



A Level

Philosophy

7172/1 - Paper 1 – Epistemology and moral philosophy

Report on the examination

Version: 1.0
June 2025

Further copies of this report are available from aqa.org.uk

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Introduction

What follows is a question-by-question commentary on the key trends in the performance of students on component 7172/1: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy. In compiling this report, reference is made to student responses, the question paper, the assessment objectives, AQA's A-Level Philosophy (7172) *Specification*, associated readings, and the Mark Scheme. The commentary draws on the observations of the lead examiner, supplemented by evidence gathered from senior examiners and their marking teams. Where appropriate, provisional data on the distribution of marks is used to contextualise these qualitative findings. However, we avoid citing precise statistical averages due to minor variations between awarding and results day. Trends will instead be described in general terms, with Summer 2024 serving as the main point of comparison.

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 argument to form reasoned judgements.

Summary Findings

At the time of writing this report, the (mean) average performance was fractionally higher than 54, a slight increase on 2024 when it was marginally over 53. This rise is largely explained by improved student outcomes on both 12-mark questions, both 5-mark Moral Philosophy questions, and the 25-mark essay in Epistemology. The overall performance across Epistemology and Moral Philosophy was closely balanced, with students performing just over a mark better, on average, on the Epistemology section. However, students were still able to access more than 53 marks on average across both parts of the paper. The number of students scoring zero on individual questions was also low by historic standards, although this is now becoming a pattern, occurring over several exam series. The exception this year was Question 10, where the proportion of students gaining no credit was noticeably higher, with around 4% scoring zero. This reflects another pattern: that questions on meta-ethics tend to present greater difficulty for students. That said, performance on this essay marked a significant improvement on the last time a comparable meta-ethics question was set in 2022.

Essay performance more generally showed signs of progress, with students increasingly aware of timing, structure, and how to engage with the demands of the question. However, some students continue to rely on Mark Scheme language - such as describing the 'weight' of arguments, referring to points as 'crucial', or claiming to argue 'robustly' - without actually providing evaluative evidence to justify the use of these terms. While this remains a common issue, it was slightly less noticeable than in previous years, and there were encouraging signs that more students are beginning to develop substantiated and meaningful evaluation in their responses.

Senior examiners made a number of general observations this year, which will be explored in more detail throughout the report, but which can be summarised as follows:

1. Conceptual precision remains an area for improvement.

While many students demonstrated secure knowledge of key concepts, arguments and distinctions from the *Specification*, misunderstandings affected the clarity and quality of some responses. This was particularly evident on Questions 03, 05 and 07. AQA's recently introduced subject vocabulary lists – though by no means the only resource available – serve as a particularly useful reference point for students aiming to improve clarity and consistency in their use of key philosophical terminology.

2. Philosophical tools were used more confidently this year, though some common misapplications remain.

More students are drawing on established philosophical tools to support their evaluation, and this is a positive development. However, there were still some recurring errors, which were especially apparent in the essays. For example, Ockham's Razor was frequently treated as a general rule that 'the simplest explanation is best', and used as a philosophical trump card without a clear grasp of how the principle operates. Hume's Fork was sometimes conflated with Ayer's 'verification principle', and so misapplied as a test for *meaning*, rather than correctly understood as a distinction between types of *knowledge*. As a result, some students based their evaluation more on criticisms aimed at Ayer's verification principle, such as the 'self-defeating' objection, rather than engaging directly with Hume's position. This led to less effective analysis and evaluation and highlights the need for greater care in distinguishing between similar but philosophically distinct arguments. In meta-ethics, both Moore's 'naturalistic fallacy' and Hume's 'is-ought gap' were often referenced, but not always well applied or fully understood. These issues are explored further in the commentaries on Questions 05 and 10.

3. Careful consideration of the command word

While many students showed a secure grasp of content, some did not fully attend to the specific demands of the question, particularly on 5-mark 'explain' questions (see Questions 02 and 08). A common issue was the tendency to treat these more like 3-mark questions, providing a definition or brief statement without further development. Closer attention to command words would support more precise and effective responses.

4. Seemingly 'rote-learned' material or approaches limited the quality of evaluation

In some essays, pre-prepared structures or rehearsed content were applied too rigidly, often at the expense of relevance and critical engagement. This was especially evident where students focused on adjacent topics – such as 'direct realism' on Question 05 or 'anti-realism' in Question 10 – when the questions concerned indirect realism or moral realism. Another recurring weakness was the use of flawed argumentative strategies, particularly false dichotomies. Some students asserted that one theory must be correct simply because an alternative view was unconvincing. However, this line of reasoning obviously does not follow: the weaknesses of one theory do not automatically make another more plausible. Multiple theories may be problematic, and each must be evaluated on its own merits.

Epistemology

Question 01: What is the difference between analytic truths and synthetic truths? (3 marks)

This question tested students' knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a fundamental philosophical distinction listed in the 'Subject Content' (3) section of the *Specification*. Although not explicitly named in the Epistemology section, it is central to debates within epistemology, particularly in 'Reason as a source of knowledge' (3.1.3) and 'The limits of knowledge' (3.1.4). Perhaps for this reason, a significant number of students approached the question through the lens of Hume's Fork. While Hume himself does not use the terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic' - these being introduced later by Kant - this approach was anticipated in the Mark Scheme and was creditworthy if explained accurately. Similarly, students who explained the distinction in Kantian terms were also credited, despite Kant not being directly referenced in the Epistemology section. Students were therefore able to explain the distinction in several legitimate ways - ontologically, epistemologically, or semantically - provided they showed understanding of the key difference: that analytic and synthetic truths differ in what makes them true, in how they are known to be true, or in terms of predicate containment.

Students were more effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding 3-mark item in the Moral Philosophy section, with the most commonly awarded mark being 3. Those who scored the full **3 marks** typically either gave a succinct and accurate account by focusing solely on the central difference or developed their responses further by exploring related distinctions. In more expansive answers, students often discussed how analytic truths are (typically) necessary and/or known a priori, whereas synthetic truths are considered contingent and/or known a posteriori, at least according to many empiricists. However, even in these more developed responses, credit was dependent on the central distinction being made clear. Many students also used relevant examples to support their explanations, such as 'All bachelors are unmarried' (analytic) and 'The cat is on the mat' (synthetic), although examples were not required to gain full marks.

The second most frequently awarded score was **2 marks**. These responses typically demonstrated a sound grasp of the topic but lacked the precision or completeness required for full credit. Often, students in this category showed clear understanding of one type of truth but offered only a partial or less accurate account of the other. For example, some defined analytic truths in terms of what makes them true (or how they are known) but then defined synthetic truths only in contrast – that is, as the opposite of analytic truths – rather than giving a positive explanation of what makes them true (or how they are known). In other cases, students demonstrated relevant associated knowledge, such as the a priori/a posteriori distinction or appropriate examples, but did not clearly explain what fundamentally distinguishes analytic from synthetic truths in terms of either their truth conditions or how they are known to be true.

A sizable minority of students scored **1 mark**, usually for responses that were partially correct but imprecise or incomplete. These students often focused on only one aspect of the question or gave vague definitions of both types of truth, failing to clearly distinguish between them. In some cases, students attempted to define both analytic and synthetic truths but ended up

conflating the two, or offered imprecise definitions accompanied by examples that did little to clarify their explanations.

Hardly any students left the question unanswered, so those who scored **0 marks** did so because their responses were either wholly irrelevant or so fragmented that no credit could be awarded.

Question 02: Explain the tripartite view of propositional knowledge. (5 marks)

This question tested knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a central topic from the 'What is knowledge?' section of the *Specification* (3.1.1). This is a topic that students tend to approach with greater confidence and generally perform well on. This is borne out in the data. It was the best performing 5-mark question on the paper and the second-best performing question overall. Most students were able to identify the three conditions - truth, belief, and justification - and over three quarters were able to demonstrate a basic grasp of the view. While the core idea is widely understood, the logical structure of the definition - particularly the interplay of necessary and sufficient conditions - provided useful scope for distinguishing between more detailed and precise responses. The overwhelming majority of students were able to say something relevant, with only a very small number producing wholly irrelevant or confused responses.

Students awarded **3 marks** showed the level of substantive understanding required by the question. To reach this level, responses needed to do more than simply *state* that knowledge is 'justified true belief'. Students were expected to *explain* the tripartite view - either by outlining the role of each condition or by noting that they are necessary and sufficient for knowledge. They did not need to do both, but they did need to move beyond simply stating the definition and/or listing terms. Typical responses at this level identified the three components and offered at least some account of how they contribute to the definition of knowledge. These responses demonstrated a sound conceptual grasp, though often lacked detail and technical clarity.

Students scoring **4 or 5 marks** provided fuller, clearer, and more precise explanations. Building on the features of responses awarded 3 marks, students at this level typically:

- Explained all three conditions in detail and precisely.
- Explicitly stated that the conditions are *individually necessary* and *jointly sufficient*, using these terms precisely.
- Explained why none of the conditions is sufficient on its own, frequently using brief examples to support their point (e.g. someone having a true belief based on luck rather than justification).
- In some cases, used formal terminology accurately - for example, expressing the definition using the biconditional 'iff' (if and only if) to highlight the logical structure of the view.

Responses awarded **2 marks** typically listed the three conditions without explaining them or attempted to describe one or two in imprecise terms. Some of these responses included additional material - such as references to Gettier-style cases - but did so without clearly explaining the tripartite view itself, making such content redundant rather than supportive.

The logic of these answers was often less clear, and students frequently omitted any reference to necessity or sufficiency.

Students gaining only **1 mark** tended to produce fragmented or partially relevant responses. Conflation between propositional, acquaintance, and ability knowledge was not uncommon at this level, with some students attempting to define all three types instead of focusing on the one specified. However, even a basic or partial definition of propositional knowledge could still count as a relevant but incomplete point and gain credit at this level. These responses showed some engagement with the topic but lacked the detail and conceptual clarity to demonstrate sufficient understanding of the tripartite view.

Only a very small number of students failed to gain any credit, typically due to wholly irrelevant answers rather than non-responses.

Question 03: Explain how local scepticism and global scepticism are similar and how they are different. (5 marks)

This question tested AO1 knowledge and understanding of two forms of philosophical scepticism from 'The limits of knowledge' section of the *Specification* (3.1.4). This was the lowest performing 5-mark question on the paper, although the average mark was still higher than the mean for the paper. While a clear majority of students were able to make some relevant points, slightly less than two-thirds demonstrated a secure enough grasp of both forms of scepticism to access 3 marks or above. Most students were able to identify a clear difference, typically focusing on the scope of doubt, but fewer were able to articulate a similarity in philosophically meaningful terms. Global scepticism was generally handled more confidently, often supported with well-known examples such as Descartes' 'evil deceiver' or 'brain-in-a-vat' scenarios. However, by far the most common error was to confuse local scepticism with normal incredulity - treating it as personal or everyday doubt rather than a philosophical challenge within a restricted domain. This widespread misunderstanding limited many responses and often prevented students from giving accurate or meaningful comparisons.

Students awarded **3 marks** demonstrated substantive understanding. These responses typically offered a broadly correct, if sometimes general, explanation of both local and global scepticism, and identified a basic but relevant similarity and difference. Most students at this level correctly noted that global scepticism applies to all knowledge, while local scepticism is restricted to a particular domain such as perception, induction, the past, or other minds. A typical similarity cited was that both forms of scepticism challenge how we justify our knowledge claims. To reach this level, students needed to show that they understood these were philosophical - not practical - forms of scepticism. While a clear majority of students reached this level, some responses included examples or definitions that sometimes drifted into normal incredulity - treating local scepticism as everyday doubt. However, where students had already shown some understanding that local scepticism is a form of philosophical scepticism, such imprecision did not preclude them from being awarded 3 marks. By contrast, straightforward conflation of local scepticism with ordinary doubt was much more common in 2-mark responses and typically prevented a clear comparison being made.

Students scoring **4 or 5 marks** provided more developed and precise comparisons. These responses typically:

- Accurately defined both forms of scepticism, often supporting them with relevant examples.
- Clearly explained the key difference in scope - that global scepticism challenges the possibility of knowledge in general, while local scepticism targets a specific area or category.
- Identified a philosophically meaningful similarity, such as both being forms of radical doubt that go beyond everyday contexts, both undermining justification through ordinary means, or both relying on thought experiments that are resistant to empirical resolution.
- Demonstrated coherence and clarity in the comparison, with logical structure and little or no redundancy.

Responses awarded **2 marks** often showed partial understanding, typically giving only a clear difference or a vague or underdeveloped similarity. As already stated, the most common reason students failed to progress beyond this level was the mischaracterisation of local scepticism as normal incredulity. In other cases, students offered a correct example or a general description of scepticism but did not explain how it related to either form. Some responses also included tangential material without linking them clearly to the relevant definition.

Students gaining only **1 mark** produced fragmentary or confused responses. These often failed to define either form of scepticism clearly. Some students conflated global scepticism with more specific doubts (such as scepticism about perception), while others confused philosophical scepticism with opinion or emotional uncertainty. Conflation between the terms 'local' and 'global' was not uncommon. However, responses that offered even a minimal but relevant observation - such as noting that both are forms of doubt - were credited as a relevant point. A few responses gave a partial or vague definition of one form of scepticism without contrast or explanation, which also met the threshold for 1 mark.

Just over 4% of students failed to gain any marks on this question, either due to non-attempts or wholly irrelevant content.

Question 4: Explain Leibniz's innatism and one of Locke's arguments against this position. (12 marks)

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of one of the central debates in the 'Reason as a source of knowledge' section of the *Specification* (3.1.3). While Locke historically predates Leibniz, students were not being asked to assess the debate chronologically, but rather to consider how Locke's arguments - specifically those in the anthology text - could be used to challenge Leibniz's view. A range of objections from Locke could be credited. Overall, this question did not perform quite as well as the corresponding 12-mark question in Moral Philosophy, but outcomes were stronger than on the equivalent Epistemology question from 2024. Around two-thirds of students were awarded 6 marks or more, with the most common scores falling in the 7–9 range. A smaller, but still significant, proportion reached the top level (10–12 marks), demonstrating secure knowledge of both views and their relationship. Just under a third of students were placed in the 4–6 band, while

a minority produced underdeveloped responses that scored in the 1–3 range. Only a very small number of students were unable to produce any creditworthy material.

Responses in the **7–9 mark** range - with 8 being the most awarded mark - typically demonstrated a sound understanding of both philosophical positions. Most students were able to explain Leibniz's account of innatism - often using the marble analogy - and relate this to one of Locke's objections. However, many of these responses were stronger on one thinker than the other, with some giving a detailed account of Leibniz's position while offering only a general or limited version of Locke's critique, or vice versa. Those who relied solely on the marble analogy often struggled to develop Leibniz's argument in full or to integrate it effectively with a relevant Lockean objection. By contrast, those who included Leibniz's argument from necessary truths alongside the marble analogy were better placed to explain how innate knowledge was supposed to work. The most frequently used objection from Locke was the 'universal assent' argument, sometimes combined with the point about the 'transparency of ideas'. These were generally well explained and integrated, especially when supported with examples. However, some responses in this range were limited by imprecision. While generally accurate, they were not always precise in their use of key philosophical terminology, which tended to hinder the clarity of the explanations.

Answers in the **4–6 mark** range generally gave largely correct explanations of the views of Leibniz and/or Locke, but lacked the clarity, detail, or integration required to move into the higher bands. In some cases, students offered partial responses - explaining one philosopher's position but omitting the other altogether. Some responses focused heavily on Leibniz's marble analogy but failed to draw out the underlying philosophical claim about how innate ideas are 'veined' into the mind and revealed through experience. Others summarised Locke's empiricism, often referencing 'tabula rasa' or the 'universal assent' argument, but without clearly developing either into a sustained critique or directly applying them to Leibniz's position. A recurring issue was the presentation of 'tabula rasa' as an argument, rather than as a foundational assumption that Locke supports with specific arguments. There were also notable conceptual confusions. Several students conflated 'a priori' with 'innate', which undermined their explanations. In some cases, generalised claims were made about reason or experience as sources of knowledge, but with little reference to the specific reasoning found in either thinker in the question. A significant minority substituted Plato's 'slave-boy' argument or theory of 'recollection' for Leibniz's actual argument, which detracted from the relevance and focus of their answers. Where both Leibniz and Locke were mentioned, their views were often outlined in parallel without any clear connection or engagement. This lack of integration was a key barrier to higher marks, as students did not show how Locke's empiricism directly challenged a particular feature of Leibniz's theory of innateness. Finally, students who listed multiple objections from Locke (e.g. transparency, universal assent, redundancy) without developing any one of them typically lacked the depth and precision needed to progress beyond this band. Philosophical terms were sometimes used without full understanding of how they functioned within the debate.

Responses in the **10–12 mark** band were typically characterised by:

- Precise exposition of Leibniz's innatism, often making effective use of both the marble analogy and the argument from necessary truths (although this wasn't a requirement). Some stronger responses distinguished between concept innatism and knowledge innatism (although, again, this wasn't a requirement). The marble analogy was used

not just descriptively, but analytically, with the best students explaining that it illustrates internal predispositions shaped by innate structure, rather than fully formed ideas present at birth.

- A clear and accurate formulation of Leibniz's argument from necessary truths, emphasising that while experience gives us particular instances (e.g. repeated cases of ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '), it does not yield the *necessity* or *universality* that such mathematical or logical truths demand. Often students supported this point with examples like the law of non-contradiction, principle of identity, or basic arithmetic truths to show how such propositions cannot be justified by experience alone.
- A focused and well-integrated explanation of one of Locke's objections, typically one of the following:
 - The argument from 'universal assent' – highlighting that ideas said to be innate (e.g. the law of identity) are not universally recognised by all people (such as children or 'idiots').
 - The 'transparency of ideas' – arguing that if ideas were innate, we should be aware of them from birth.
 - An empiricist theory of concept formation – where Locke argues that all ideas derive from experience via sensation and reflection, rendering innate ideas unnecessary. In a few stronger responses, this was supported (explicitly or implicitly) by invoking Ockham's Razor - arguing that positing innate ideas introduces unnecessary metaphysical assumptions.
- Crucially, these responses not only explained Locke's objection clearly, but linked it *directly* to a feature of Leibniz's theory.
- A small number of students went further by incorporating Leibniz's metaphysics, referring to the *Monadology*. While not required, this level of insight demonstrated secure familiarity with the broader rationalist context of Leibniz's thinking.
- These answers were also marked by accurate and confident use of philosophical terminology. Where examples were used, they were generally well chosen and reinforced the analysis.

Responses in the **1–3 mark** range typically demonstrated a limited or confused understanding of the topic. Some students attempted to describe either Leibniz's or Locke's view but did so inaccurately or without sufficient clarity - for example, by substituting Plato's theory of 'recollection' for Leibniz's innatism (again, the 'slave boy' argument featured prominently). Others mentioned terms like 'rationalism' or 'empiricism' without showing awareness of how these relate to the debate. In some cases, answers lacked any meaningful structure or failed to address the set question altogether. While a few relevant points might have been made, these responses lacked the relevance or detail required to score more than minimal credit.

Question 05: Is indirect realism convincing? (25 marks)

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, with the majority of marks allocated to AO2. Drawing on content from 'Perception as a source of knowledge' (*Specification* 3.1.2), it differed from some previous 25-mark Epistemology questions by demanding sustained evaluative engagement with a single theory rather than broad exposition across multiple positions. Overall, performance on this question showed clear improvement. Just over half of all students achieved at least half marks, with the average mark higher than in previous years. The most frequently accessed band was 11–15, with 14 the modal score. Over a quarter of

students reached the top two bands (16-20 and 21-25), with more achieving 21-25 than in previous series. At the lower end, just over a quarter scored in the 6-10 range, while very few fell into the 1-5 band or failed to attempt the question - unlike Question 10, where non-responses were more common.

The majority of students fell into the **11–15 mark** band. Most explained the core claims of indirect realism, often referencing sense-data, scepticism, and the 'veil of perception'. The primary/secondary quality (PSQ) distinction was frequently introduced, though its significance was not always well understood. Better responses recognised that Locke uses this distinction to argue that our ideas 'resemble the primary qualities of external objects', supporting a realist conclusion. However, many students either underdeveloped this point or failed to appreciate that the same distinction can be used to challenge indirect realism - for example, by questioning whether mind-dependent ideas can coherently resemble mind-independent properties. This evaluative potential was often overlooked or treated in isolation rather than integrated into a broader line of argument. A common issue at this level was the blurring of sense-data and secondary qualities. Some students mistakenly assumed that only secondary qualities are conveyed via sense-data, or that primary qualities are perceived directly - misunderstandings that undermine the basic structure of indirect realism, where all perceived qualities are mediated. These imprecisions were compounded by the misapplication of the PSQ distinction to Russell. For instance, some appealed to PSQs when responding to Russell's perceptual variation argument (e.g. the changing appearance of a table), assuming that primary qualities remain constant. In fact, Russell explicitly uses such examples to show that even primary qualities vary with perspective, and his account does not rely on the PSQ distinction. Criticisms based on that framework are therefore misplaced when applied to him - an important distinction that some students missed. Evaluation in this band was present but often lacked balance. Arguments and counter-arguments were included, but not always developed in equal depth or clearly weighed. Objections to indirect realism - such as scepticism or Berkeley's arguments - were sometimes presented without considering how indirect realists might respond. Comparisons with direct realism or idealism were common but tended to frame conclusions without fully exploring how each theory handles the central issues. Arguments were frequently summarised rather than articulated in their strongest forms, and preferred conclusions were sometimes asserted without sufficient justification. Another recurring issue was the use of Ockham's Razor. Some students defended indirect realism on the grounds that it is 'simpler', without recognising that Russell's argument does not rely on simplicity alone. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, simplicity plays a supporting role in a broader abductive strategy: Russell argues that the hypothesis of a mind-independent world best explains why our sense-data occur in regular, predictable ways and are not subject to our will - not that it is correct purely because it is the 'simplest'. Conversely, some students criticised indirect realism by attacking simplicity as a weak justification but wrongly attributed this as Russell's primary or sole rationale. This led to straw man criticisms that misrepresented the structure of his position. Despite these limitations, responses in this band showed real engagement and an attempt to form an argument. Conclusions were often present and supported by identifiable reasons, though the overall logic was sometimes strained. With greater precision, stronger integration, and more balanced evaluation, many of these responses could have progressed into the next band.

Students who did progress into the top two scoring bands – **16–20 and 21–25** – demonstrated a high level of clarity, precision, and evaluative skill. These responses were typically characterised by the following features:

- Some highly effective essays adopted a simple (but not simplistic) strategy: they first isolated the core commitments of indirect realism – e.g. (1) a realist claim that a mind-independent world exists, and (2) the indirectness thesis that we perceive that world only via sense-data or mediated representations – they then produced a sustained, robust evaluation of those commitments through a clear sequence of argument, counter-argument, reply, and counter-reply. Other strong answers structured their discussion around two interconnected questions: (1) the existence of the external world and (2) the nature of that world as we can know it. This framing allowed students to argue, for example, that indirect realists offer a compelling response to sceptical worries about *whether* the external world exists yet stand on less secure ground when specifying *what* that world is like, thereby exposing epistemological vulnerabilities in the theory. In both approaches (and others), the hallmarks of top-band performance were evident: sustained and well-structured argumentation, clearly signposted and consistently developed in support of a focused position on indirect realism, rather than a descriptive tour of competing views.
- Nuanced understanding of indirect realism, including the role of sense-data in mediating all perceived qualities (not just secondary ones), and the theory's response to scepticism, illusion, and hallucination. These responses avoided common conflation (e.g. sense-data with secondary qualities) and clearly differentiated indirect realism from both direct realism and idealism.
- Integrated and evaluative use of the primary/secondary quality distinction, especially when discussing Locke. Students examined how the distinction supports realism (via resemblance of primary qualities) while also engaging with Berkeley's challenges – e.g. that resemblance between mind-dependent and mind-independent properties is incoherent, or his broader attack on the PSQ distinction. These insights were woven into the argument rather than presented in isolation.
- Careful analysis of Russell's indirect realism. Misuse of Ockham's Razor or straw man critiques were avoided.
- Deeper metaphysical evaluation of sense-data, including critical questions about their ontological and causal status – e.g. where they are located, how they are individuated, and whether they can stand in causal relations. These issues were used to assess the internal coherence of the indirect realist framework.
- Sophisticated responses to the resemblance problem, reframing it in representational terms. Students used analogies (e.g. maps or models) to argue that mental representations can accurately depict reality without resembling it, offering a strong defence of indirect realism against Berkeley's objections.
- Balanced and analytical comparisons with rival theories. Rather than listing features, these comparisons were used to illuminate how each theory deals with core philosophical challenges.
- Measured and well-supported treatment of objections, including the 'veil of perception' and Berkeley's arguments. Stronger responses engaged with these criticisms thoughtfully, often acknowledging partial limitations in indirect realism while defending its broader plausibility.
- Precise and accurate use of philosophical language, with students using technical terms consistently and correctly. Evaluative language was analytical rather than

rhetorical, avoiding dismissive terms and only using mark scheme relevant language like 'crucial' or 'weaker' with clear justification.

Many of the same issues present in the 11–15 range appeared in responses awarded **6–10 marks**, but to a greater extent. For example, key distinctions were frequently confused or misapplied. The primary/secondary quality distinction was often introduced but rarely explained with clarity or linked to the plausibility of indirect realism. Similarly, students often blurred the line between direct and indirect realism, leading to misattributed objections or muddled defences. Where Ockham's Razor was mentioned, it was used imprecisely without reference to ontological parsimony, explanatory power or theoretical context. Beyond these content issues, responses in this band often lacked integration and argumentative control. Students typically described multiple theories in sequence, but without distinguishing their key commitments or explaining how they relate to the question. Arguments and objections were frequently placed side by side without being evaluated or developed, leading to a descriptive and disjointed approach. Evaluation was usually quite minimal, unbalanced, or assertive. Objections were sometimes included but not analysed or related back to the core commitments of indirect realism. In some cases, students shifted position within their essay without clearly explaining why, suggesting a lack of coherence in the overall argument. Despite these limitations, responses in this band included relevant material and tried to construct an argument. Key terms were usually present, albeit used inconsistently, and conclusions were offered, even if not well supported.

Students awarded **1–5 marks** typically showed very limited understanding of indirect realism or of the topics of perception and epistemology more broadly. Some referred vaguely to the idea that we 'don't perceive the world directly' or mentioned that 'what we see might not be real', but without grounding these comments in a philosophical theory or using appropriate terminology. Where indirect realism was named, it was often mischaracterised or conflated with either direct realism or idealism. Some responses included isolated comments about scepticism, illusion, or perception, but these were often disconnected from any recognisable argument. A few students attempted to compare theories or offer evaluations (e.g. 'indirect realism is confusing' or 'direct realism makes more sense'), but without reference to relevant arguments, objections, or counterpoints. Where mention was made of thinkers such as Locke or Russell, this was usually superficial or confused, and not clearly linked to any identifiable aspect of their theories. In general, responses at this level lacked coherence and made minimal use of philosophical concepts or vocabulary. Nonetheless, partial credit was given where some understanding of perception as a philosophical issue could be inferred.

Moral Philosophy

Question 06: What, for Aristotle, is the difference between voluntary and involuntary actions? (3 marks)

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of a central distinction in Aristotelian virtue ethics, as outlined in the 'Normative Ethical Theories' section of the *Specification* (3.2.1). Students were expected to draw on Aristotle's discussion of voluntary and involuntary action, which appears primarily in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III (especially Chapter 1, but also Chapters 2–5). Although Aristotle does not formally divide his account into three parts, his discussion clearly centres on three key elements: (1) that voluntary action

requires knowledge of what one is doing (the 'epistemic condition'); (2) that it originates in the agent without external compulsion (the 'control condition'); and (3) that voluntary actions are those for which we are praised or blamed, while involuntary actions are those for which we are pitied or pardoned, and often involve regret (the 'hallmarks' of responsibility). To be substantively correct, students were expected to explain the distinction with reference to at least two of these elements.

Students were less effective in meeting the demands of this question than on the corresponding 3-mark item in the Epistemology section. However, the most commonly awarded mark - albeit very marginally - was still 3, with just over a third of students gaining full marks. A similarly sized group scored 2 marks, meaning that a clear majority of students produced responses that were at least substantively correct. A smaller number were awarded 1 mark, usually for responses that were partially accurate but lacked clarity or development. A relatively small minority failed to gain any credit, and almost all students attempted the question.

Students who scored the full **3 marks** generally fell into one of two categories. Some addressed all three key features of Aristotle's account - knowledge, control, and moral responsibility - in responses that were concise, clearly structured, and demonstrated an excellent grasp of the conceptual distinction. Others focused on two of the three main features but were still awarded full marks where the distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions was clearly drawn, and the explanation of each selected aspect was accurate and appropriately applied. In addition to the core features, some students skilfully introduced Aristotle's discussion of mixed or non-voluntary actions, such as 'throwing cargo overboard in a storm', or 'acting in ignorance without regret'. These responses were credited when the additional material served to clarify or reinforce the main distinction and remained clearly focused on the question. Although these distinctions were not required for full marks, they often enriched stronger responses and were not treated as redundant. Some students also made effective use of illustrative examples, either drawn directly from Aristotle's text or from more familiar contemporary analogues. While not necessary for full marks, such examples often helped to clarify the distinction when used appropriately and concisely.

Students who gained **2 marks** typically showed a sound understanding of the distinction, but either lacked precision or gave a response that was not fully developed. In some cases, students correctly identified the distinction in broad terms - for example, recognising that voluntary actions involve awareness and control, while involuntary actions involve ignorance or compulsion - but expressed these ideas in a general or imprecise way, without clearly linking each point to Aristotle's account. In other cases, students offered a more detailed explanation of voluntary action but gave an incomplete or vague account of involuntary action (or vice versa), resulting in a response that was uneven overall.

Students who gained **1 mark** often showed understanding of only one relevant aspect of the distinction or gave an account that was partially correct on both aspects but lacked precision. These responses frequently included vague or overly simplistic statements that failed to clearly distinguish between voluntary and involuntary action. In some cases, students made relevant but fragmented points that were not clearly connected or fully developed. For example, some answers stated simply that voluntary actions are those we choose, whereas involuntary ones are those we don't choose. While this gestures towards the control condition

in Aristotle's account, it lacks the clarity and development needed to be considered substantively correct.

Question 07: Explain the difference between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism. (5 marks)

This AO1 question tested students' knowledge and understanding of two key variants of utilitarianism from the 'Normative ethical theories' section of the *Specification* (3.2.1). As anticipated, this was a question that students were generally well prepared for, and it allowed them to perform confidently without requiring extensive development. On average, it was the second best performing 5-mark question on the paper, with just over three-quarters of students demonstrating a substantive understanding of the difference between the positions. The overwhelming majority were able to offer something creditworthy.

Students awarded **3 marks** demonstrated the expected level of substantive understanding. These responses typically offered a broadly accurate account of both views and clearly identified the central difference: act utilitarianism assesses actions on a 'case-by-case basis', whereas rule utilitarianism appeals to 'general rules that tend to promote utility if followed'. Many students reached this level, though not all provided clear definitions or comparisons. Responses at this level often lacked precision and/or detail, and some included references to Bentham and Mill that were not always accurate. Notably, a significant number of responses confused the act/rule distinction with the quantitative/qualitative distinction - focusing on types of pleasure rather than on how moral decisions are evaluated. This confusion limited clarity but did not necessarily prevent a response from being credited at this level, provided the central difference was still recognisable.

Students scoring **4 or 5 marks** provided a clear, accurate, and well-structured explanation of the distinction. These responses typically:

- Defined act utilitarianism as evaluating the morality of individual actions.
- Defined rule utilitarianism as evaluating the morality of actions based on whether they follow rules that, if generally adopted, would maximise utility.
- Clarified that both are consequentialist theories aiming to promote happiness but apply this principle differently.
- Often used examples (e.g. 'lying to protect someone') to illustrate how the two views might deliver different moral verdicts in a given situation.
- Some stronger responses referred to the 'hedonic calculus' in the context of act utilitarianism or explained how rule utilitarians justify rules through long-term utility.
- A few also mentioned 'strong vs. weak' rule utilitarianism or briefly noted criticisms of each view (typically act utilitarianism as a way to introduce rule). While this went beyond what was required, it was not treated as redundant if relevant.

Responses awarded **2 marks** made one or two relevant points but lacked clarity or precision. The most common weakness by far was conflating act/rule utilitarianism with the quantitative/qualitative distinction, often resulting in superficial comparisons between Bentham and Mill that focused on types of pleasure rather than decision-making methods. Others offered a good account of act utilitarianism but gave an incomplete or confused description of rule utilitarianism - sometimes mischaracterising it as deontological or suggesting that rules are followed regardless of consequences. Some responses relied too

heavily on generic language like ‘following rules’ or ‘doing what is right’ without linking these ideas back to the principle of utility.

Students gaining only **1 mark** produced fragmented or partial responses. These typically involved isolated statements (e.g. ‘act utilitarianism looks at actions’ or ‘rule utilitarianism follows rules’) without explanation, or incorrect contrasts between the two. Some students used examples without defining the theories they were meant to illustrate or gave muddled definitions that blurred the key distinction. Nonetheless, responses at this level contained at least one relevant idea that merited credit. Almost all students were able to make a point relevant to the question, with only a very small number of responses scoring zero due to non-attempts or wholly unrelated material.

Question 08: Explain what Aristotle means by ‘eudaimonia’. (5 marks)

This AO1 question tested students’ understanding of a key concept in Aristotle’s Virtue Ethics from the ‘Normative ethical theories’ section of the *Specification* (3.2.1). It was the third best performing of the four 5-mark questions on the paper, although only marginally behind questions 07 and 02 in terms of mean score. All three were broadly well-answered, with little separating their averages, and stood in contrast to Question 03, which was a notable outlier in terms of overall performance. The overwhelming majority of students offered something creditworthy, with just over three-quarters reaching the level of substantive understanding. Most students recognised *eudaimonia* as something like ‘human flourishing’ or ‘living well’, although a recurring issue - also seen in responses to Question 02 - was treating the question as a definition-only task. To reach the higher levels, students needed to *explain* the concept’s philosophical significance and connect it to central elements of Aristotle’s theory.

Students awarded **3 marks** demonstrated substantive understanding of *eudaimonia* as ‘human flourishing’ and linked this to at least one relevant feature of Aristotle’s ethical framework. This might include recognising it as the ‘final end’ (*telos*) of human life, or noting its association with ‘rationality’, ‘virtue’, or the idea of ‘fulfilling one’s function’ (*ergon*). Brief explanations that clarified how flourishing is achieved through rational activity or virtuous living were typically sufficient for this level. Some responses included imprecisions - such as implying that non-human animals could achieve *eudaimonia* - but these did not preclude access to this level (or even 4 marks in some cases) provided the core understanding remained intact.

Students scoring **4 or 5 marks** typically:

- Explained that *eudaimonia* is not a subjective emotional state, but an ‘objective condition grounded in fulfilling one’s purpose as a rational being’.
- Highlighted the ‘role of virtue, character development, and practical reason’ (*phronesis*) in achieving it.
- Emphasised its status as self-sufficient and intrinsically valuable – ‘the final end for which all other goods are sought’.
- Distinguished *eudaimonia* from transient emotions or pleasures, sometimes noting that ‘Aristotle rejected hedonism.’
- Occasionally referenced Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in relation to the ‘contemplative life’ or discussed the social and political dimensions of flourishing.

Responses awarded **2 marks** included one or two relevant ideas but lacked either sufficient detail or precision. A typical feature was the unelaborated statement that *eudaimonia* means 'human flourishing' - which, while accurate, was not developed enough to meet the explanatory demand of the question. Other responses offered more commentary (e.g. linking *eudaimonia* to living well or achieving goals) but did so imprecisely, without clear reference to Aristotle's notions of reason, virtue, or function. These twin weaknesses - lack of development and/or lack of clarity - typified this band. Some students mentioned relevant themes like 'purpose' or 'virtue', but without explaining their significance. Generalised accounts, lacking precise use of the most relevant philosophical concepts, such as 'being happy' or 'having a good life' were also characteristic of responses at this level.

Students gaining only **1 mark** produced fragmented or partial responses with minimal structure. These included vague or disconnected points such as '*eudaimonia* is about being good', without substantive engagement with Aristotle's ideas. Some responses confused *eudaimonia* with pleasure or hedonism, or treated it as a temporary feeling rather than an enduring objective state. Several students echoed more colloquial or lifestyle-oriented interpretations, equating *eudaimonia* with phrases like 'living your best life' - a view that reflects contemporary usage but lacks the conceptual rigour expected in philosophical analysis. Nevertheless, most students managed to make at least one relevant point and were awarded some credit.

Only a small number of students failed to produce any response or wrote nothing worthy of credit.

Question 9: Explain Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative and explain the issue that not all universalisable maxims are distinctly moral. (12 marks)

This question required knowledge and understanding (AO1) of Kant's first formulation of the categorical imperative and a well-known critique of it, both drawn from the 'Normative ethical theories' section of the *Specification* (3.2.1). The expected response focused primarily on an internal critique of Kant's method – i.e. questioning whether the consistency test ('contradiction in conception' or 'contradiction in will') is sufficient for identifying genuinely moral principles. However, several students opted to use the 'mad axeman' case (or similar) as an external critique - arguing, in effect, from a consequentialist (or other non-deontological) standpoint that Kant's moral rigidity can yield counterintuitive or morally troubling outcomes. Although this was not an anticipated approach, it was subsequently credited in the Mark Scheme, provided it was well integrated and philosophically relevant.

Overall, this was the strongest performing question on the paper. Nearly three-quarters of students scored 6 marks or more, with a large proportion placed in the 7–9 band. Marks of 7, 8, and 9 were awarded in broadly equal numbers, reflecting a consistent level of performance across that range. Nearly a quarter of responses reached the top band (10–12 marks). Just over a quarter were placed in the 4–6 range, fewer than 10% of responses scored in the 1–3 range, and only a very small number of students produced no creditworthy material.

Responses in the **7–9 mark** range often included clear explanations of Kant's test of universalisability, usually covering both types of contradictions. However, some did not fully explain how these tests function within Kant's system, with either one test omitted, or one

explained with significantly more clarity and/or detail than the other. A common omission was the distinction between ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ duties, or a lack of clarity around which contradiction test leads to which type of duty. While this did not necessarily preclude access to the top band, it often indicated a response that could have been more fully developed. Many students successfully identified the key issue - that certain maxims, such as ‘always chew food 32 times’ or ‘steal from shops on the third Wednesday of each month if your name has 7 letters’, may be universalised without contradiction, yet seem morally trivial or problematic. However, answers in this range sometimes focused too heavily on one part of the question: either offering a detailed exposition of Kant’s theory with little attention to critique, or critique without a clear account of Kant’s framework. A recurring issue was the mistaken assumption that Kant thought that all universalisable maxims are obligatory rather than merely permissible, which often led to less impactful critiques. Examples were often well chosen but not always clearly analysed. In particular, some students failed to show how the examples they used could pass both of Kant’s contradiction tests, or to explain why this would undermine his system. This often linked back to the earlier issue of incomplete exposition: where one or both contradiction tests had not been fully explained, students struggled to demonstrate how their chosen maxim passed both tests and why this constituted a challenge to Kant’s method. In this way, weaknesses in explanation led directly to weaknesses in integration.

Responses in the **4–6 mark** range demonstrated a largely correct understanding of Kant’s ethical framework and/or the associated critique but lacked the clarity, detail, or integration required for higher marks. Many students were able to outline Kant’s theory in broad terms, referencing the idea of ‘testing maxims’ through ‘universalisation’, but did not always distinguish clearly between the two contradiction tests. Where both were mentioned, they were often described imprecisely or confused with each other. Some students focused almost entirely on Kant’s theory without addressing the critique in any meaningful way, while others outlined the objection without laying the necessary groundwork in Kant’s system. This lack of integration was a key barrier to higher achievement. These responses showed some relevant understanding, but often in an underdeveloped or imbalanced form. In some cases, students addressed the wrong issue altogether - such as the problem of conflicting duties or the concern that some moral principles cannot be universalised. That said, students who made such errors could still score within this band; since the question required explanation of both Kant’s framework and the related objection, a sustained treatment of either part could, in principle, access up to half the available marks. Some brought in the second formulation of the categorical imperative which, while part of Kant’s moral theory, was not relevant to the specific focus of this question and often led students off track. Use of examples was mixed. While some students mentioned trivial maxims, they did not always explain why the triviality of such maxims was philosophically problematic for Kant’s method. The ‘mad axeman’ case also appeared in some responses, but often without a clear explanation of its function as an external critique or of how it exposed potential weaknesses in Kant’s reliance on universalisability as a sufficient test for morality.

Responses in the **10–12 mark** band were typically characterised by:

- Precise accounts of Kant’s first formulation, clearly distinguishing between ‘contradiction in conception’ and ‘contradiction in the will’.

- A recognition of Kant's distinction between 'perfect' and 'imperfect' duties, showing how each kind of contradiction aligns with one of these duty types. Well-chosen examples were often used to illustrate these distinctions effectively.
- The best responses showed how certain maxims pass both contradiction tests yet fail to align with our moral intuitions and/or pose a significant challenge to the internal logic of Kant's system.
- As previously noted, some responses presented examples like the 'mad axeman' case, where the maxim 'never lie' is shown to lead to morally troubling consequences when applied rigidly. Although external to Kant's method, this kind of example was credited when it was clearly integrated into the broader analysis and used to reinforce the critique of Kantian moral reasoning.

Responses in the **1–3 mark** range were typically very limited, often showing only a basic or confused understanding of Kant's ethical theory and/or the issue. Some students made vague references to duty or morality without explaining the first formulation or how it operates. Others focused on unrelated issues - such as Kant's second formulation or the problem of conflicting duties – which did not address the specific question set. A few answers mentioned the idea of universalisability but failed to connect it to either of the contradiction tests or to the challenge posed by trivial or morally questionable maxims. These responses often lacked structure, detail, and integration, and as a result could only be awarded minimal credit.

Question 10: Are moral realists right to claim that mind-independent moral facts/properties exist? (25 marks)

This question tested both AO1 and AO2, with the emphasis on evaluative judgement (AO2). Drawing on content from the 'Meta-ethics' section of the *Specification* (3.2.3), it required students to assess the plausibility of the moral realist claim and included opportunities to evaluate different forms of moral realism (such as naturalism and non-naturalism), as well as major anti-realist alternatives (such as error theory and/or non-cognitivism). As is typical of questions focused on meta-ethics, performance was relatively variable, with many students finding it conceptually demanding. The average mark was just under 11, making it the lowest-scoring question on the paper and lower than both the corresponding Epistemology question and the Moral Philosophy 25-mark question from 2024. Just under half of all students scored 12 marks or above, and the modal score was 13, with the most frequently accessed band being 11–15. Around one in five responses reached the top two bands, with a modest increase in the number of students achieving 21–25 compared to last year - a sign of improvement at the top end. However, a quarter of students scored in the 6–10 range, and substantially more fell into the 1–5 band than on Question 5. A larger proportion also left this question blank or wrote nothing worthy of credit. The disparity between the highest and lowest performing students was especially stark here: while those with a firm grasp of the material could construct coherent and well-evidenced arguments, many others struggled to explain key distinctions or to sustain a clear evaluative line. This contrast highlights the ongoing challenge posed by meta-ethics, but also the opportunities it offers for students with a strong command of content and conceptual precision.

The majority of students fell into the **11–15 mark** band. Most identified the core claim of moral realism and contrasted this with anti-realist alternatives such as emotivism, prescriptivism, or error theory. However, these discussions were not always consistently

evaluative. While arguments and counter-arguments were included, they were not always stated in their strongest forms or given balanced consideration – e.g. moral realism was often dismissed too quickly without having been given a fair hearing. Often, conclusions were based more on assertion than sustained justification. Many students at this level engaged with familiar critiques of realism, including Mackie's arguments from queerness and relativity. The queerness argument was sometimes described only in general terms, without distinguishing its metaphysical and epistemological components or considering possible realist replies. The argument from relativity was frequently cited as a way of undermining realism but was not explored in depth (e.g. by unpacking the nature of moral disagreement or considering whether disagreement necessarily implies subjectivity). Students also commonly referred to Moore's 'open question argument' or the naturalistic fallacy. However, these were not always used precisely, nor realist replies considered. Some treated the naturalistic fallacy as a universal objection to any appeal to natural facts in ethics, rather than as a targeted critique of reductive definitional strategies. Similarly, Moore's challenge was frequently mentioned without clearly explaining how it relates to the definability of 'good' or whether naturalists could offer a viable response.

Hume's 'is-ought gap' was also frequently cited but sometimes left unexplained or conflated with Moore's point, suggesting a need for clearer conceptual differentiation. Some students conflated the views of Hume and Ayer – an understandable error, given the similarities in their critiques of moral statements. The more significant issue, however, was that many did not fully explain or develop the objections raised by either thinker. In particular, students often *asserted that* moral statements fail Hume's and/or Ayer's tests, but without illustrating *how* they fail. Students could have strengthened their answers by explaining this more precisely, perhaps by referring to Moore's 'naturalistic fallacy' or the 'open question' argument, which highlight the difficulty of reducing moral terms to empirical or definitional ones. Responses in this band were often strongest when describing anti-realist positions, but realist theories were sometimes summarised too briefly or evaluated only by comparison. In some cases, discussions moved from one theory to another without maintaining a clear argumentative thread. While philosophical terms were generally used correctly, they were not always applied consistently or precisely, for example with some conflating 'cognitivism' and 'realism'. A number of students often started off their essays by describing the various positions in meta-ethics, which is a legitimate way to start the essay, but answers in this band often failed to utilise or integrate this material as effectively as they could have done. Nevertheless, these responses showed genuine engagement and a reasonable structure. Conclusions were present and supported by identifiable reasons, even if the overall logic was not always sustained.

Students who progressed into the top two bands – **16–20 and 21–25 marks** – were characterised by some of the following features:

- Clear and consistent argumentative direction, often established in the introduction and maintained throughout. Rather than simply describing realist and anti-realist views, these essays focused explicitly on whether it is philosophically plausible to believe in the existence of mind-independent moral properties and structured the discussion accordingly.
- Some students structured their arguments effectively by identifying key criteria for assessing a meta-ethical theory – such as 'explanatory power', 'coherence', 'psychological plausibility', and 'the ability to account for moral discourse and

knowledge’ - and then evaluating their chosen theory accordingly. This approach allowed for clear, focused analysis and demonstrated a strong understanding of both the theory and the standards by which it can be assessed. (NB: students must take care if adopting this approach, as some less convincing answers attempted it without adequately explaining or justifying their chosen criteria. In such cases, it was often unclear why the selected criteria were particularly relevant, or the subsequent evaluation did not fully engage with or apply them).

- Focused engagement with major realist positions, especially naturalism and non-naturalism, and their associated challenges. Stronger essays integrated these ideas into the flow of argument rather than listing them sequentially.
- Evaluation that addressed not only objections, but also responses to them, adding philosophical depth. For instance, some students defended naturalism against Moore by comparing moral reductions to other successful identity claims (e.g. ‘water is H₂O’), or responded to Hume’s ‘is-ought’ objection by invoking Searle’s critique. Others linked the problem of moral motivation to Mackie’s metaphysical queerness, drawing out its relevance to realism’s overall coherence.
- Critical engagement with anti-realist theories, including emotivism, prescriptivism, and error theory. Strong responses did more than explain these views - they interrogated their plausibility, often contrasting them with realism on the grounds of ‘explanatory power’ or ‘ability to account for moral discourse and disagreement’.
- Recognition of realism’s potential strengths, such as its explanatory power in accounting for ‘apparent moral progress’ or ‘widespread moral norms’. Some drew on discourse-based arguments to show how realism might provide a more satisfying account of moral language and disagreement, even if these arguments were later challenged.
- Accurate application of philosophical distinctions, including clear separations between realism and cognitivism’, naturalism and non-naturalism, and epistemological vs metaphysical queerness.
- Emphasis on weighing and prioritising arguments, especially in the best responses (21-25 range), where students identified which objections were most damaging to realism and allocated space accordingly. This weighting of significance, as well as the articulation of counter-responses, gave their conclusions greater force and coherence.
- Appropriate and precise use of philosophical terminology, with key terms applied accurately and consistently.
- The best essays also avoided rhetorical overstatement and instead focused on reasoned, well-supported evaluations.

Students awarded **6–10 marks** typically demonstrated a partial grasp of the indicative content but struggled to develop a coherent or well-integrated argument. As in the 11–15 band, there was some engagement with the realism/anti-realism debate, but responses in this range were generally less coherent, less accurate, and more descriptive than analytical and evaluative. A common issue was over-reliance on critiques of anti-realist views, particularly emotivism or prescriptivism, followed by the unsupported conclusion that realism must therefore be true. This revealed a misunderstanding: refuting anti-realism does not, by itself, establish realism. Similarly, the distinction between cognitivism and realism was frequently blurred, with some students assuming the terms were interchangeable and overlooking that realism is a specific form of cognitivism, distinct from positions such as error theory. Where key objections were raised - such as Moore’s ‘naturalistic fallacy’, the ‘open question argument’, or Hume’s ‘is–

ought' gap - they were often stated briefly or formulaically, without analysis. For example, students might write that 'you can't get an ought from an is' without explaining how this challenges naturalist attempts to derive moral truths from factual premises. Compared to 11–15 responses, these claims were typically more superficial and less clearly connected to the argument. There was also limited support for or defences of realism. Few students explored realist frameworks in any depth, such as the contrast between naturalist and non-naturalist realism, or drew on explanatory strategies that might support a realist view. Even where realism was endorsed, it was typically asserted rather than argued for. Some responses relied on Ayer's 'verification principle' or Hume's Fork as grounds for rejecting realism, often without clarifying the basis of the objection. While these tools can challenge cognitivist claims, their role and scope were not always well understood (and often conflated), leading to generalised or imprecise critiques. Across the band, argument structure was weak. Competing views were often listed or juxtaposed without comparison or critical engagement. Evaluation, where present, was minimal or unbalanced, and philosophical terms were used inconsistently or without explanation. Nonetheless, many responses included relevant material and tried to engage with the question.

Students awarded **1–5 marks** typically demonstrated very limited engagement with the question or with the relevant meta-ethical content. In some cases, responses focused on broad ideas about morality being 'just opinions' or 'what society teaches', without reference to the concept of 'mind-independence', 'realism', or any specific theory. Others listed some relevant philosophical terminology but did not explain or develop them. While some students made relevant points about 'moral disagreement' or 'cultural variation', these were often asserted in general terms without connection to the structure of the realism/anti-realism debate. A few students showed some awareness of philosophical issues but confused realism with other positions – e.g. treating realism as equivalent to being 'strict' or 'dogmatic' about morals, or as simply 'believing right and wrong exist'. Others mistook the question as one about which normative theory is best, drifting into discussions of utilitarianism or deontology with little relevance to the topic of moral realism. Where objections to realism were introduced, they were usually named without explanation or were applied in confused ways. Few answers in this band attempted a structured argument, and where conclusions were offered, they were typically asserted without reasoning or failed to address the issue of whether mind-independent moral facts exist.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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