2024 VCE Philosophy external assessment report

General comments

The 2024 VCE Philosophy examination provided students with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge of the concepts, viewpoints and arguments from the set texts; to evaluate these viewpoints and arguments; and to apply their learning to consider the viewpoints and arguments presented in a range of highly accessible extracts.

In Section A, many students were able to provide accurate and appropriate responses to the questions. Many were able to construct high-scoring responses for questions that required they explain an idea or outline an argument. Questions that used quotations or extracts were less successfully answered. A significant number of responses repeated verbatim the quotation or elements of the extract. While many students were able to offer appropriate evaluations and comparative evaluations, a significant number of students cited – again, verbatim – responses they had given in another part of the examination.

In Section B, the responses suggested that students had a clear understanding of the requirements of this section. Students referred to the extracts in some detail, and many students included short quotations from the extracts, which was an effective strategy for ensuring responses remained relevant. Generally, students were able to clearly and accurately identify the position of a given philosopher in relation to the prompts and the ideas contained in the extract, but many did not explain why the philosopher might adopt this position. More space needed to be given to articulating the arguments for philosophical claims. While students generally understood that a justified response is different to a comparative evaluation, a significant number of students did not provide justification appropriate to philosophical discussion, and instead provided a series of assertions or supported their claims with personal beliefs (e.g. ‘I think a chatbot could never be conscious because I believe the mind is physical’). Many students, particularly in the case of Question 2, lost sight of the question and focused exclusively on the extract. Students are reminded to be cognisant of expectations when working with an extract and a prompt to ensure that responses are appropriate to the requirements of the task.

Section C offered students two accessible extracts from which to build their essay on technology and the good life. High-scoring responses were able to use these extracts in a detailed and relevant way to engage in a sustained discussion about technology and the good life, supported by judicious use of the chosen philosophy. While most students understood the requirement to use the extract, many responses did so in a cursory (Question 1) or generalised (Question 2) way. Many students were able to accurately identify a relevant philosophical position in relation to the extract. A significant number of responses were less successful at developing a response that engaged in relevant and sustained evaluation supported by examples.

In 2024, 65 examinations were potentially impacted by the early publication of the examination material. After extensive analysis, only 5 exams were found to have been impacted. The Philosophy examination was one of those 5 examinations.

The independent Expert Advisory Panel led by Professor John Firth:

* reviewed student marks in the affected exams and identified any anomalies in how students have responded to the affected questions, including how the affected question related to the rest of the exam
* analysed if any discrepancies were identified. If so, the panel conducted further analysis.

The statistical analysis revealed anomalies in the data where a small number of students performed significantly better on the impacted questions compared to their performance in the rest of the paper.

To avoid any consequent disadvantage for other students, the Panel recommended that those students were removed from the standard study score, including the distribution of study scores. The scores of impacted students were then inserted into the overall distribution at a matched point after the study scores had been distributed.

This has ensured that no student lost a mark through this process and no student was disadvantaged as a result of this process.

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 been 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

Question 1a.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 17 | 26 | 57 | 1.4 |

High-scoring responses identified that Descartes was able to recognise the wax as the same wax despite the change of form via the intellect, thus it is the intellect and not the senses that provide us with knowledge of reality. Responses that did not score well often cited Descartes’ observation that he knows the wax to be the same despite the change of form, without citing his conclusion. A few responses described the thought experiment instead of responding to the question.

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

By observing the melting wax, Descartes concludes that the mind is a better knower than the body, because the mind can the true attributes of the wax; flexible and changeable. In contrast, through the bodily function of the senses he only sees the distinct qualities of the wax before and after being melted – and thus cannot understand its true nature. Thus, we know reality best with the mind and not the body.

Question 1b.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 16 | 16 | 69 | 1.6 |

To answer this question, students typically cited Smart’s example of lightning or the morning and evening star to illustrate his claim that knowledge of A but ignorance of B does not entail that A and B are different. Many students also used these examples to support Smart’s argument that a semantic difference does not entail an ontological difference. Responses that did not score well often restated the quotation (e.g. ‘someone can describe their sensations without knowing anything about neuroscience’), occasionally including one of the two examples.

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

Smart would likely defend this statement by arguing that this highlights a difference in semantics and does not impair the ontological identity of brain processes and sensations.

He would likely refer to the evening and morning star example. The ignorance of the people has no effect on the star remaining venus.

Question 1c.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 23 | 35 | 42 | 1.2 |

Most high-scoring responses to this question cited either Descartes’ distinction between mind and body or one of Descartes’ arguments for this distinction. Some students used Descartes’ scepticism regarding knowledge obtained through the senses as an argument against Smart’s views. Low-scoring responses typically confused the terms ‘sensations’ and ‘brain states’; conflated the brain with the mind; and argued that Descartes might respond that, while we cannot trust our sensations, we know that our brain exists, so brain states cannot be sensations.

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

Descartes would say that since he has clear and distinct ideas of the mind as a thinking, no-extended thing and the body as an extended, non-thinking thing, God has probably separated them as distinct substances in reality. Hence sensations are not brain states but a part of a different substance entirely.

Question 1d.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 10 | 31 | 59 | 1.5 |

To answer this question successfully, students needed to identify which view they preferred and provide a relevant justification to support this choice. Generally, students understood the needs of the question and were able to provide an appropriate reason, either by deferring to the authority of science and scientific evidence (in the case of Smart) or by referencing shortcomings in the scientific account of mind (in the case of Descartes). However, many responses supported their choice by reference to the students’ own preferences (e.g. ‘I prefer Descartes because I believe that mental states are not brain states’) or by simply citing a version of Questions 1b. or 1c. None of these responses was awarded full marks.

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

I prefer Smart’s view as it accounts for interaction between substances. It is easy to see how a brain process influences sensations if they are the same thing, for example why stimulation of the visual cortex produces visions. However, Descartes’ view cannot account for this as his non-physical mind is not able to be influenced by a material brain which operates exclusively in the physical realm.

Question 2a.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 16 | 21 | 63 | 1.5 |

This question was handled well by most students, who understood that, for Michaels, concern regarding the impending torture despite the erasure of one’s memories indicates that the body must play some role in personal identity. Low-scoring responses to this question often linked concern with the idea that the individual remains ‘in’ their body.

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

She argues that if you remain worried about the torture and there is no psychological continuity the body and physical continuity must play a role in the continuity of identity as only your body experiences the torture.

Question 2b.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 22 | 21 | 57 | 1.4 |

This question attracted a variety of acceptable responses. Some students argued that, as personal identity is constructed through impressions and ideas, the body has no role in the construction of personal identity. Others used the same foundation to argue that the body does play a role in personal identity, for it is one of the impressions from which the idea of a continuous self is constructed. Students who took this pathway sometimes cited Hume’s relations of ideas and views regarding memory to support their responses. As long as students understood Hume’s fundamental view that there is no continuous self, all of these responses were awarded full marks.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. It should be noted that this is a particularly detailed response, and a student could write much less (for example, leaving off the example of the mountain) and still receive full marks.

Hume would respond to the idea our bodies are important in establishing personal identity by denying the existence of a consistent identity entirely, arguing there is nothing invariable and long-lasting that suggests we have a continuous identity. He might extend this to the body, arguing we never retain a perfect identity of our bodies and we confuse similarity with identity through a ‘customary association of ideas.’ Just like how a mountain may seem identical physically, any change to its material parts such as falling rocks would ruin perfect identity and create similarity only. He would argue like everything else, we cannot recognise proportionate change well; due to resemblance and causation we link memories of our bodies.

Question 2c.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 5 | 12 | 31 | 52 | 2.3 |

To answer this question successfully, students needed to provide a clear statement regarding the degree of importance of the body in personal identity and a relevant justification for this position, with reference to Hume or Michaels. Overwhelmingly, students cited Michaels in their response, and particularly her example of riding a bike. While many students were able to use this example effectively to support a view that the body is important to personal identity, others simply cited the example, as though the example itself was adequate justification. Many students understood this question as asking which view – Hume’s or Michaels’ –they found more convincing.

Many responses used examples of bodily change, particularly in cases of individuals for whom the body is important to identity (for instance, athletes and dancers) to argue for the importance of the body in personal identity. While such examples usually indicated a misunderstanding of the nature of personal identity as it is understood in the relevant philosophical arguments, students who were able to show how the body could provide a link between persons at different points in time (for example, a dancer who could perform the moves they had learned previously despite a lack of memory, or an individual who bore the scars of an injury from an accident they cannot remember), and used this to either support Michaels’ views or challenge Hume’s views, were awarded full marks. Responses that provided a clear statement regarding the degree of importance of the body in personal identity but simply cited the response to either 2a. or 2b. as justification could not be awarded full marks.

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

I argue that the body plays no role in personal identity and think that Michaels’ Dr. Nefarious thought experiment does not present a compelling view for the body’s role. Her thought experiment merely rests on an emotional response to the fear of torture – which is a weak logical basis. Furthermore I think the body can’t play a role in establishing personal identity as it is constantly changing – our cells completely regenerate every 7 years – thus I wonder which part of the body would play a role as it is always changing. Thus the body is not important in establishing personal identity.

Question 3

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 9 | 13 | 28 | 50 | 2.2 |

This question required the provision of a clear statement supported by a relevant justification. Students did not need to refer to the extract to answer the question, although many did so. Low-scoring responses often restated parts of the extract to support their position in relation to the question, or supported their position by referencing the students’ own beliefs (e.g. ‘because I believe a good life is really about …’). A number of responses reframed the question and, rather than addressing the notion of happiness, discussed the good life more generally, often citing Nietzsche’s views on suffering to support their claims. As such responses did not address the question asked, they could not be awarded full marks.

Many lower-scoring responses showed a misreading of the question and, rather than responding to the idea that disadvantage makes happiness hard to achieve, instead responded to the view that disadvantage makes happiness impossible to achieve. High-scoring responses typically discussed how happiness can be achieved, despite the specific disadvantages Aristotle identifies, on the grounds that happiness is often the result of how we view our lives. Others acknowledged how difficult it is to achieve happiness in lives characterised by hardship, often because our focus is directed towards survival or consumed by sadness. Some responses discussed how, despite disadvantage, individuals could still use their reason to act virtuously. Although not often managed successfully, when done well the latter was an effective way of responding to the question.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. It accurately responds to the question and makes good use of examples to support a compelling reason as to why disadvantage can make achieving happiness difficult.

Aristotle is right, as a life of disadvantages makes it difficult to achieve happiness insofar as we have limited time. A woman struggling with her child’s chronic illness has little time to consider her own happiness as she is preoccupied with the survival of her child. Indeed, disadvantages take up time in which we can pursue what makes us happy – acting morally for Aristotle. Thus a life of disadvantages inhibits the time we have to pursue happiness.

Question 4a.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 7 | 16 | 77 | 1.7 |

Most students were able to provide accurate responses to this question. High-scoring responses typically connected desire to the good life via pleasure. Some students instead cited Callicles’ claims regarding the life of self-restraint or the prescriptions of nature. Such responses, if done in sufficient detail, were awarded full marks. Low-scoring responses usually failed to draw a connection between the good life and desire, instead simply claiming that they are connected. Others ineffectively cited Callicles’ argument regarding natural right.

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

Callicles argues that one should grow their desires as larges as possible before using one’s ability to achieve them. Desire plays a crucial role in Callicles’ good life which he argues is synonymous to a pleasurable life. He argues that a life where you control your desires is equivalent to living as a stone or corpse.

Question 4b.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 16 | 18 | 66 | 1.5 |

Students offered a variety of acceptable answers to this question. Many students connected desire to the good life via Wolf’s fulfilment view. They suggested that it is our desire for particular ‘passions’ that facilitate the good life, usually with the qualification that what we desire must be ‘worthy of love’ or that we engage with something ‘larger than ourselves’. A number of responses cited Wolf’s claims regarding the human desire to see our lives as having value from a point of view beyond our own. Low-scoring responses conflated desire with pleasure, and claimed that desire was irrelevant to the good life; or they conflated passion with pleasure, and claimed desire was important because it provides us with pleasure, which is important for a good life. Many responses demonstrated a clear misunderstanding of the ‘larger-than-oneself’ view, believing that it involved helping others or producing some benefit for others, or was somehow aligned to altruistic behaviour. While this did not always affect the marks awarded, it indicated that many students do not understand this aspect of Wolf’s argument.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. Note that the response could have been more precise in its articulation of the reasons given as to why Wolf believes meaningfulness is important to us:

Wolf believes that the good life and desire are connected as she posits that the reason we search and aim for meaningfulness in our lives is because we have a desire for community and self-esteem.

Question 4c.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 6 | 6 | 22 | 66 | 2.5 |

This question required students to provide a clear statement of response and to justify that response by drawing on the chosen thinker’s viewpoints or arguments. To respond effectively, students also needed to identify what it was, in particular, about the life of a social media influencer that would lead the thinker to respond in this way.

There was no clear preference in terms of the thinker selected. Students who chose Callicles typically claimed that he would endorse the life of the social media influencer on the grounds that such lives typically involve the pursuit of desire and feelings of pleasure. Some students claimed that Callicles would endorse such a life, citing the argument for natural justice; others claimed that he would condemn such a life on the grounds that influencers are enslaved to the opinions and conventions of the masses. All such responses, if done in appropriate detail, were awarded full marks. Generally, those students who used Wolf claimed that her response would be dependent on the nature of the influencer’s activities.

Once again, misunderstanding about the ‘larger-than-oneself’ view was evident, with many responses claiming that the influencer’s activity must necessarily help others. A number of responses also conflated the fulfilment view with pleasure and claimed that because influencers get pleasure from what they do, they are living good lives. Low-scoring responses typically misunderstood the philosophy or provided only a vague justification for the claim (e.g. ‘because influencers have lots of pleasure’). Some students also misread the question and discussed whether the chosen thinker would endorse social media more generally. Such responses could not be awarded full marks.

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

Wolf would suggest that a social media influencer can only be living a good life if they are engaging with something they love, that is worth of love, in a positive manner. So while an educational influencer may lead a meaningful life, an influencer that simply posts pictures of themselves or spreads misinformation would be lacking the ‘objective worth’ component of a good and meaningful life and would not be living a good life.

Question 5a.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | Average |
| % | 15 | 34 | 51 | 1.4 |

To answer this question successfully, students needed to identify why Nietzsche believes increasing suffering is helpful while decreasing it is harmful. Typically, students cited human greatness as the reason for both increasing suffering and the harm of decreasing suffering. Very good responses cited Nietzsche’s distinction between the creature and creator, and the relationship each has to suffering. Low-scoring responses generally only responded to one part of the question.

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

Decreasing suffering and aiming for comfort is what Nietzsche deemed the ‘herd imperative’, which he saw as being mediocre and leading to the ‘collective degeneration of man.’ Rather, increasing suffering is what has ‘created ever elevation of mankind hitherto’ and is what allows the creator in man to mould our character into something greater.

Question 5b.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Average |
| % | 9 | 12 | 28 | 51 | 2.2 |

High-scoring responses to this question used specific examples to argue how suffering can improve resilience and make individuals stronger or, conversely, how some suffering can overwhelm the individual and serve to stifle opportunities for self-overcoming. Some students also discussed how it is difficult to see how certain kinds of suffering could ever produce greatness. Less effective responses demonstrated a lack of understanding regarding Nietzsche’s views on the utility of suffering, claiming that suffering allows us to ‘learn’ and so avoid the same mistakes, or even that through suffering we can develop empathy for others. As the question specifically asks students to respond to *Nietzsche’s* views on the role of suffering, and not suffering in general, such responses could not be awarded full marks. Nor could responses that were justified by reference to the student’s own beliefs and preferences be awarded full marks.

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

I agree with Nietzsche that suffering can help develop character, but I think he goes to far in saying we should seek to maximise it. Indeed, if a child grew up in a spoilt and over protective environment devoid of suffering, they may not have the strength of character to face the trials and tribulations of the real world. However, many forms of great suffering do not seem to me to elevate character at all such as genetic diseases which cause lifelong chronic pain, or lifelong psychological trauma.

Section B

Section B provided students with the opportunity to apply their learning from Unit 3 in a considered way to develop their own justified responses. In general, students who recognised the importance of working closely and explicitly with the provided extract were able to do so more effectively with Question 2. While most students were able to identify a plausible position on each question from the perspective of the relevant philosophers (more so in the case of Question 2), many students did not provide any discussion, or only provided minimal discussion, of why the philosopher held this position. The requirement to provide a justified response to the question was often poorly done. Many students simply provided a list of assertions without justification, or they justified assertions with statements regarding their own preferences or beliefs. Quite a number of students discussed which philosopher’s views they preferred and why, rather than providing a justified response to the question. Such responses could not be awarded full marks.

Question 1

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
| % | 3 | 3 | 7 | 13 | 18 | 16 | 14 | 13 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 5.0 |

This extract and question invited students to consider if chatbots could ever be conscious. While most students were able to summarise the broad ideas presented in the extract, fewer students picked up on the assumptions presented regarding the nature of consciousness. Students who were able to do this tended to produce more effective responses.

Many students were able to plausibly speculate on Smart’s likely response to the question; however, few students drew on Smart’s arguments to explain why he would respond in this way. While students generally demonstrated an accurate, albeit generalised, knowledge of Nagel’s arguments, few could plausibly apply this understanding to the question and the ideas explored in the extract. Many students, for example, used the example of the bat to conclude that a chatbot could never understand human consciousness. More effective responses discussed how the bat suggested that even if chatbots were conscious, it is unlikely that we would understand the nature of this consciousness or even be able to assess its presence because it would be radically unlike our own.

While most students were able to accurately describe the ideas in the extract and use each of the relevant philosophers to broadly reflect on these ideas, many students struggled to effectively address the final dot point in the task description. Instead of providing a justified response to the question, students typically identified which philosopher’s views they preferred and provided reasons as to why. This type of response did not adequately address the question. Of those responses that did answer the question, many simply provided a personal statement of belief, followed by several assertions or further beliefs. It is important that students recognise that a justified response requires a claim that is supported by arguments. High-scoring responses were able to do this by, for example, considering how advances in science and neurobiology would suggest that it is only a matter of time before we are able to replicate the brain and – if we consider that consciousness is part of the brain – produce consciousness. They also could have considered how, despite the advances in neurobiology and science, we are yet to close the explanatory gap and understand consciousness, and so it is unlikely we will be able to produce a conscious chatbot.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. It is notable for its detailed account of the philosophical arguments and the application of these arguments to respond to the question. Although the student has drawn on personal experience to support their own response to the question, they have used this experience as evidence in support of a position, which is perfectly acceptable and quite different to using personal beliefs (e.g. ‘because I believe that physicalism is true’) to support a claim.

The argument presented claims that chatbots are not conscious, assuming that the brain is necessary for consciousness. Smart understands consciousness, or ‘sensations’ to be a purely physical process that occurs in the brain. Due to both the recent advancements in science and its ability to describe us as ‘physico-chemical mechanisms’ and the principles of parsimony/simplicity of occam’s razor, Smart thinks it is unlikely that consciousness should sit outside the known laws of science as a ‘nomological dangler.’ The question of chatbots having consciousness would depend on the nature of that chatbot’s processes. Modern chatbots ‘built on a massive network of data’ may not result in the creation of consciousness. However, due to Smart’s reductionist stance, it is definitely possible for the physical processes we design in future chatbots to harbour consciousness, if we replicated our brain processes, since these are strictly identical.

Nagel would be much more sceptical. His problem with reductionist theories is that in trying to explain the subjective character of experience/consciousness in an objective sense we are moving further away from subjectivity. While this works for objective phenomena such as lightning and H2O, this strips the essential characteristic from consciousness, namely its subjectivity. However, this is not to say that physical constituents do not make up our consciousness. Simply, Nagel doubts that we could ever exhaust the analysis of our consciousness using our current scientific methods, and by extension questions how we could then create a chatbot that has consciousness, or how we could even know if it did have it.

I personally doubt that chatbots in their current form could ever have consciousness, no matter how advanced their algorithms for selecting words or mimicking human language, it is ultimately still just predicting what the most likely next word would be, which seems fundamentally different to how I myself choose words. Rather, I have something I want to say, a motivation or idea that is not merely predicting words. However, if the mechanism of how chatbots function or are programmed changes to something more resembling the patterns of thought in a human, I must concede that a chatbot could be conscious, but it will take a lot of work.

Question 2

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | Average |
| % | 5 | 4 | 7 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 15 | 12 | 8 | 4 | 1 | 4.9 |

For the second extract students were provided with an account of an elderly man, Arthur, confronted with photographic evidence of his involvement in war crimes that he cannot recall perpetrating. Students were asked to consider if we are responsible for things we do not remember.

Most students were able to provide an accurate account of the extract. Stronger responses noted that Arthur, in changing his plea to guilty when confronted by photographic evidence of his crimes, accepted a thesis of bodily identity. Generally, students were able to plausibly consider Arthur’s responsibility by applying Locke’s arguments; however, a significant number misunderstood Locke’s notion of responsibility and claimed that Locke would consider Arthur responsible because he is the same ‘man’ as the young man who perpetrated the crimes. Better responses identified the distinction Locke draws between moral and legal responsibility and discussed how, despite Arthur being punished for his crimes, he may not be considered morally responsible. Most students supported their discussion of Locke’s views by drawing on his arguments and examples, in particular ‘the prince and the cobbler’ and ‘the drunk and sober man’. A significant number of responses falsely attributed the ‘brave officer’ thought experiment to Locke.

Responses that applied Hume’s views were done less successfully. While many students were able to identify that Hume would not consider the Arthur who perpetuated the crimes as the same Arthur who is confronted with the evidence in court, many students claimed Arthur should still be held responsible. Reasons for this were diverse, such as: that particular memory, even if forgotten, was part of Arthur’s ‘bundle’; Arthur in the present is linked to Arthur in the past through causation; or Arthur himself identifies with Arthur in the past. All such responses suggested a profound misunderstanding of Hume’s notions of the ‘bundle of perceptions’ and his ‘relations of ideas’.

While students appeared to handle the task of providing a justified response to Question 2 better than in Question 1, many responses discussed whether or not the punishment of Arthur was justified, rather than addressing the question of responsibility despite a lack of memories. Many of these responses argued that Arthur should be punished even if he can’t remember, simply because it is important that someone is punished. Such a response not only failed to address the question, but bypassed the very philosophical ideas that the question was designed to engage. High-scoring responses tended to consider the role the body might play in establishing continued identity, the limitations of memory, and the difficulty of discovering a solid foundation for the continuity of identity. All explicitly addressed the question of responsibility despite a lack of memory.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response. Although the exposition of Hume contains some inaccuracies, the response is notable for its development, particularly in relation to offering a justified response to the question.

Are we responsible for the things we do not remember? In the above passage, Arthur contends that while he has absolutely no recollection of his ‘atrocious actions during the war,’ he maintains culpability for what he did. As a consequence, it is suggested that identity and responsibility extend beyond memory and ‘remember[ing]’, instead being attached to another sense of personhood.

It would likely be argued by philosopher David Hume that although persistent personal identity does not exist, our ability to maintain a sense of responsibility for ‘our’ actions follows a fallacy of identity that extends beyond memory. This is illustrated in his example of asking the reader to reflect upon a series of dates and suggesting that although we may not remember our actions we still attribute them to ourselves due to the principles of resemblance, causation and contiguity. Consequently, even if we are unable to remember our actions, our ability to link together and create a false sense of enduring self to these moments due to these three principles suggests that we could still be held accountable.

Contrastingly, it would likely be argued by John Locke that this should not be the case due to his belief that personal identity is constituted by the continuity of consciousness tracked via memory. This is illustrated in his example of the prince and the cobbler. Where Locke suggests that the soul of the prince, along with all of his princely thoughts and memories, entering into the body of a cobbler makes the person the prince. Consequently, Arthur’s lack of memory suggests that he is no longer the same person as the person that committed the atrocities, and therefore should not be held responsible.

As to whether I believer that we should be held responsible for things that we do not remember, I do believe that this should be the case. First and foremost, we are causally dependant upon the person that did the action that we do not remember. Although Arthur has no memory of his crimes, the Arthur today would not exist without the Arthur during the war. Which allows a link to be drawn between the individuals which suggests that culpability is present. Furthermore, the body of the person that committed the crimes is still the same body that sits in the stand in the court today. It is the same legs that stood over the lifeless victim, the same hands that held the gun and committed those atrocities. As a consequence of being able to drawn connections between a person and their forgotten actions despite a present lack of memory, I believe that we should still be held accountable for actions we do not remember.

Section C

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Option | N / R | 1 | 2 |
| % | 2 | 46 | 52 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mark | 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 | 3 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | .5 | 9.4 |

Section C of the examination provided students with two accessible extracts that between them allowed students to utilise any one of the Unit 4 philosophers in their discussion. Fewer students chose to respond to Question 1, and of those students who selected this question, more students chose to use the viewpoints and arguments of Nietzsche over those of Plato.

Students who had a nuanced understanding of Nietzsche’s viewpoints and arguments were able to write effective essays. Such essays often explored the prompt in relation to notions of self-overcoming and discussed how, in the quest to overcome limitations, humanity may eliminate the very suffering that Nietzsche believes is generative to both individual and social greatness. Lower-scoring responses also focused on self-overcoming, but typically demonstrated a poor or limited knowledge of Nietzsche’s ideas, in particular, his notion of the Übermensch, which is often misrepresented in student writing.

While the ideas of Plato also provided fertile material for a number of students, many essays were limited in scope, using Callicles’ arguments regarding pleasure to respond to each of the three proposals set out in the Manifesto. More-effective essays engaged in a critical dialogue with the proposals, using both the arguments regarding pleasure and the related arguments regarding natural justice, as well as Socrates’ criticisms of these arguments. Although the Plato text may have been seen as an easier choice, such essays demonstrated that to use the Plato text well required sophisticated thinking.

Question 2 utilised a rich extract that engaged with a topic that many students would be very familiar with. Yet, despite the generative nature of the extract, many students neglected the detail, in particular the proposal to ‘bin’ smartphones, and instead wrote very generalised essays on social media. Effective essays picked out details such as the extract’s claims regarding the effect of social media on relationships, creativity and our perception of reality, as well as its addictive qualities, and connected these details to examples from other, non-philosophical sources such as studies, statistics and real-life examples. Responses that were able to do this and use the philosophical viewpoints and arguments thoughtfully and critically scored very well.

Although there was no clear preference among the philosophers chosen by students, those who used Wolf were more successful in their application, focusing on Wolf’s prescriptions for a meaningful life and how smartphones may inhibit the pursuit of such a life. Students who chose to use Aristotle typically focused on the mean and the notion of addiction. If students were able to understand smartphone use in the context of passions/actions and how, for example, by cultivating our inclination to pleasure, smartphones distract us from acting virtuously, this could be an effective pathway. However, many responses simply described smartphone use as something we should not do in excess (or in deficiency), thus demonstrating an inaccurate understanding of this fundamental idea.

Whichever question students selected, the qualities of high-scoring responses remained the same. These essays:

* made detailed and specific use of the extracts throughout
* developed a precise and plausible contention from the extracts and the chosen philosophy through which to discuss the issues raised in the extract
* utilised the philosophy to think through the ideas presented in the extract
* made good use of relevant examples; and engaged appropriately in the task of evaluation.

Essays that scored lower tended to write cursory responses to the claims made in the extract (Question 1), or ignored the claims in favour of a broad discussion of the general idea that the extract spoke to (Question 2). Such responses also tended to mismanage philosophical viewpoints and arguments, either including very little philosophical material or including material without discrimination, resulting in essays that were unfocused.

A number of responses were written on both philosophers identified in the prompt. While it was unclear whether or not students had misread the prompt or had included the second philosopher as ‘other philosophical concepts and sources’, for many responses this decision was poorly managed, and the inclusion of the second philosopher did not further the discussion in a meaningful way. There was also an issue with responses including what were essentially approximations or caricatures of philosophers’ arguments. As previously mentioned, this was particularly the case with Aristotle’s mean and Nietzsche’s ideas of self-overcoming.

Evaluation continues to be a challenging task. Many students appeared to equate evaluation with a discussion of their own views, usually supported by personal beliefs. It is important that students understand that evaluation is the process of testing arguments, using examples and counterarguments to uncover the merits and shortcomings of claims. Rather than telling the reader what he or she believes, the student must show why a particular argument or viewpoint is to be considered favourably or unfavourably.

High-scoring essays engaged in sustained critical discussion, testing ideas through the employment of effective examples and compelling counterarguments. Tere was a noticeable dearth of examples employed by students, even in what might be considered mid-scoring responses. Students are reminded that, aside from the fact that examples are an effective way to illustrate claims and test arguments, they are explicitly included in the marking rubric for this part of the examination.

The following is an example of a high-scoring response to Question 2. Although the way in which some of the philosophy is articulated has resulted in some minor inaccuracies, this is a thoughtful essay that strongly engages with both the ideas in the extract and the philosophy. The response has employed a number of effective and precise examples to support the discussion, and the response is well organised and clearly written.

Social media technologies are integral to modern-day life, responsible for the engagement and enjoyment of billions of users worldwide. Yet, the ‘trivial’ nature of said technologies raise the moral question, are social media technologies conducive to good, meaningful lives? The nature of this ‘new digital minimalism’ perhaps suggest that users are realising the true nature of technological development as they ‘bin’ their phones. In a life ‘dominated by social media,’ is true meaningfulness achievable? This essay will examine said questions with close reference to Susan wolf’s ‘Meaning in Life’ and other philosophical concepts.

Social media at first seems an exciting tool, capable of expanding human understanding, by facilitating any user access to a super-abundance of knowledge. But, is this excitation worthy of love? Wolf would largely disagree, because for an activity to be considered ‘worthy of love,’ one must have the possibility to be subject to suffering, disappointment and sadness within their passion. Otherwise, the action is instead a ‘pleasure.’ In this way, mindless gratification via ‘google-searching and trivial entertainment can be considered a pleasure, analogous to riding a roller-coaster or eating a hot-fudge sundae which does not envoke objective worthiness. If one is gripped and excited by social media, thinking that said technologies solely lead to a meaningful life, said users are analogous to Sisyphus – fulfilled. Whom, despite being a ‘paradigm of meaninglessness,’ enjoy the meaningless activity of mindless social-media gratification, much like a deluded Sisyphus may find joy in mindlessly stone-rolling. Yet, neither activity, upon feelings of gratification, make the activity any less meaningless.

In Wolf’s thesis, an importance is placed on our inherent social nature as creatures whereby we take a ‘view from nowhere’ (Thomas Nagel) upon the significance of our lives, one day hoping that our lives may be recognised or celebrated by others. In this way, a ‘loss of balance’ when it comes to technology, as we ‘scroll and tap away our creativity, intelligence, and social skills’ directly detracts from our inherent need as social creatures to form meaningful relationships. Indeed one may find inclusion and acceptance within online communities such as reddit, facebook, Instagram, X, but the legitimacy of said connections is questionable. As stated in the passage, ‘we spend hours looking into altered images instead of real faces,’ effectively ‘lying to each other by only presenting [curated] online selves’, revealing the superficial nature of digital relationships and interactions, supporting the contention that social media ‘does not provide genuine social connection.’ This superficial aspect of social media may add to Wolf’s conception of our ‘cosmic insignificance,’ that true meaning in which one finds their passion, while also contributing to something ‘larger than itself’ is alleviates.

The negative effects of a life ‘dominated by social media’ are prevalent in modern society. As stated by clinical psychologist, Andrew Fuller, ‘the youth of Australia is 2.6x more likely to suffer from depression when constantly engaging in social media. This correlation between depression and excessive technology use suggests that perhaps a life ‘enslaved to handheld technologies,’ does indeed detract from the pursuit of truly meaningful tasks in one’s life. In relation to Wolf’s distinction between pleasures and meaningful pursuits, Nick Cave denounced social media as a ‘grotesque mockery’ which directly negates one’s ability to suffer and subsequently find meaning in suffering. The new trend in which the youth of today are preferring minimalist ‘dumb-phones’ over feature-full devices supports Wolf’s notion of an objectively and subjectively fulfilling pursuit providing happiness. Within technologies though, there are ways in which one can satisfy both criterias of Wolf’s ‘fitting fulfilment view.’ As stated by Peter Singer in ‘A Dream for the Digital Age,’ one is 5x more likely to donate to charity if there’s an emotional image ‘digitally visible.’ In this way, rather than mindlessly scrolling and living the life of a ‘satisfied pig’ (Mill), one may instead use their time on social media to raise awareness for charity, or raise funds for a friend’s much-needed surgery. It is through digital engagement in which one is distinctively ‘gripped and excited’ subjectively by their actions, while also contributing to something ‘larger than itself’ objectively, that meaning in life may arise from technological developments.

Thus I argue that although mindless technological gratification is inherently meaningless, to go as far as condemning all aspects of social media engagement by stating that ‘happiness is a binned phone’, is extreme and lacks nuance. Rather, social media, in order to give one genuine fulfilment, must gratify the user, while also contributing to a greater cause. Genuine social interaction can be achieved through social media, for example; one may organise a group of like-minded animal enthusiasts to volunteer at an animal shelter using social media to facilitate genuine connections, rather than superficial ones. Thus, moderation and balance is achievable in technological development, as one may lead a good, meaningful life by facilitating social media to foster genuine connections aimed at genuine activities that offer lasting value.

The following rubric is used for Sections B and C:

| **Mark range** | **Descriptors – Expected qualities of mark range** |
| --- | --- |
| Very High  9–10  Precise, insightful, perceptive | * Comprehensive knowledge of concepts, viewpoints and arguments * Perceptive and precise analysis of the stimulus * Convincing and subtle justification/evaluations * Question is thoroughly understood and its implications drawn out into a detailed analysis * Response to the question is incisively justified * A well developed, organised and coherent progression of ideas * Clear and precise language |
| High  7–8  Knowledgeable, competent, effective | * Secure knowledge of the concepts, viewpoints and arguments * Accurate analysis of the stimulus * Sensible and coherent justification/evaluations * Question is understood and its implications considered * Response to the question is justified * A developed, competent and sensibly organised presentation of ideas * Clear and effective language |
| Medium  5–6  Clear, sound, fluent | * Generally sound knowledge of concepts, viewpoints and arguments * Some sound commentary on the stimulus. Clear, if uneven justification/evaluation * Question is understood * Response to the question is evident, if not fully justified * The piece is generally coherent and ordered, if lacking in development of ideas * Mostly clear language |
| Low  3–4  Basic, obvious, uneven | * Some basic knowledge of concepts, viewpoints and arguments * Some relevant references to the stimulus * Some limited attempts at justification/ evaluation * Some reference to the question * Some assertions in response to the question * Basic or uneven development of ideas * Uneven clarity of language |
| Very low  1–2  Simplistic, inaccurate, incomplete | * Some superficial and limited knowledge of concepts, viewpoints and arguments * Limited or no reference to stimulus * Little or no justified response/ evaluation * Little understanding or awareness of the question * Simplistic or no response to the question * Limited development and organisation of ideas * Unclear use of language |
| Insufficient to judge  0 | * Transcription or title only / entirely irrelevant response |