

# 2018 VCE Philosophy written examination report

## General comments

The 2018 Philosophy examination allowed students to demonstrate their knowledge, and student responses showed that the examination was generally accessible. In Section A students were expected to not only recite specific textual knowledge but also demonstrate focus and precision when reading the specifics of each question. Many students displayed accurate and refined knowledge of the study material and an astute ability to make selections and support their reasoning. However, a large number of students made simple reading errors and misinterpreted or ignored what was being asked of them in some questions. This issue was compounded by some inconsistent content knowledge and a distinct shortage of precise recognition of philosophical language.

## Specific information

**Note: Student responses reproduced in this report have not been corrected for grammar, spelling or factual information.**

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

## Section A

Section A contained a variety of question styles ranging from those that required single-mark definitional responses to those that required expanded discussions of philosophical positions supported by specific and well-developed reasoning. Students who knew the study content well and targeted the specific language of the questions performed well in this section. However, students often attempted to interpret some questions in ways that suited their knowledge rather than applying their knowledge to accurately and insightfully develop a precise response to the question asked.

### Question 1

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	86	3	2	8	0.4

References to anything outside of Meditation 6 did not answer the question. Moreover, it was essential for students to identify not just Descartes's efforts to separate the mind and body (as supported by the uncertainty established in Meditations 1 and 2) but to make use of the specific argument given in the single paragraph of Meditation 6 in the set readings. For this reason,

responses referring to the impact of doubt on knowledge, or the knowability of the mind versus that of the body, were irrelevant.

The only acceptable answer covered the way that Descartes possesses clear and distinct understanding of the nature of his mind and by extension clear and distinct knowledge of the different aspects of the mind and body. Finally, and most importantly, students had to identify the role of God as the figure within whom the separation of the mind and body is properly held. Hence, because the separation can be held at least in the mind of God, Descartes feels justified in his claim that such a separation actually exists.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*Descartes argues that if he can clearly and distinctly understand A apart from B, then God can make it logically possible that they're distinct. For them to be clear and distinct there must be 2 properties that differ between them. With his body this property is extension, and with his mind this property is thought. Therefore, the mind and body are distinct and the mind can exist apart from the body.*

### Question 2

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	37	16	47	1.1

Question 2 required students to identify an example specifically used by Armstrong to demonstrate his problem with behaviourism. The most common error students made in answering this question was not to include an example, or to choose examples not directed at behaviourism, such as the subconscious driver thought experiment. Students who made good use of either behaviourism's inability to account for emotions felt but not expressed, using the angry man example, or Ryle's limited conception of the brittle glass thought experiment and why Armstrong felt the need to refine it, scored highly in this question.

### Question 3a.

Marks	0	1	2	3	Average
%	31	21	22	26	1.5

Responses to Question 3a. needed to demonstrate Hume's sceptical perspective on personal identity and make distinct use of an argument expressed by Hume in his text. Often, students had a very good sense of both how and why Hume viewed identity in the way that he did without making use of an actual argument. These responses could not be awarded marks. Moreover, merely stating Hume's scepticism is not the same as identifying how or why he holds such scepticism. A complete explanation of how Hume recognises impressions as essential to identity and that, despite his efforts, he is unable to discover any perception that is persistent over time, would constitute a complete argument. Students who made use of the theatre analogy were required to connect the imagery of the theatre performance with the inconsistency of impressions to make this into an argument. Outside of the set reading, a student could use Hume's problem of induction in order to explain the way that consistency over time is the product of incomplete reasoning, which they might have supported from within the text with reference to resemblance, contiguity or causation.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*Hume argues that we have no evidence to suppose the synchronic personal identity exists. When we actively search inwards for an essential self via empiricism, we cannot observe such a thing – merely perceptions that continuously emerge as independent, separate and distinct, much like a theatre has moving pictures – but with no audience or essential self to perceive them watching it. Thus, Hume concludes that we have no empirical proof for a synchronic self,*

*such that we should be sceptical of the existence of personal identity as all that exists is not a self, but a bundle of perceptions.*

**Question 3b.**

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	46	30	24	0.8

Students were asked to propose a possible objection to Hume's position on personal identity. Students who could identify problems while making sure to address them to Hume's scepticism of personal identity, rather than just at Hume himself or his general philosophical perspective, handled this question well.

Efforts to leverage moral responsibility as a problem for Hume's scepticism required extra work to identify and explain how Hume's discussion of the philosophical nature of the problem he identifies means that its relevance to real world living should be taken with caution. Most students who challenged Hume on the moral implications of a non-persistent self did not draw out Hume's full explanation for why this concern is unimportant to him, either to reference how unfulfilling such a response is or how this raises questions about the philosophical importance of such a discussion if it cannot be related to reality.

Despite the misleading comment about Hume arguing that the 'self doesn't exist', the following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*Hume's direct empiricism seems to fail him in his search for the essential self, such that he is flawed in arguing the self doesn't exist. Hume's attempt to perceive the self is much like the owner of a house, skipping outside of his house and peering into the window to search for the owner, and then, since he is the owner and he is outside, concluding that there is no owner of the house. Similarly, when Hume attempts to perceive, he runs into the same issue of not being able to directly perceive the self, but this doesn't mean that the self doesn't exist, much like how the house owner still exists even though he can't see himself. Thus, Hume is flawed in his sceptical view, for the self actually exists.*

**Question 4a.**

Marks	0	1	Average
%	40	60	0.6

Aristotle has several positions on the role of pleasure in the good life. Students who identified pleasure with a life of beasts, or the need to take pleasure in virtuous acts, or at the right time and in the right way, were awarded the mark. Vague responses, those that suggested that Aristotle had no interest in pleasure or that pleasure should be sought as a mean between excess and defect did not demonstrate accurate and precise knowledge of Aristotle's position.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*Pleasure must be felt at the right time, under the right stimuli and circumstance – this indicates an inherently virtuous character that is necessary for a good life, as well as habituated virtue.*

**Question 4b.**

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	28	34	38	1.1

It is likely that Socrates would agree with Aristotle regarding pleasure. Those who pursue it without restraint are like gully birds, while those who discover pleasure in the effort to create order and discipline in the mind would be welcome to it. This being said, Socrates has little interest in

pleasure as a pursuit. If it were a by-product of the effort to become or understand the Good, then he would likely hold no reservations.

In addition to this, students were required to specifically address Aristotle's position as outlined in Question 4a., which meant an answer that did not make use of the answer given in Question 4a. could not be awarded full marks. Finally, students often confused Socrates's and Aristotle's positions, attributing views expressed by one as views expressed by the other. Answers of this nature could not be awarded marks.

The following is an example of a response that demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of Socrates, without connecting it to Aristotle's position stated in Question 4a.

*Socrates would assert that pleasure may be experiences, but must be restricted to lead a fulfilling life, for the corruption of limitless desires is analogous to a leaky jar that dribbles constantly to maintain a constant flow of desires, resulting in a life of frustration in an attempt to consistently maintain the jar and the sustenance of desires – this is not a good life.*

#### Question 4c.

Marks	0	1	2	Average
%	13	28	59	1.5

Students generally understood how Callicles would respond to Aristotle's view on the role of pleasure in the good life. Most commonly, students made reference to Aristotle's efforts to restrict pleasure for a variety of reasons and counteracted this with Callicles's unsophisticated decree that the pursuit of pleasure is the only thing of value in the effort to live well. As with Question 4b., students were required to specifically apply Callicles's views to those of Aristotle expressed in Question 4a.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*Callicles would reject Aristotle's viewpoint. It is redundant for pleasure to be felt under correct circumstances, for he denounces the pursuit of virtue. Instead, Callicles postulates that preventative conventions of which restrict the superior from expanding their desire and pleasures are a ploy of the masses – the stronger should experience pleasure by any means possible, for this is endorsed by nature (in the case of a strong state making war on a weaker one). Thus – maximising pleasure, despite being virtuous, leads to a good life.*

#### Question 5a.

Marks	0	1	Average
%	36	64	0.7

Nietzsche has one clear response to 'hedonism or pessimism or utilitarianism or eudaemonism' in the selected reading and that is that all of these ethical modes are misleadingly concerned with pleasure and pain. This being said, Nietzsche's entire philosophy acts as a rejection of moral roles as ascribed by groups and in this manner students could respond by highlighting that these ethical modes represent 'herd morality' or a restriction or 'diminution' of man. All of these options were acceptable.

It is important that students direct their answer to the question being asked. General assertions of a vaguely Nietzschean form could not be awarded the mark if they did not clearly express they were responding to the issue at hand.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response.

*He objects that there are more important issues than pleasure and pain which is what these philosophies address and that this concern is contributing to the degradation of man.*

**Question 5b.**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	30	16	26	18	10	1.6

For this question students were required to clearly express whether or not Nietzsche's views consisted of a fair criticism of the arguments set forth in Singer's 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality'. As such, detailed explanations of Singer's arguments were unnecessary unless used in the development of a discussion of the fairness of Nietzsche's critique. Similarly, elaborations on Nietzsche's philosophical stance were not awarded marks if they did not adhere to the requirements of the question. Students who clearly explored how Nietzsche's viewpoint on the role of suffering was radically different to that of Singer and acknowledged that the two views were perhaps incompatible for a discussion of fairness scored well. Mere assertions about how one was better than the other with no clear development of reasoning could not be awarded full marks.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response that clearly attempts to develop a rationale for supporting the position argued. There are some misleading language choices and the suggestion that Nietzsche 'decides to help those suffering' is used in a way that misinterprets Nietzsche's central philosophical position. Despite this, the student's line of reasoning is well-supported and demonstrates genuine consideration of the question asked.

*I don't think that Nietzsche's objection is a fair criticism of Singer's argument. While Nietzsche believes that one should suffer as it helps to strengthen the soul and build courage, he would not say that people should suffer from famine and poverty, the main evils Singer addresses in his argument. Singer Argues that suffering from lack of food, water and medical care is bad and that people ought to help the victims of this suffering by giving until the point of something of comparable moral significance. Nietzsche's argument is even less fair as later, he acknowledges that those of master mentality should help those suffering albeit not out of pity but out of their superfluity of power. Therefore, although for different reasons, Nietzsche too decides to help those suffering, thus too addressing issues of pleasure and pain which he deems pointless.*

**Section B**

Section B highlights the distinction between knowledge of study content and the ways in which students use that knowledge to answer a question. In 2018, it was clear that students generally had a firm grasp of Plato's 'Phaedo', Armstrong, Locke and Nagasena, and many were able to appropriately use the mango thought experiment.

**Question 1**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	12	7	9	11	12	12	10	10	9	5	3	4.5

Many students correctly identified the nature of the prompt for Question 1. The prompt encouraged students to consider the philosophers in application to a particular concern. Whether or not the 'body, mind and soul' can be balanced was separate to the extent to which such advice could make sense for Socrates and Armstrong. It is worth noting that neither philosopher advocates for balance. Armstrong would find the entire concept ridiculous because the mind is the body. Socrates would find the idea damaging because the soul is the natural ruler of the body and efforts to bring them into balance would effectively damage or taint the soul. Students who kept a clear focus on the demands of the question generally handled this well, whereas those who chose to outline Socrates's and Armstrong's views on the mind/body relationship without any discussion of the issue of 'balance' did not score as highly. Moreover, the assertion that one or the other might be 'right' required the students to make a judgment on the notion of balance within the discussion

of the mind/body problem. To state that Armstrong is right, simply because science is modern and he uses science, missed the purpose of the question. Developing an argument based on that line of reasoning was simple enough, but most students did not connect such a discussion to the problem of balance. Similarly with Socrates, who has little interest in balance, students often spent too much time outlining his goals in the *Phaedo* rather than addressing whether or not any of these comments give a relevant or justifiable response to the question of balancing the body, mind and soul.

Finally, students who evaluated or critically compared the two viewpoints often moved away from the question. An evaluation for this prompt is only valuable if it is designed to support one of the central tenants of the prompt. Students who leveraged one philosopher against the other to demonstrate why one of them would be more right or more supportable were able to score highly despite this not being to the only acceptable methodology.

The following response, despite some misleading language choices, makes a concerted effort to grapple with all aspects of the question.

*The image above seems to suggest that one ought to balance one's body, mind and soul. For Armstrong, this idea seems to make little sense as he believes that the mind is corporeal and a part of the body, being the brain. He believes this as a result of the authority he gives to science as it is the only intellectual field to be able to reach consensus on controversial topics. Since science currently believes that the mind is purely physical, Armstrong justifies his materialist stance. He believes that similar to how brittleness is a disposition of glass causing it to break when struck under the right conditions, mental states are merely brain states apt for producing a range of certain behaviours under the right circumstances. Furthermore, consciousness is merely our brain scanning itself to identify our dispositions in order to act upon them similar to how one perceives the world through senses and with that information can choose to respond. Since Armstrong seems to dub all mental activity tied to the mind as part of the brain, he seems to make no room for balance between the body and mind as they appear to be one. Furthermore, as a materialist, he makes no acknowledgement of having a soul and would reject that concept as well thus this image would make no sense to him. On the other hand, Socrates would agree with this image as he discerns between a body and the mind and soul (which seem to be interchangeable for him). He does this as the soul shares more affinity to the world of forms which is eternal and indestructible whereas the body is more like the world of particulars, destructible and mortal... He believes the soul to be master of the body and deems it superior yet one must protect their soul by preventing it from indulging in bodily pleasures which can corrupt a soul and bring it down to the body's lower status... It is in these ideas which this idea of balance the image represents if vital as one does not want to corrupt their soul thus one must balance bodily indulgences with philosophy. However, it is hard to accept that Socrates' belief is right though as he cannot explain how an immaterial soul can have a causal effect of a material body, especially if the soul itself lays beyond the laws of causation. Moreover, it is hard to accept this idea when science seems to be on track to disproving it. This is where Armstrong's idea gains more merit, as it is supported by science which brings us the rest of our truths. Although he acknowledges that science can be occasionally wrong, it is still the best we have. As a result, Socrates seems to be wrong. However, while Armstrong presents a better case on the nature of the mind, his idea is not perfect. He provides an inadequate explanation of consciousness as it seems to be lacking. Similar to how there is something it's like to be a bat, there is something else there is to be like an individual human which differs from person to person yet this is not accounted for by Armstrong. Therefore, while Armstrong seems to be more right than Socrates, he fails to give a perfectly adequate account of the mind.*

**Question 2**

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	12	6	10	11	12	13	15	10	7	3	1	4.3

Students showed a clear understanding of Nagasena's and Locke's views on the nature of personal identity and its role in moral responsibility while using a Nagasena thought experiment. All of these parts were clearly stipulated in the prompt, yet many students ignored them and presented an irrelevant overview of Locke's or Nagasena's entire philosophical position. Moreover, evaluations of the philosophers independent of one another was not required for this question.

Students found making a critical comparison challenging. It requires the focused discussion of how two differing philosophies might approach the same task in alternate but equally compelling ways. However, it also requires students to consider how these alternate views might interact and how such interaction might lead to concerns that emphasise the merits and limitations of the philosophers in question. For Nagasena and Locke, both of whom have radically different perspectives on identity yet still manage to ascribe responsibility in different ways and for different reasons, the most direct point of comparison was these similarities and differences and whether or not they could be reconciled.

The following is an extract from a response that involved a reasonable attempt to critically compare.

*Locke's account of moral responsibility is superior to Nagasena's, as Locke says that to be punished for something you don't remember is like being born cursed. Because Nagasena doesn't believe in a personal identity, in the mango thought experiment, punishing the man who has the mangoes now is like the man being born punished. If there is no self, then although this man may be causally linked to the man who stole, he is now a different person, so should not have to pay the price for the actions of a different person. The fact that Locke relies on memory for moral responsibility and Nagasena doesn't, instead he relies on the causal relationship, may sometimes be a negative thing such as in the case of false memories. If people were implanted with false memories Locke would be forced to say that the person now should experience the punishment/reward of the person in those memories, but this is logically impossible as the person in those memories doesn't exist. Despite memory being a faulty criterion to base personal identity and thus moral responsibility off of, I still think Locke's account of moral responsibility is superior as it provides a possibility that the person now will justly be punished as they share memories with the person doing the crime so they at least have some element of identity in common, but in Nagasena's account the men are 2 different people so it is more unfair for the person being punished.*

**Section C**

Question chosen	0	1	2	3
%	2	31	43	24

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	3	1	2	2	4	5	6	7	10	9	9	8	8	6	6	4	3	2	2	2	0	9.7

The essays are assessed by the use of the published criteria and therefore it is important that students are familiar with these.

Students who developed incisive and precise discussion of the central philosophical concepts were rewarded for their efforts. Each prompt involved an interpretive element that gave students a variety of possible avenues to explore:

- Was the human bridge forced into this position or did he choose to make a sacrifice? How do these questions influence our perspective on all of the lives depicted by the cartoon?
- What is the difference between a 'real need' and a 'want'? Is destruction the only path for those who satisfy their wants?
- What kind of technology is the kind that might save us? Can the naivety of the assertion be discussed as there are obviously many forms of technology and much of it is unlikely to 'save us'?

Most essays displayed genuine efforts to develop a long piece of philosophical writing. Students were able to interrogate the question; however, many essays followed a very simple formula and offered little insight into the philosophical concerns of the questions. It was common for essays to make a statement about what will be achieved before presenting a series of generic paragraphs, each based on a different philosopher, with no discussion of the merits or limitations of their views in light of the question's concerns, or in light of each other. This was not conducive to a philosophical essay. Responses of this type involved little if any critical discussion and generally drew conclusions without having interrogated any of the arguments raised. Similarly, essays that ignored the questions and consisted of a generic discussion of similar issues could not score highly.

The following is an extract from a high-scoring response to Question 3 that demonstrates careful considerations of all arguments and ideas raised and makes a systematic effort to develop a clear and well-supported argument.

*What role should an individual's self-determination play in the good life? Have technological advancements reduced our ability to lead independent, good lives? In this essay, I will argue that Socrates' good life is most representative of the actual good life, such that an individual's own discipline and self-control to pursue the goodness of order and organisation is necessary for a good life, but that if an individual's own ability is somehow restricted, technological advancements, specifically genetic engineering, should be employed to assist in the pursuit of good in case that individual's own strength would not allow it. However, since this seems to be a rather specialised use of genetic engineering, in all other cases, genetic engineering will not save us, but rather prevent us from pursuing the good, such that we should be worried about permitting its general use. But even if we do not agree with Socrates' approach, Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel will provide attractive reasoning as to why genetic engineering's reduction of our opinions to the unbidden by compromising humility, responsibility and solidarity means that we should greatly avoid genetic engineering.*

*But what role does an individual's independence play in Socrates' good life? According to Socrates, the good is not found by the rhetorician who pursues pleasure which is distinct to goodness as both sufferable goods and bad pleasures exist, but the philosopher who generally locates goodness to reside in the order and organisation of all things. Specifically, for the individual, goodness is found in the order and organisation of the body, leading to health, but also within the mind. The processes that forge order and organisation within the mind will also cause the person to be just, disciplined and capable of demonstrating self-control to reject pleasure and remain committed to the good. Yet these virtues also give rise to other attributes required of the good life, such as courage to endure the suffering that may come with the pursuit of good and the ensure one remains committed, but also the preference to suffer wrong rather than do wrong. Suffering wrong is better than doing wrong since it is a communal good, thus allowing justice, order and equal distribution to be reimposed as the person is punished for their attempts to have more than others. But more importantly, suffering wrong is also better since it is a prudential good. By suffering wrong, one prevents the greater harm of immorality from attacking the soul, allowing it to remain in a pure state by sacrificing the body to the temporary harms of the physical world. Additionally, since a person who seeks order and*



*organisation is always aiming at the good, they will be successful in all that they do, and thus be happy. Consequently, a Socratic good life's primary focus will always be on the pursuit of order and organisation, such that whilst the independent self-determined attempt to achieve this good will be applauded, it is not the say that achieving the good with altruistic means such as through other goals will compromise the gestures that have been achieved.*

*Given Socrates' emphasis on order and organisation, will Socrates permit the use of genetic engineering? Genetic engineering – the deliberate surgery of our genetic material can be used to either remedy or embrace and thus must be viewed differently for these two difference approaches. Firstly, Socrates would seem to permit genetic engineering insofar as our own independent, self-determined approaches to order and organisation via one's own discipline and self-restraint is insufficient. Therefore, in cases where the body is in disorder and chaos in chromosomal deficiency like Klinefelter's and Down's Syndrome, genetic engineering can be used to restore order to the body. However, this use of genetic engineering is quite limited, and so for the predominant usage of genetic engineering to enhance our traits, Socrates would not permit its usage. The desire to improve oneself seems to be an act of indulgence as an act of pleasure, as it seems to mirror the role of cosmetic enhancements in that the goal of the patient is to be as beautiful or as strong as possible such that they are admired and achieve pleasure. Thus, genetic engineering for the purposes of enhancements would not be permitted by Socrates as it is a pursuant of pleasure...*

*However, is Socrates' account of the good life justified in the first instance? I agree that it is – for 3 reasons. Firstly, it seems as if order and organisation do indeed seem like necessary components of the good life. Suppose there are two students sitting an exam. Student A takes an ordered and organised approach in their revision and thus aptly receives an A+. Student B is disorganised and doesn't revise, yet still miraculously achieves an A+. Although an equivalent outcome was achieved, through intuition, it is evident that Student A was good and B was bad. This is ultimately due to the ordered brain of A allowing her to understand the nature of her success, such that she is able to both replicate her approach and receives more A+'s in later exams, but also to because she was deserving of her grades. Student B was not organised and therefore does not know the nature of her success, such that in subsequent exams, she will not repeat an A+, and she will know that she did not deserve her original grade. Thus, order and organisation are consequently justified as essential components of the good life. Given this, pleasure is also confirmed as being bad and not equivalent to goodness. The life of constant pleasure, epitomised by a drug addict who can easily access pleasure via drugs, is not living a good life. Such a life not only diminishes the value of pleasure, for in the same way as a catamite will eventually regard pleasure as monotonous, pleasure will lose its worth... Furthermore, with order and organisation as the primary focus, it follows that a good person who is just, will also lead to a good society valuing justice. As justice is found in fairness, and fairness occurs via equal distribution, Socrates is justified in his support for equal distribution. However, this not to be read as Socrates supporting strict egalitarianism. Rather, Socrates supports distributing according to need, just as the good doctor distributes according to the needs of the patient. Consequently, Socrates is justified in all 3 elements of his good life.*

*Yet even if we still do not agree with Socrates' approach, Michael Sandel provides us with alternative form of justification for why even though technology can save us, genetic engineering should be restricted. Like Socrates, Sandel concedes the worth of genetic engineering in 'remedying' the illnesses of the human body – namely in disease. However, he ultimately rejects genetic engineering for 3 reasons which destroy our current moral landscape. Firstly, it removes humility. Without genetic engineering, we are humble as we remain open to the unbidden, but with genetic engineering, we become the masters of our own fate and thus accept all praise that result from our improved lives as it was our choice to be modified. The loss of humility is exacerbated by the emphasis of responsibility. If we choose not to be saved by technology, we become responsible for failures previously seen as the work of fate. If we are not tall enough to catch a ball, we are blamed because it is our fault and responsibility that we did not genetically enhance our height. Lastly, we also renounce humanity's solidarity. If we allow people to genetically engineer, we split the race into the enhanced and the plebians. The enhanced will be less likely to help the rest as they will see it as their own fault for not*

*enhancing, removing solidarity from humanity. Thus, due to the three obstructions to humanity's humility, responsibility, and solidarity, Sandel argues that we should avoid genetic engineering as it will not save us but destroy us.*

*Consequently, we should be worried about genetic engineering for whilst the non-issue of compromising our individual ability to achieve Socrates' order and organisation may occur, genetic engineering represents greater harms as a distractor of the good and must be avoided. Similarly, Sandel provides alternative reasons for how genetic engineering threatens our moral landscape, such that we must be worried and avoid it.*