

My Revision Notes: Edexcel A2 Religious Studies Developments: Philosophy of Religion and Ethics

These are guidelines of what might be included but are by no means exhaustive or even the only way to answer the question.

Unit 3A: Philosophy of Religion

1.1 Religious experience

Exam practice, page 15:

- (a) Examine the view that it is meaningless to speak of religious experience. [18]
- Identify the key features of religious experiences: mystical, conversion, dramatic, inward looking, numinous and testimonies of experiences.
 - Look at arguments in support of the view that religious experiences are meaningful, e.g. by referring to principles of testimony and credulity or to the weight of evidence.
 - Consider the views of scholars, e.g. Hick, James, Swinburne.
 - Consider if such claims can be verified or whether they are meaningless and explain why.
 - You may want to link this with what you have learned in other topics, including religious language, about verification and reliability of testimony.
- (b) Assess the view that religious experience provides convincing proof of the existence of God. [12]
- Identify the main strengths of the argument.
 - Identify the main weaknesses of the argument.
 - Consider the arguments that suggest religious experience does or does not prove the existence of God, e.g. psychological causes, natural reason, drugs or the weight of testimony.
 - Assess the extent to which religious experience does or does not provide convincing proof of the existence of God.

1.2 The Ontological Argument

Exam practice, page 20:

- (a) Examine the principle themes of the Ontological Argument for the existence of God. [18]
- Select a range of key themes such as:
 - the *a priori* analytic and deductive nature of the argument
 - Anselm's definition of God as 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'
 - concepts of existence as a predicate, *in intellectu* and *in re*
 - the logical impossibility of atheism
 - Descartes' support for the Argument
 - the contrast with views of Kant and Aquinas
 - modern views: Malcolm and Plantinga.

(b) Assess the failure of the Argument to prove the existence of God. [12]

- Identify and assess key criticisms:
 - the weakness of the Argument's reasoning: Gaunilo, Aquinas, Gasking
 - existence is not a predicate – Kant
 - assumptions of the Argument are flawed; Descartes' definition of God, that it is possible to prove anything without empirical data
 - Dawkins – negative views.
- Conclude by observing that the purpose of the Argument is *not* to convince non-believers, but to confirm the rational basis of the believer's faith.
- In a sense, the Argument is correct if it rests on true definitions and assumptions. But whether it does or not is a matter of divided opinion.

1.3 Non-existence of God and critiques of religious belief

Exam practice, page 28:

(a) Examine two critiques of religious belief. [18]

- Choose two critiques – say Durkheim and Dawkins.
- Identify four or five key features of their arguments, for example, that Durkheim focuses on the unifying element of religious belief and practice, while Dawkins focuses on the divisive elements.
- Include two quotations from each scholar.
- Suggest the possibility of strengths and weaknesses.

(b) Assess the view that atheism offers a more convincing answer than theism. [12]

- Do not just load your answer with criticisms of each approach.
- Use the material on the nature of atheism as a philosophical position and assess whether it is sounder than the material on theism, for example, is there genuine lack of evidence for belief in God or does the atheist not know where to look or how to interpret the evidence?
- Does Dawkins or any other scholar offer a philosophically sound critique?
- Reach a balanced conclusion – it doesn't matter what you actually believe, it's how you present the argument.

2.1 Beliefs about life after death

Exam practice, page 35:

(a) Examine the concepts of the immortality of the soul with the resurrection of the body. [18]

- Identify the key features of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body:
 - Highlight the ways in which they are similar – spiritual existence, the 'real self', notions of personal identity.
 - Highlight the ways in which they differ – bodily and mental, self-conscious, memory, personal identity.
- Put forward the views of scholars such as Aquinas and Hick.

(b) To what extent is one of these a more convincing argument for life after death than the other? [12]

- Identify the main strengths of both concepts.
- Identify the main weaknesses of both concepts.
- Evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses.
- Conclusion – assess which of the two is the more convincing claim and give examples and support from scholars such as Maritain and Dawkins.

2.2 Religious language

Exam practice, page 42:

(a) Examine the view that all religious language claims are meaningless because they cannot be verified. [18]

- Identify the key features of religious language that support the claim that religious language is meaningless.
- Consider verification, falsification, reliability, demythologising.
- Explain the views of scholars such as Flew, Ayer and Bultmann.
- Highlight the types of religious language – symbolism, myth, analogy.

(b) Discuss the extent to which language games solve the problem of religious language. [12]

- Explain the main strengths and weaknesses of language games.
- Explain the views of scholars, notably Wittgenstein.
- Assess whether the strengths of the language games theory outweigh the weaknesses.
- Evaluate the extent to which language games solve problems of religious language.

Unit 3B: Ethics

3.1 Critiques of the relationship between religion and morality

Exam practice, page 49:

(a) Explain one critique of the link between religion and morality. [18]

- Select one critique and identify its key features, for example, the Euthyphro dilemma, or the presentation of the morality of God.
- Alternatively, consider whether Dawkin's critique on religious morality or the view that religious morality is out of date is still a powerful argument.

(b) To what extent does it succeed in showing the fact that there is no link between religion and morality?

- Consider how far these features are successful, for example:
 - Is Dawkin's right?
 - Is the biblical view of God out of date?
 - Is morality dependent on religion?
 - Are there good examples of religious morality that count against these criticisms?
- Finish your essay by suggesting other ways in which morality may develop with or without religion.

3.2 Deontology, natural moral law and virtue ethics

Exam practice, page 58:

(a) Examine the key features of any two of natural moral law, deontology and virtue ethics. [18]

- Identify three to four key features of each moral theory, highlighting features such as the notion that humans have an end or purpose to which they must aim and that goodness consists in fulfilling that end.
- Identify features such as the theistic focus in Aquinas's natural moral law, the duty of Kant and the masculine virtue ethics ideas of Aristotle and compare with modern writers such as Anscombe and MacIntyre.

(b) Evaluate and comment upon the relative strengths and weaknesses of one of these theories. [12]

- You are required by the question to evaluate and comment upon the strengths and weaknesses.
- Be careful not just to list them. Instead, concentrate on the theory you find the most clear and identify three strengths and three weaknesses, checking whether they are decisive weaknesses or strengths, and draw an overall conclusion.

4.1 Ethical terms and emotivism

Exam practice, page 62:

(a) 'Ethical language claims are meaningless because they cannot be verified.' Examine this claim. [18]

- Identify problems of attempting to define 'good', of what is meant by 'good', of the existence of different kinds of moral claims, of moving from 'is' to 'ought' in ethics, of being unable to provide factual support for ethical claims.
- Consider the lack of empirical evidence.

(b) Assess how far ethical language could be meaningful. [12]

- Identify one way of showing this, such as intuitionism or emotivism, and assess its strengths and weaknesses.
- Decide if the proposed solution really makes ethical language meaningful or not.

4.2 Objectivity, relativism and subjectivism

Exam practice, page 65:

(a) Examine the strengths and weaknesses of relativism and subjectivism as ethical theories. [18]

- Look in detail at the strengths and weaknesses and consider how effective and useful they are in determining right from wrong.
- Ask yourself how useful they are as ways of deciding right from wrong. You might choose to compare the two views with each other.

(b) To what extent is absolutism an effective ethical theory? [12]

- Begin by highlighting the strengths of absolutism, for example, the fact that moral statements are seen as factual and beyond human question.
- Then consider the weaknesses, for example, the fact that a moral standpoint may become out-dated.
- Ask yourself whether the strengths outweigh the weakness or not and come to an effective conclusion. You might offer an example, for instance, divorce. An absolutist view may say that divorce should never be allowed, whilst others may argue that, in the modern age, divorce should be allowed in certain circumstances.

4.3 Justice, law and punishment

Exam practice, page 74:

(a) Examine either justice or law and punishment. [18]

- Examine either concept from a chosen perspective, for example, an examination of the theories of punishment, or the notion of justice, from the perspective of Colson.
- Aim for precision rather than a range of unassociated views.

(b) Consider critically how objectivity and relativism contribute to the understanding of the area you have examined in part a. [12]

- For example an examination of the theories of punishment from the perspective of objectivity might lead to an assessment of the notion of punishment as an absolute principle, without taking into account circumstances, while a relativist view may adopt the position that punishment cannot be justly given without an understanding of the individual's circumstances. If we apply this to the death sentence, for instance, we can see that an absolutist view might lead to the killing of an innocent person, whereas a relativist view, taking personal circumstances into account, may spare the person's life.