

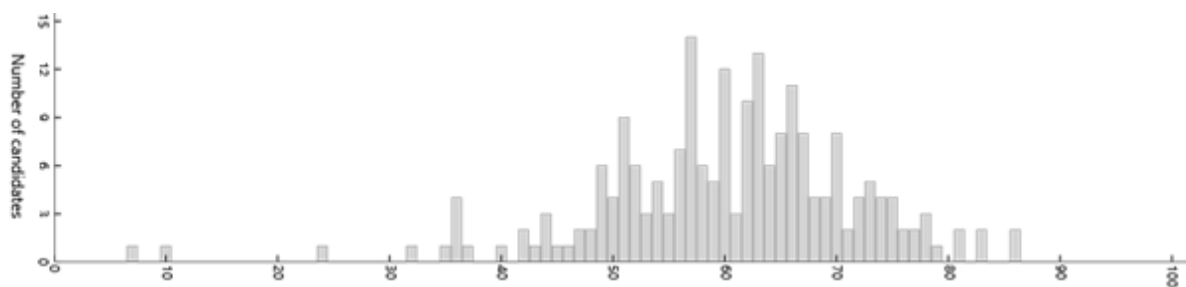


Summary report of the 2020 ATAR course examination: Philosophy and Ethics

Year	Number who sat	Number of absentees
2020	211	2
2019	205	5
2018	209	5
2017	196	4

The number of candidates sitting and the number attempting each section of the examination can differ as a result of non-attempts across sections of the examination.

Examination score distribution–Written



Summary

The examination paper was effective in providing candidates with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge from across the course syllabus and was of an appropriate length for the three-hour time frame. The paper allowed for a fair assessment of the ability of candidates and enabled discrimination between those of different abilities across the full range of marks.

The examination mean was 59.91%, and the maximum score was 86%. Both were lower than previous years. This decrease in the examination mean is largely attributable to a decrease on last year's results in the section-specific mean for Section One of the examination paper.

Attempted by 211 candidates Mean 59.91% Max 86.00% Min 6.50%

Section means were:

Section One: Critical reasoning Mean 59.84%
Attempted by 211 candidates Mean 17.95(/30) Max 28.00 Min 4.00

Section Two: Philosophical analysis and evaluation
Mean 61.72%
Attempted by 211 candidates Mean 24.69(/40) Max 34.50 Min 2.00

Section Three: Construction of argument Mean 57.57%
Attempted by 206 candidates Mean 17.27(/30) Max 27.50 Min 0.00

General comments

Previous examinations have seen an elevated mean for the critical reasoning section, Section One, of the paper. However, this section of the examination paper proved more difficult for candidates than in previous years. This allowed the paper (i) to better discriminate between candidates who sat the paper and (ii) to bring the section-specific mean in line with the rest of the paper. Overall, candidates performed well in Section One

where a broad range of curriculum dot points were assessed. Many candidates displayed an admirable proficiency with the skills being assessed here.

Section Two, comprising of the dialogue (Question 9) and passage (Question 10) analyses, elicited some laudable responses from many candidates. However, a number of candidates appear to be structuring their responses in accordance with the subsections displayed in the marking keys for this section from previous years' examinations and are doing this in a way that actively detracts from their fulfillment of the main objectives for these questions, namely, to produce a summary, clarification and evaluation of the dialogue and passages. This is an ongoing issue highlighted in previous years' examination reports.

In Section Three, candidates select one question from five alternatives. This section of the examination remains the most challenging for candidates. Candidates and teachers are urged to heed the advice offered below in preparing for next year's examination, particularly with respect to Section Three of the paper.

Advice for candidates

Section One.

- Read the questions carefully at least twice before attempting an answer.
- Give yourself enough time to check over your responses.
- A clear understanding of the meaning (truth conditions, as in, what makes the statement true or false) of the connectives (if/then, and, or etc.) is important. This includes a grasp of how the conditional is used to express necessary and sufficient conditions.
- A clear understanding of the difference between the concepts of argument evaluation is crucial. Understanding the difference between premises, sub-conclusions and conclusions, between acceptability, validity and cogency is essential.
- Candidates should recognise that giving a reason for why a specific argument is cogent requires more than simply providing the definition of cogency.
- When you are asked to write out separable statements in full, inference indicators should be eliminated, and you must clarify the referent of any demonstrative pronoun appearing in the statement so as to remove any ambiguity of reference.

Section Two

- Be careful not to write too much and compromise your performance elsewhere in the examination (typically Section Three).
- Avoid structuring your responses strictly according to previous marking keys, as this can lead to a lengthy repetitive response that fails to adequately fulfill the objectives of summarising, clarifying and evaluating the dialogue or passage.
- Avoid verbatim reproductions of statements made in the dialogue or passage. Instead, demonstrate your understanding of the dialogue or passage by succinctly summarising it in your own words.
- Only diagram an argument if you feel certain that it will help to clarify your analysis. A diagram of an argument is a step in the process of clarification and is not assessed as part of a candidate's skills in evaluation.
- It should be recognised that the community of inquiry question presents candidates with a dialogue for analysis. It is not two interspersed passage analyses. You must evaluate the contributions of each participant with regard for their adequacy and relevance as responses to remarks made elsewhere in the dialogue.

Section Three

- Spend time thinking about and planning your essay. The reading time at the beginning of the examination is perfect for this.
- Make sure you give yourself enough time to write your essay. It is worth 30% of your examination mark and you ought to give it (at least) 30% of your time. One way to

ensure that you devote sufficient time to the construction of your argument is to do it first before you get into the other sections of the paper, but this is by no means necessary. Spending more time on the essay so as to produce a clearer more cogent argument that takes care in considering and responding to objections (see below) is by far the easiest way for candidates to improve their grade.

- You must produce an answer that responds directly and relevantly to the question you have selected. A pre-prepared essay with only tangential relevance to the question actually asked in the examination paper will not score well.
- Come prepared to write on a range of topics. Even though you are given five options to choose from, there may not be a question that directly addresses your preferred topic. It is best to have a back-up (or two) that you feel confident to write about.
- You **MUST** consider an objection to the view you are putting forward. Ask yourself, how might someone who did not share my position criticise the argument I am making? Then try to reply to that criticism in some way.
- Begin with a succinct introductory paragraph that clearly states the position you intend to argue for and which offers a preview of the argument you will present in defence of that position.
- To do well in this section of the paper it is not enough to merely describe and recount information about philosophers and about the various different points of view that are relevant to the question. Whilst it is good to demonstrate a knowledge of some of the available positions and an awareness of their progenitors, this knowledge must be marshalled in support of an argument and position of your own formed in response to the question you are answering.

Advice for teachers

- Understanding the connectives – especially conditionals – is a crucial element in the curriculum whose significance ramifies across other curriculum dot points. A thorough grasp of the connectives will aid students in recognising relations of logical equivalence, and to recognise valid and invalid arguments. It will also aid them in comprehending the structure of arguments more generally, in focusing their attention on ways in which arguments can be criticised, as well as in constructing their own arguments.
- Ensure that your students have a thorough grasp of the various ways in which conditionals can be expressed ('if A then B', 'B, if A', 'not-A unless B', 'A only if B', 'whenever A, B' etc.) and that they properly understand the conditions being asserted in the various formations e.g. as in the cases mentioned, the sufficiency of A for B, and the necessity of B for A.
- Throughout the year, give your students practice at planning relevant essay responses to unfamiliar essay prompts.

Comments on specific sections and questions

Section One: Critical reasoning (30 Marks)

Candidates demonstrated a range of ability in Section One. Candidates appeared to find this section more challenging than in previous years. In particular, candidates had difficulty constructing a deductively-valid argument from the statements provided in Question 6.

Section Two: Philosophical analysis and evaluation (40 Marks)

Both questions in Section Two exhibited a similar range of candidate performances when compared with past examinations. As has also been the case in previous years, many candidate responses to questions in this section of the paper were excessively and unnecessarily lengthy. No more than three or four pages of analysis is required for either question.

The layout of previous marking keys for questions in this section of the paper appear to be dictating a structure to many candidates' responses which is unhelpful in their actually fulfilling the objectives of the question; namely, a summary, clarification, and evaluation of

the dialogue or passage. This approach leads to repetitive and unnecessarily lengthy responses as candidates try to tick off every item given as a subheading under each criterion in the marking key with a distinct series of paragraphs. In taking this approach, candidates fail to recognise that many of the items mentioned in the marking key can be accomplished simultaneously.

Another common phenomenon observed in many of the lengthy responses sees candidates write out in full the separable statements occurring in the dialogue for their clarification of the argument. Verbatim reproductions of statements are not rewarded.

Section Three: Construction of argument (30 Marks)

Section Three of the examination paper worked very well in providing candidates with a range of prompts addressing accessible topics with which to construct an extended answer. Some questions were more popular than others, but none were drastically so. The spread of responses across the five questions was more even than it has been in previous years. Typical trends in performance from the candidates were observed. Time management continues to be a problem, with some candidates failing to leave themselves sufficient time for this section of the paper. The results of this are hastily constructed arguments that show promise, but which lack clarity and often fail to consider any objection. Candidates are strongly urged to allow for the suggested working time of 50 minutes and to spend time planning their response before writing their answer out in earnest. There is ample space in the question/answer booklet for candidates to utilise one or two pages for the purpose of sketching out a plan for their answer. This is highly recommended and will help to address problems of clarity and structure seen in many responses.

There is a tendency among candidates – though less common than in previous years – to provide a diagram (or ‘natural deduction’ style representation i.e. a list of premises and conclusion) of their argument as part of their essay. Most philosophical arguments made in this section will be conductive arguments, that is, they will be arguments where a number of considerations in favour of the conclusion will be put forward (i.e. a number of convergent premises) and where at least one counter consideration will be discussed. Providing a diagram would not add anything to the clarity of such an argument in the case where a candidate has written a clear, concise introduction setting out their conclusion and stating explicitly how they intended to argue for it. A diagram in this context is gratuitous, unnecessary and an interruption to the progress of the argument.

Some candidates wrote a lot but did not succeed in constructing a response that was adequately relevant to the question they had selected to answer. Where this is a result of an error in interpreting the question, candidates are urged to read over the questions more carefully and to spend more time planning their response. However, in many cases it appears that candidates are simply writing out a pre-prepared essay which is only tenuously relevant to the question actually asked in the examination paper. Relevance is a fundamental feature of a cogent argument. Responses that exhibited failures of relevance did not score well.