering: e.g. the importance of ‘epistemic distance,’ to be free beings capable of moral development and a voluntary relationship with God.
- Some responded, through Hick, to claims about ‘horrendous evils’ with the points that the extremity of evils is always relative, and so given the defensibility of the existence of any evil (which the evidential version accepts), there will always be some that appear far worse than others,
- Their application of Hick’s ‘soul making’ theodicy included an ‘eschatological’ dimension, whereby ‘undeveloped souls can flourish after death’ in spite of earthly sufferings.

- These students also tended to keep the relevant divine attributes in view – i.e. ‘omnipotence’, ‘omni benevolence’, and sometimes ‘omniscience’ - when giving their account of Hick’s response, thereby maximising integration.

Students in the **4-6 mark** range tended to be more generic on the first part of the question, referring to feature of all versions of the problem of evil (i.e. tensions between God’s classical attributes and the moral and natural suffering in the world), which was all creditworthy, but they are not the distinctive considerations for the *evidential* version. There was less precision in the use of language, with some students blurring their presentation with logical versions of the problem. Occasionally, students got the gist of the *evidential* dimension of the problem – e.g. focussing on the ‘scale and distribution of suffering’ – but omitted any reference to God’s attributes, or else only mentioned God’s ‘omnipotence’ or ‘omnibenevolence’. Hick’s theodicy was then utilised to respond to the problem, often focussing on the ‘necessity of evil’ for the development of ‘virtue’ and the ‘morally praiseworthy use of free will to do good’. Students sometimes tried to link the theodicy to Hick’s argument for ‘eschatological verification’, which is not irrelevant, but this wasn’t done precisely. There was also more likelihood of redundant evaluation at this level of attainment: after giving an account of Hick’s theodicy, students then offered a sceptical response. Occasionally students did this as an opportunity to develop their original account of the evidential argument and show how Hick deals with a particularly difficult instance of suffering. That is fine. But in examples at this level of performance, it rarely added much to the original account of the problem, and it did not achieve anything on the second part of the question.

At the lower end of the performance scale, **1-3 marks**, there was sometimes total confusion with the logic problem of evil and nothing on Hick, or else students explained the difference between ‘moral and natural evil’ and noted (correctly) that they posed a problem for the existence of God, but they gave no account of the divine attributes. Sometimes there was confusion with Hick’s argument for ‘eschatological verification’ and his parable of the ‘Celestial City’.

Question 05: Is the teleological/design argument for the existence of God persuasive? (25 marks)

This question tested students on both AO1 and AO2, with an item designed to assess them on one of the classic arguments for the existence of God (*Specification* 3.3.2). Students performed exceptionally well, with a mean average of almost **13 marks**, and **16 marks** the typical score. Almost 99% of students were able to score at least some marks. Students typically approached the questions by arguing that the design argument was not persuasive, but there were very strong essays defending one or more versions of the argument, and nuanced conclusions which argued that one or more argument (typically Swinburne’s) is persuasive to some extent, but not enough for the student – e.g. because they think there are other plausible explanations for the relevant features of the universe, or the ‘designer need not be God.’ Students typically addressed all three arguments from the *Specification* (3.3.2): Hume’s argument from analogy; Paley’s argument from spatial order/purpose; and Swinburne’s argument from temporal order. There were also versions of the fine tuning argument and Aquinas’ Fifth Way,

Most students scored in the range of **11-15 marks**, with almost 54% of all students achieving at least 13. The content of these essays was sometimes detailed but lacking consistent precision in terms on the logical form on the arguments. Swinburne’s argument from ‘temporal order’ was sometimes blurred with fine tuning arguments. The latter is of course a relevant argument, but this did not always help students to present Swinburne accurately and led to some confused discussions of the ‘anthropic principle’. Hume and Paley’s arguments were often countered by ‘disanalogy’ and ‘evolution’ respectively, with evolution thought to be

a 'better explanation' for the existence of 'disorder and suffering'. Students higher up this scale were able to identify aspects of nature where there seemed to be clear evidence of 'purpose, complexity, or harmony', comparable to things like a watch: e.g. planetary motions; biological structures, such as the eye or heart; bacteria flagellum etc.. Swinburne was either countered by the 'Epicurean hypothesis,' borrowed from Hume, or a failure to deliver persuasive evidence that the designer that he (otherwise plausibly) argues for corresponds to God (and the stronger responses were sure to include a working definition of God to guide their judgements). What these essays often lacked is strong (or any) counter arguments, to really test whether these objections are as decisive as suggested. For example, it wasn't clear *why* the logical *possibility* that there is 'finite matter and infinite to rearrange itself' was more persuasive than the scientific evidence and analogical reasoning offered by Swinburne. The logic seemed to be: if there is another possible explanation, then the design hypothesis is false.

Over a quarter of students progressed at least as far as the **16-20 range of marks**, while over almost 8% accessed the top band (awarded **21-25 marks**). These responses were characterised by some of the following features (with different degrees of detail, precision, and felicity with the most relevant philosophical language):

- A firm and consistent grasp of the logic of each argument, and the ability to match relevant (technical) philosophical language with relevant ordinary language: e.g. 'deductive' with 'necessary/must'; 'inductive' with 'probably/likely'.
- Discrimination in the selection of material. For example, some students gave reasons at the outset why they thought Hume's argument was not worthy of consideration because, for example, 'he did not seriously pose the argument to be persuasive because arguments from analogy alone are inherently flawed.' These essays focussed their attention on narrower but more detailed analyses and evaluations of Paley and Swinburn's argument (understanding the subordinate place of analogy in both).
- Students who discussed Hume and Paley's arguments were able to distinguish between them: e.g. they represented Paley as offering a 'deductive argument' based on a definition of 'spatial order/purpose', and Hume as offering an 'inductive argument' based on analogy. Others chose to present Paley as offering an 'inference to the best explanation', taking all the evidence into account. This facilitated well-reasoned judgements about the weight assigned to different arguments: e.g. 'Paley is not susceptible to Hume's objections because....'
- With the exception of some essays which were as good as they were long, the various analogies were summarised with economy, so as to bring out the relevant philosophical considerations and avoid overly long descriptive passages.
- Students who attacked design arguments due to 'temporal disorder' and 'the existence (or severity and distribution) of evil' were sure to foreground the *conception* of God they were working with: e.g. 'Omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent'; the 'Abrahamic God'; or the 'Judaean-Christian God'.
- Without getting drawn into a long tangential discussion of the problem of evil (a topic in its own right on the *Specification*) there were outstanding essays where students clearly thought that the problem of evil could be countered (e.g. through Hick's 'soul making theodicy'), and they offered clear and concise rebuttals to this objection to design arguments. It is perfectly legitimate to draw from one part of the *Specification* to critically assess arguments in another; in this case, they are actually from the same section (3.3.2), so long as the essay does not get completely sidetracked on another topic.
- There was precise handling of the 'argument from a unique case' objection from Hume, applied specifically to design arguments not cosmological arguments.

- The ability to draw out some plausible divine attributes implied by design arguments (e.g. 'atemporal,' 'immaterial,' 'immensely powerful and intelligent') even when they ultimately rejected design arguments as unpersuasive.

Lower down the performance scale, students awarded **6-10 marks** were more likely to focus on Hume and Paley only, with Paley sometimes treated as offering a more detailed extension of Hume's argument from analogy. In other cases, discussions of analogy lacked any precise or detailed references to the natural world: 'the parts of a watch resemble to the parts of the universe', was sometimes as far as it went. Where Swinburne was discussed, he was often taken to be offering a deductive argument and so faulted for failing to deliver something he never intends (there were higher performing students who said at the outset of their essays that they would only be persuaded by 'deductive arguments', so the logic of their argument was sustained throughout). In this range of marks there was more likely to be blurring with other theistic proofs – e.g. cosmological and ontological arguments – and comparative juxtapositions. Some students tried to apply the 'fallacy of composition' argument against cosmological arguments to design arguments, with mixed results. This only really works when the design argument was set up in such a way that *everything* within the universe is said to be designed, which is not a strong (or accurate) presentation of the argument to begin with.

Over 90% of students moved beyond the bottom scoring band (**1-5 marks**). Students who did not achieve this either showed negligible philosophical understanding of design arguments, despite writing quite a lot, or else they did not get beyond a statement of intent and/or a conclusion along with a couple of brief and relevant points, and with little sense of an argument.

Final reflections on Question 05

Statistically, this was the strongest performance by students on the Metaphysics of God essay in the lifetime of the *Specification*, both on average and at the upper end of performance. And these outcomes are supported by qualitative observations by examiners. The design argument has proven to be a relatively accessible topic, historically, but that should not detract from genuine evidence of improvement. For example, students often provided clear and plausible justifications for the weight they were assigning to particular arguments and objections, distinguishing crucial arguments from less crucial. Indeed, one of the differentiating features of responses was that weaker ones tended to be assertive rather than explanatory when it comes to identifying the relative strength and weakness of arguments and objections.

Section B: Metaphysics of Mind

Question 06: State what mind-brain type identity theory claims about mental states. (3 marks)

This question tested students on AO1, with the focus on the central claim(s) made by mind-brain type identity theory (*Specification* 3.4.4). Whereas functionalism proved very tricky for the students on the counterpart item in 2024, students found this question very accessible, with a mean average fractionally over **2 marks**, just marginally below the average on Question 01.

The typical score awarded for this question was the maximum of **3 marks**. To achieve this, students had to demonstrate two things: (1) they understood that mind-brain type identity theory is an ontologically reductive theory; and (2) correctly identify the specific cite of the

physical reduction of mental states: to brain/neural states. Over 44% of students achieved this.

As teachers and students should be aware, we do not use the 'redundancy' criterion to penalise students who simply write more than is strictly necessary: we use it only where that material is incorrect, imprecise, or irrelevant. As such, this is very rarely an issue with 3-mark questions. But there were cases this year when that redundant material did compromise answers, and this explains why many of the 28% of students who scored **2 marks** did not reach the maximum. Some students over elaborated on the relationship between 'mental states' and 'brain states' to such an extent that they blurred the distinction between ontological and analytic reduction: e.g. by adding 'In summary, mental states mean the same thing as brain states'; or "In other words, to talk of brain states is the equivalent of talking about brain states'. The latter example also errs by conflating 'equivalence with 'identity'. They are not, of course, identical.

Students awarded **1 mark** were typically rewarded for recognising the 'physicalism' of the theory, sometimes contrasting it with 'dualism'; others drew attention to the close relationship between 'mental states and brains', but these answers were not precise.

For the 10% of students who scored **zero**, they either left the question unanswered, or else gave definitions of other theories of mind – sometimes dualism, whereby 'brain states are *not* 'identical to non-physical mental states.'

Question 07: Explain one similarity and one difference between interactionist dualism and epiphenomenalist dualism. (5 marks)

This question tested students on AO1, focussing on two forms of dualism (*Specification* 3.4.2). On average, students scored (proportionally) more marks on this question than any other item of assessment on the Metaphysics of Mind in 2025 (over **3 marks**), which mirrored outcomes in 2024 when students answered a question on Descartes' conceivability argument very effectively. Almost all students stuck to the task by giving *one* similarity and *one* difference and therefore avoided redundancy.

Almost 70% of students advanced to at least **3 marks**. This was typically achieved by (1): identifying one similarity, usually that both positions hold that 'physical states and mental states are distinct', in some sense; and (2) contrasting the 'causal power of mental states' for interactionist dualists with the 'causal impotence of mental states' for epiphenomenalist dualists. There was occasionally effective use of the 'steam train' analogy of the nature of mental states according to epiphenomenalist dualists.

Examiners reported a surprising number of students who approached both interactionist and epiphenomenalist dualism through the prism of substance, such that 'substance dualism' was taken to be a shared characteristic. Of course, if one takes the essence of epiphenomenalist dualism to be the claim that 'mental states do not casually impact physical states,' then it is logically possible to frame the position in terms of substance dualism. The problem came, however, when students took this route, but then went on to claim that one of the differences between the two positions is that 'mental states are byproducts of physical states,' which of course makes no sense if the mind is also a substance. These students did not advance beyond Level 3.

Where students progressed to **4 and 5 marks** (usually differentiated by degrees of precision and/or fullness of explanation), their answers had some of the following features:

- They identified a similarity as the 'ontological distinction' between mental states and physicalism states (i.e. their 'shared dualism'), without specifying any further whether this should be thought of in terms of substance or properties.
- Where students did go into types of dualism, they tended to associate 'interactionist dualism' with 'substance dualism' (sometimes with reference to Descartes) and 'epiphenomenalist dualism' with 'property dualism', with precise definitions of the latter in terms of 'supervenience'.
- Some of the best responses took up 'interaction' as the centrepiece of their explanation of both a similarity and a difference. So, they are *similar* in so far as 'both positions accept that physical states are causally influential in the production of / change to mental states'; but they are *different* in so far as the interactionist dualist insists on 'two way causation', whereby the mental is also impactful on the physical (specifically the brain), whereas for the 'epiphenomenalist dualist', the mental is some kind of secretion of more fundamental physical processes and therefore has 'no causal powers of its own'.
- Where students took the previous approach, they often gave appropriate illustrations of the scope of causal interaction within these two positions, often centred on the production and impact of 'pain' or 'hunger'.

Students scoring **2 marks** were typically credited for making relevant points about the two forms of dualism, while failing to bring out any specific similarity or difference; or else they managed a broadly correct but not precise account of *either* a similarity *or* a difference but not both.

Students scoring just **1 mark** tended to offer sketchy outlines of some form of dualism about the mind/body, or explain the nature of 'mind-body interaction', but did not fully address either part of the question.

Over 10% of students failed to score marks on this question. Those who scored **zero marks** either did not answer the question, or else they were not able to demonstrate philosophical understanding of any form of dualism. Occasionally there was irrelevant material on Descartes – e.g. on the 'evil demon' and 'doubting the existence of the world beyond the mind'.

Question 08: Explain Ryle's 'soft' philosophical behaviourism. (5 marks)

This question, testing AO1, focussed on one of the physicalist theories from the *Specification* (3.4.3): Ryle's 'soft' philosophical behaviourism. Over 91% of students were able to score marks on this question, and with a very healthy mean average of over 53% of available marks, it is clear that students were well prepared for this topic (which would of course have been relevant to last year's essay question on philosophical behaviourism).

Almost 58% of students advanced to at least **3 marks**. This was typically achieved by identifying the position in focus as 'physicalist', 'reductionist', and focussed on 'behavioural dispositions'. Some students at this level omitted the crucial *dispositions* dimension, but they did capture the *linguistic* dimension: e.g. 'reducing talk of mental states to ordinary speech about behaviour'.

Responses awarded **4 and 5 marks** (usually distinguished by degrees of precision and fullness of explanation) had some of the following features:

- The recognised both (1) the linguistic dimension – ‘reducing / translating talk of mental states to...’ and (2) the focus on ‘behavioural dispositions’, as the locus of meaning for ‘mental state terms’.
- The concept of a ‘disposition’ was explained in general terms, often with reference to Ryle’s example of the ‘disposition of a sugar lump to dissolve in water’, before being applied to human behaviour: e.g. ‘We have disposition to cry when physically injured, but this may be overridden by a disposition to look tough when surrounded by friends.’
- Some students explicitly distinguished between ‘soft’ behaviourism and ‘hard’ behaviourism, framing the former as responding to issues with the latter by virtue being ‘multi-track’ and capable of integrating the ‘multiple realisability’ of mental states into its theoretical approach, rather than claiming a ‘complete analysis of particular mental state terms through ascriptions of behaviour and (ultimately) the language of physics’. This was not penalised for redundancy as it was used to illuminate features of Ryle’s ‘soft’ behaviourism.
- Some of the best responses gave an account of what one might call Ryle’s ‘negative’ project, to provide context for his ‘positive’ proposal.
 - This usually involved giving an outline of Ryle’s critique of Cartesian dualism, where he characterises the dualist tendency to posit ‘a mind’ over and above the ‘mental states/behavioural disposition’ which constitute it as a ‘category mistake’.
 - The latter point was sometimes made using Ryle’s famous example of ‘the university,’ which is ‘nothing over and above the colleges, libraries, classrooms etc’.
 - Students would then go on to show how ‘mental state terms’ can be analysed in terms of ‘language about behavioural dispositions’.
 - Some students make remarkably precise logical links between the ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ dimension of Ryle’s view: from the rejection of Cartesian dualism to the proposal of a version of philosophical behaviourism.

Students who only accessed **2 marks** often did not get beyond identifying the ‘physicalism’ of Ryle’s position and making some more or less imprecise connections between mental states and behaviour. Some occasionally seemed to confuse (at least implicitly) Ryle’s ‘soft’ behaviourism with Hempel’s ‘hard’ behaviourism, but this may just reflect more generic understanding of the theoretical position.

Response awarded **1 mark** typically produced fragments of relevant material – e.g. opposing Ryle’s views to dualism – but did not explain his own position in any way that was worthy of credit. Some were able to associate Ryle’s view of ‘mental’ states with ‘behaviour’, or even ‘behavioural dispositions’, but there was no more philosophical content than that.

Of those students were awarded **zero marks** for this question, they either omitted to answer, or gave brief and imprecise outlines of other (typically physicalist) theories of minds (e.g. mind-brain type identity theory).

Question 09: Explain eliminative materialism and explain how it can be argued that it is self-refuting as a theory. (12 marks)

This more complex, multifaceted assessment item challenged students to explain one of the most radical theories in the Metaphysics of Mind and a key objection to it (*Specification* 3.4.3): 'eliminative materialism' and the 'self-refuting' objection. Although students did not, on average, perform as well as on question 04, over 56% of students scored at least **6 marks**, which is indicative of a much stronger performance than on the counterpart question in 2024 (on 'substance dualism' and the 'empirical interaction' problem).

Students awarded **4-6 marks**, the typical range, produced clear and correct points in response to both parts of the question, usually with greater detail on eliminative materialism. Students identified this as a 'physicalist position' which rejects 'folk psychology'; on this view, most 'common sense' mental states do not exist, or are radically misunderstood, and they will be 'replaced as by neuroscientific accounts of the mind'. In this range of attainment, some students blurred a 'physical reductionist' approach to the mind (e.g. mind-brain type identity theory) with an 'eliminationist' stance, but they nevertheless produced creditworthy knowledge of this position, typically associated with Paul and Patricia Churchland. The 'self-refuting' objection tended to be framed in terms of 'belief', and the idea that to propose eliminative materialism is to 'believe in it', and yet 'beliefs' are part of the very 'folk psychology' that eliminative materialism rejects. This was fine, although the explanations given of eliminative materialism in the first instance were often focussed on 'qualia', and so there was a lack of integration between the two parts of the answer.

Students advancing to **7-9 marks** tended to provide greater detail on eliminative materialism, explaining not only *that* eliminative materialism rejects the place of 'folk psychology' in an advanced 'science of the mind', but *why* it rejects folk psychology: e.g. 'folk psychology is stagnant', having not developed for millennia; and 'mental states do not correspond to, nor can they be reduced to, anything we know of in the physical world', which makes it inconsistent with other sciences. Analogies were often drawn between the elimination of 'caloric' as an explanation of 'heat', or 'bad air' as an explanation for diseases such as 'the plague'. Students in this range tended to tease out the *general* nature of 'self-refuting' objections: that it catches philosophers in some kind of 'internal contradiction'. They then demonstrated what the specific issue is in this case: e.g. 'Denying the existence of belief' and yet inviting philosophers to 'believe' in their theory.

Nearly 16% of students accessed the top band (**10-12 marks**), which is impressive given how challenging students have found eliminative materialism in the lifetime on the *Specification*. Students in this range tended to produce responses characterised by some or all of the following:

- Precise and detailed account of eliminative materialism, which avoided claiming that the theory 'denied the existence of any mental states' (a feature of lower scoring answers); rather, that eliminative materialism considers that the 'folk-psychological approach' to mental states is scientifically primitive and ripe for replacement with our best brain science. It is the latter which will illuminate the 'true nature of mental states'.
- An awareness that, for eliminative materialism, 'folk psychology' is treated as a 'theory of mind', which has some success, for example at the level of prediction, but is ultimately constituted by concepts (e.g. 'belief' and 'desire') which simply do not refer to anything in the world described by the physical sciences, and so they should be 'replaced' by better theories informed by 'cutting edge neuroscience'.

- Locating mental states such as ‘belief’ within the wider context of ‘intentionality’, as a defining characteristic of the mind: the ‘aboutness of mental states’ makes them unlike anything we know of in the physical world, and therefore we should be sceptical that they have a credible scientific basis.
- The ‘self-refuting’ objection was integrated with (and targeted at) eliminative materialism’s rejection of ‘intentionality’, such that the latter is rendered incoherent by its claims ‘*about* folk psychology’ and ‘*about* neuroscience’, which lack any scientific basis if we accept the basic principles of eliminative materialism, which dispense with properties of mind aimed at ‘the truth *about*’ anything.

At the lower end of the performance scale, **1-3 marks**, students tended to offer a few relevant points on eliminative materialism, specifically its ‘physicalism’ and rejection of any form of dualism; others described ‘folk psychology’. Some responses in this band gestured towards the ‘counterintuitive’ nature of eliminative materialism, but they did not provide an accurate account of the ‘self-refuting’ objection.

Fewer than 9% of students were awarded **zero marks**. Those who were either did not answer the question or else they confused this position with ‘mind-brain identity theory’, and were unable to explicitly identify something they both share: physicalism.

Question 10: Are functionalists right to claim that all mental states can be characterised in terms of functional roles? (25 marks)

This question was designed to test AO1 and AO2, inviting students to judge whether mental states can be characterised in terms of functional roles: i.e. to evaluate the merits of functionalism as a theory of mind (*Specification* 3.4.4). The vast majority of students answered this in the negative through a discussion of functionalism in general terms, focussing on core features. This was a perfectly acceptable approach. But there were also some outstanding discussions of specific forms: e.g. machine-state functionalism, analytic functionalism, and psycho-functionalism. A range of issues and objections were also utilised: dualist criticisms, adapted (with various degrees of consistency) for critiquing functionalism; the ‘knowledge/Mary’ argument; Block’s ‘China thought experiment’ / ‘China mind;’ and Searl’s ‘Chinese room’ argument.

Students were most likely to be placed in **11-15** range of **marks**, with **13** the typical score. This mirrors the outcomes for the corresponding question on the paper in 2024 on philosophical behaviourism. Considering the challenge that functionalism has posed in recent years (the 3-mark items on the topic was the hardest to score marks on in 2024) the average performance levels on this question were impressive. Students in this range tended to discuss ‘functionalism’ in general terms (as noted above), bringing out some common characteristics: e.g. ‘functionalism is concerned with what mental states do rather than what they are;’ ‘functionalism analyses mental states in terms of causal inputs, internal processing, and behaviour outputs;’ and proposing the ‘multiple realisability of mental states’ under functionalism. Objections tended to centre on the failure of functionalism to account for qualia, with the ‘inverted qualia objection’, Block’s ‘China mind’, and the ‘Knowledge Mary/argument’ all featuring

Students operating at the top of this level tended to be clear that they were taking functionalism as a ‘physicist’ position, and so the dualist critiques had internal consistency, and they adapted these criticisms to target functionalism specifically: e.g. in the ‘knowledge/Mary’ argument, ‘Mary knew all the functional facts about colour vision.’ Students lower down this level did not always adapt the arguments, and functionalism was either implicitly taken as a physicalist position, or the essays were written on the assumption that functionalism simply is another physicalist theory - it is not presented as one in the *Specification* (compare 3.4.3. and 3.4.4). The credit for evaluation (AO2) for these students tended to come via the aforementioned objections to functionalism and, occasionally, replies to those objections. Some of the better responses argued that functionalism was ‘too liberal’ and ‘counterintuitive’ in terms of what it characterises as ‘a minded being’. When it comes to what one might call ‘positive evaluation’ (identifying the merits of functionalism) students in this range often *stated* that functionalism has certain strengths over rival theories: e.g. overcoming the ‘problem of other minds,’ faced by dualism; dealing with the ‘multiple realizability issue’, which undermines mind-brain type identity theory; and the ‘circularity objection’ to philosophical behaviourism. But students did not gain much credit here when there was (a) no explanation of exactly these problems amount to; and (b) no demonstration of how functionalism overcomes them. Some at the higher end of this end were able, for example, to show how ‘functionalism overcomes the chauvinism of mind-brain type identity theory.’

Students who progressed to the top two scoring bands, **16-20 and 21-25**, were characterised by some or (for the very best) most of the following features:

- Precise and detailed understanding of functionalism – either in general, or occasionally through a specific form. These essays tended to be explicit about the ‘ontological neutrality’ of functionalism, and then do one of the following:
 - Take the ‘ontological neutrality’ of the position as a strength: it is compatible with dualism and physicalism. And the essay itself remained neutral on this matter.
 - Note that ‘most functionalists are physicalists’ and indicate that the essay would approach functionalism in precisely this way, because of the general advantages of physicalism over dualism: e.g. ‘synergy with the natural sciences’, ‘explaining mind-body interaction’, ‘knowledge of other minds’ etc.
 - More rarely, students argued that the dualist emphasis on the irreducible reality and causal role of first-person conscious experience ought to be integrated within a more rounded functionalist account of mental states, focussing on ‘inputs, processes, and outputs’, effectively combining the intuitive elements of both ‘dualism’ and ‘behaviourism’ without falling foul of their specific issues.
- Some students gave very precise accounts of Putnam’s machine-state functionalism, which was critically compared (usually unfavourably) with psycho-functionalism.
- The logical ordering of arguments was from ‘weakest to strongest,’ with clear and plausible reasons for those judgements made on an ongoing basis.

- The strengths of functionalism, in comparison with other theories, were not merely mentioned but *explained*. This is not juxtaposition: it is critical, comparative evaluation.
- All arguments for property dualism (against reductive physicalism) were adapted for the purposes of critiquing functionalism.
- Students, especially those in the **21-25 range of marks**, were able to construct defences of functionalism against all objections (even if they ultimately rejected the position): some drew on Patricia Churchland to defend functionalism against using 'thought experiments' to show that functionalism does not account for qualia; some argued that 'inverted qualia', however comprehensive, would always have *some* functional consequences; some took a 'bite the bullet' approach and argued that one might be actually be able to generate 'qualia' through causal interactions between the individuals that make up the population of China, and this was 'no stranger' – just less familiar – than the fact that 'a piece of matter, like the human brain, generates qualia'; the 'knowledge/Mary' argument does not actually demonstrate (non-functional) propositional knowledge at all: it shows we that have 'acquittance knowledge' or 'ability knowledge', which depends on 'functional facts already known'.
- Students at this level were more likely to make effective use of Searl's 'Chinese room' argument, noting the failure of this functional system, seemingly communicating in Chinese, to produce 'genuine understanding' (i.e. 'semantic properties' rather than merely 'syntactic properties'). Defences of functionalism, against this argument, generally located 'understanding in the system' rather than in any of its constituent parts (including the person in the room).

Student awarded **6-10 marks** were less secure in their knowledge and understanding of functionalism. These essays knew some relevant content, and they constructed an argument with some philosophical support, but there was limited grasp of the distinctive features of the theory, which was often just taken as a 'physicalist position' which 'defines mental states as functional states'. The latter is of course true, and creditworthy, but much of the discussion thereafter was concerned with dualist critiques of physicalism. Students in this range often used but misunderstood the 'inverted qualia' objection, which was blurred with the phenomenon of 'colour blindness'. In some cases the issue that the 'inverted qualia' objection raises was misrepresented as showing that 'the two people seeing different colours are not in the same functional state' – i.e. they missed the key point that seemingly real mental states (qualia) had no functional role, and so they remain unaccounted for under functionalism. There were also some confusions over 'multiple realizability', which was often noted as a feature of the theory, but was never clearly explained (or it was conflated with behavioural multiple realizability). Occasionally, multiple realizability was actually taken to be a problem with functionalism rather than integral to the theory (these essays were not, for example, able to turn this intuition into a claim that functionalism is 'too liberal' in what it classifies as a mind / mental states).

Almost 96% of students were able to score at least some marks on this question. For students in the bottom scoring band, awarded **1-5 marks**, their responses showed minimal knowledge of functionalism, which they often discussed in terms of certain 'functional' behaviours, but they were not clearly distinguished from a vague understanding of behaviourism. At the top

end of this range, some students gave a statement of intent, offered very brief and more or less accurate definitions of functionalism, and raised one issue (imprecisely) before drawing a conclusion. There were also examples of essays which juxtaposed functionalism (imprecisely explained) with other theories such as dualism. In all cases, there were substantial gaps in relevant content and very limited creditworthy evaluation.

Final reflections on Question 10

Statistically, students at the lower end of performance found it slightly harder to score marks this year compared with 2024, but there was no significant difference in terms of qualitative observations. On both measures, however, statistical, and qualitative, students performed better at the upper end of performance this year. These different statistical trends were accounted for, in no small part, by the grounding that students had in knowledge and understanding of functionalism (AO1); the latter serving as platform for their analysis and evaluation of the issues raised by the position (AO2). Students were less likely to provide justifications for the weight they were assigning to particular arguments, in comparison with Question 04. In some otherwise good essays, this aspect was missing altogether. But some students were very effective in explaining their weighting judgements and, in keeping with a recent (and welcome) trend, fewer students made rhetorically overblown claims about the ‘strength’ or ‘weakness’ of arguments, without offering anything approaching a plausible rationale for this judgement. The students’ command of the subject matter, positions, and issues in the Metaphysics of Mind continues to improve.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.