

Examiners' report

AS LEVEL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**OCR Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Religious Studies**

H173

For first teaching in 2016

H173/02 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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Paper 2 series overview

The Religion and Ethics paper introduces candidates to a range of both religious and secular ethical theories as well as looking at key debates within the field. The paper assesses knowledge and understanding (50%) and analysis and evaluation (50%).

The responses this year demonstrated that candidates seemed to be well prepared by their centres and very few candidates attempted to answer all three questions. The legibility of some scripts remained challenging and this may be due to candidates not having the experience or practice of writing essays by hand.

The responses to this paper's questions saw a wide range of success; the very good responses showed developed arguments with clear focused exemplification of the content of the key ideas. These also had coherently developed and justified judgements on the issue raised by the question.

The responses that were less successful did not focus on the question or did not demonstrate the required knowledge and understanding of the specified topic. In their evaluation, these candidates stated alternate ideas but did not actively evaluate or analyse in relation to the question.

Many entries this year seemed to be pre-prepared responses to a topic using a taught framework of phrases, scholars and analytical language, and therefore at times the candidates' focus on the precise question may have been lost in this formulaic approach.

Assessment for learning



Although preparation for possible exam questions is essential before an assessment, it is very important that candidates are not using a taught set of evaluative and analytical phrases that are repeated using pre-learnt scholars and the same points. Candidates should focus on addressing the question that has been set and engaging with it rather than prioritising a pre-taught set of analytical statements that may not meet the criteria for the assessment of the question.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- focused on the wording of the question and the terminology used, for example 'most useful' in Question 1 and 'most helpful part' in Question 3 - produced essays that developed an argument focused on the set question and justified it throughout and reached an appropriate conclusion - were able to select other scholars or thinkers to exemplify their points and counterpoints - effectively selected material to use to address the question; this was often about what was excluded rather than what was put into the essay	- prioritised knowledge rather than fully engaging with the question with their analysis and evaluation - relied on pre-learnt structures and scholars/approaches for topics and did not vary them to focus on the specific question asked on the paper - prioritised own general knowledge and opinion rather than using the ethical theories/approaches to address the question - provided less variety of material in addressing the questions, rather focusing on general ideas, e.g. in Question 2, focusing solely on duty.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• were able to balance their argument effectively using at least two different approaches.	

OCR support



Candidates may wish to look at the [useful blog piece](#) produced by the OCR Religious Studies Subject Advisor in consultation with senior examiners, which explores advice on exam technique in more detail.

Question 1*

In all your responses, you should:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of ethical thought and teaching
- analyse and evaluate aspects of, and approaches to, religion and/or belief (in an ethical context), including their significance, influence and study.

1* 'The most useful approach to business ethics is provided by utilitarianism.' Discuss.

[30]

This question was generally answered very well with appropriate knowledge of both business ethics and utilitarianism. For the most part, candidates compared act and rule utilitarianism or focused on Bentham and Mill and developed an argument of whether these were useful approaches to the issues raised by business ethics.

There was some developed application of John Stuart Mill, particularly how his harm principle could be applied to the question. A small number of candidates made good use of preference utilitarianism and negative utilitarianism in evaluating the utilitarian approach. Some candidates broadly understood the variety of ideas in utilitarianism but tended to conflate all aspects of the theory into one approach. Less successful responses did not explain much beyond 'greatest good' and a sense that Bentham wanted to 'maximise pleasure.'

Candidates used a variety of different business ethics approaches and examples, primarily focusing on corporate social responsibility and whistleblowing. The examples used were applied well to the point that the candidates were making and enabled more successful responses to meet the requirements for the higher levels of response. Less successful responses tended to outline aspects of business ethics and then add a sentence to suggest why utilitarianism would agree or disagree with the approach.

Many candidates contrasted the utilitarian approach with a Kantian interpretation of the issues. The more successful responses did this well using nuanced interpretations of both theories, alongside very good exemplification of the business examples and theories. Less successful responses that used other theories as a contrast offered, at times, simplistic contrasts between the theories and how they were applied to the ethics of business.

More successful responses showed a diversity of content and relevant practical examples using a good knowledge of utilitarianism to apply the theory to addressing the question.

Practical examples used in applied ethics

Many of the examples that candidates use to support their points are older examples that appear repeatedly in various sources (e.g. Rana Plaza, Nestle, Ford Pinto) and some candidates learn these examples without fully understanding their relevance to the theory as they are older examples. It may be useful to include and explore some more modern examples to assist with understanding of the concepts/theories, e.g. the Post Office or the Boeing whistle-blower.

Exemplar 1

people 'suffering' still. Therefore, Bentham's utilitarianism is not the most useful approach to business ethics. Due to this it could be argued instead that ~~that~~ Immanuel Kant's Kantian ethics provides a better approach to business ethics because it protects the workers. Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative highlights that people should never be used as a means to an end, in business, this means that workers cannot be used so that the goal of profit can be achieved. This therefore protects workers from exploitation, and means they are fairly treated. This shows how Kant is more useful than utilitarianism in business ethics because it respects the workers who are in reality the backbone of businesses, where as utilitarianism disregards them and essentially means they can be treated any way so long as society is benefited.

In conclusion, although in theory utilitarianism provides a ~~helpful~~ ^{useful} approach to business ethics, in

		practice it is inconvenient and
		doesn't protect people from harm
		which is what a moral theory should
		do. Instead, Kantian ethics may be
		more useful as it better protects &
		businesses employees.

Exemplar 1 shows a variety of content exemplified with real-world applications and references to thinkers. This extract demonstrates the use of both Kant and utilitarianism being contrasted with each other to provide a coherently developed and justified evaluation of the question. The question set requires analysis of whether utilitarianism is the most useful approach and this response has done it effectively, by using Kantian ethics to come to a reasoned conclusion to the question.

Question 2*

2* Assess the view that Kantian ethics is of little help in moral decision-making.

[30]

This question was one of the most answered from the paper this year and was the question that at times showed the biggest variation in the knowledge of candidates. Many candidates identified the question as solely focusing on strengths and weaknesses of the teachings of Immanuel Kant and they proceeded to outline everything that they knew about Kantian ethics, e.g. duty, categorical versus hypothetical imperatives, three postulates, summum bonum, etc. More successful responses did refer to its helpfulness in moral decision-making, however less successful responses did largely only look at strengths and weaknesses.

The accuracy of AO1 was mostly good, however the selection of appropriate material to address the specific question was not always effectively managed by candidates. Less successful responses saw candidates primarily focus on duty throughout with occasional reference to the categorical imperative, although this was usually stated and not exemplified fully.

Many candidates had a generally good understanding of Kant's understanding of reason and attempted to use the theory to explain its helpfulness in making moral decisions. The common examples that candidates used to support their points, e.g. the enquiring murderer and the shopkeeper, were for the most part used effectively. Although other practical examples illustrating points were not always used effectively by less successful responses to focus on the set question and tended to be used to answer a general question on Kantian ethics.

Less successful responses reduced Kant's theory to just following rules and duty, and therefore moral decision-making is solely following rules/duty. Many of these responses also stated knowledge with some explanation but were not focused on the specific question.

Candidates who successfully focused on the question were able to effectively select appropriate material from Kant's teachings to develop coherent and suitably justified arguments to address the question. These candidates were able to access the highest marks by contrasting the knowledge of Kantian ethics' reliance on reason with alternative perspectives (e.g. using Hume, Sartre, Dawkins) including use of empathy and sympathy when making moral decisions.

In general, candidates had very good knowledge of Kantian ethics but didn't always transfer the knowledge effectively into focus on/analysis of the question.

Question 3*

- 3* 'The five primary precepts are the most helpful part of natural law in moral decision-making.'
Discuss.

[30]

This question was generally answered well by most candidates. There was a demonstration by the candidates of good knowledge of the primary precepts. They gave good explanations of the various precepts and the more successful responses were able to use them effectively to address the question.

A common approach to this question was to outline the primary precepts with examples of them applied and then to comment on their effectiveness in moral decision-making. More successful responses evaluated them well and focused on the helpfulness of the precepts with good contrast with other areas of the theory. Less successful responses tended to only talk about the primary precepts and in some cases to not link this to moral decision-making at all.

Some candidates argued that the secondary precepts were better as they were more specific; others argued that the primary precepts were the basis of the secondary precepts and therefore more useful. There was generally good consideration by some candidates of Aquinas' four tiers of law and this did lead to some appropriate discussions around the role of telos and reasoning contrasted well with divine revelation.

Many candidates focused on comparing the primary precepts and the doctrine of double effect and determining, for the most part, that the doctrine of double effect was the most helpful part of the natural law. More successful responses had a good understanding of the double effect doctrine and were able to exemplify this well; less successful responses were likely to suggest that the doctrine of double effect makes natural law a relativist theory and more useful without fully understanding the nuances and connection with Aquinas' teaching and approaches.

Many candidates interpreted the question as requiring the use of other ethical approaches (e.g. situation ethics or utilitarianism) to contrast with natural law and spent a lot of time outlining these other theories.

The more successful responses managed to balance the various aspects of natural law and to understand that they all work together as they depend on each other; this enabled these candidates to effectively analyse the question to come to a well-reasoned conclusion.

Misconception



Not all questions require candidates to compare ethical theories with each other. There are questions that require candidates to focus entirely on one ethical approach and to evaluate it in light of the question. Many candidates spent too much time outlining other ethical theories and not focusing on the evaluation required of the question that had been set.

Exemplar 2

Another notable aspect of Natural Law that conflicts with my argument is that of Aquinas' rejection of Divine Command Theory, where every part of human morality is sourced from what God desires. Aquinas places more of the onus on humans to be close to God, instead, and to achieve closeness to God - phronesis - through the process that takes place in the human world. This is a strong criticism, as it uses another facet of the theory to present a problem. I would argue though, that ~~the~~ the Primary Precepts can be thought of as conducive to this end, because they effectively 'translate' a lot of Biblical writing into something simplified. In this way, Primary Precepts are instead the facilitator to unlock ~~the~~ the main idea of Natural Law, making it more useful as a framework.

The core nature of the Primary Precepts is in their total absence of change or adaptation to any circumstances. Whilst it may appear that this would seem inflexible, and therefore lacking in relevance to human society, this is not so - the primary precepts concern the absolute fundamentals only. Secondary precepts are designed to change in the situation, as long as the idea aligns with Eternal Law - that of God's command, as humans are made in the image of God. This means, however, that human flaws lead to misinterpretation and distancing from the true Thesis of Eternal Law. Because Primary precepts are taken directly at face value, and can face no interpretation, they are, in the majority of situations, by far the most accessible and the least ~~requir~~ dependent on human input. Therefore, the Primary Precepts can be thought of as most fulfilling the intent and purpose of Natural Law, and being close to God.

Exemplar 2 demonstrates very good focus on the question and analysis of whether the primary precepts are helpful in moral decision-making (e.g. the final sentence of the extract), showing a developed and justified level of AO2 with coherent evidence to support clear analysis and evaluation. The breadth of material used to support the analysis in this extract very clearly shows that the candidate has selected evidence that is relevant to approaching the question.

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