



British Philosophical Association

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On the 23rd of January, AQA published a proposed revised specification for the A-level in Philosophy. This revision has not been approved by Ofqual yet and if it is approved, would only run for a short period until the major revisions to the A-level required by the Department of Education come into effect from, it is anticipated, September 2016. AQA decided to propose these changes because of well-documented problems with the existing A-level which needed addressing urgently.

On 13th December 2013, a sub-group of the Executive Committee of the British Philosophical Association, working with the delegated authority of the full Executive Committee, met with the newly appointed Chair of A-level Philosophy at AQA to discuss their proposals for the revision of the A-level in Philosophy. Revision was thought to be warranted, given serious worries about the current specification that have been raised, over a long period, by teachers, students, and by the BPA itself. In particular, there were considerable problems with the content, with questions being too open-ended, and with the marking scheme, with criteria being insufficiently clear. In light of this, the AQA decided that the viability of the A-level required significant streamlining of content as an interim measure and a marking scheme that was clear, precise, and easily understandable.

The purpose of the meeting was not for the BPA to offer detailed or formal advice on the content of the syllabus or the proposed mark schemes, though the group was circulated with drafts of these in advance of the meeting, but to discuss the nature and rationale of the changes being proposed and to develop a new working relationship between the AQA and the BPA with the intention of securing and maintaining the academic integrity of the Philosophy A-level into the future. Given time constraints, there were limits to the changes that could be made and discussed prior to AQA scrutiny and approval. But we understood that this was a first step in the process, and that the A-level will be subject to further revision, in light of wider consultation with teachers and the BPA, in the future.

The decisions we reviewed were: to reduce the number of units offered; to select those in a manner which gave a better representation of the academic study of philosophy in the tertiary sector; and to make a clear distinction from Religious

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Studies in the precise content and assessment criteria of the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics units, while recognising that those topics are relevant, taught as part of university Philosophy degrees and also popular with schools. While the short-term restriction of choice is not ideal, the units chosen were demonstrably by far the most popular with candidates and schools, a fact confirmed by our experience of undergraduates on Philosophy degrees. We also noted the changes in assessment to bring in some shorter questions with a greater emphasis on the philosophical skills of clear and accurate presentation, focus on validity of argumentation, and methods of counterexample, and the recognition that the marking schemes needed to be prepared in a manner which gave clear, incontestable indications of right and wrong answers.

The BPA supports the process of change that has been begun by the AQA and is willing to be involved long term in the improvement of the specification. The interim specification is a step in the right direction, although constrained in several ways at the moment by Ofqual and AQA processes. We were particularly impressed by the willingness of AQA to work with academic philosophers in future to ensure that the advice given to teachers and markers was of the highest standards of accuracy. Nothing can be more harmful to the intellectual integrity of an A-level than its conflicting with how the discipline is taught at university, and AQA are to be commended for recognising the importance of their role as a bridge between academics and schools, providing for a consistency and common purpose in the teaching of philosophy at all levels.

We would also like to note that the A-level in Philosophy is very important for the health of the discipline in universities in the increasingly competitive recruitment environment. It provides exposure to philosophy in a form which gives a realistic impression of what degree level study is like, provides those who take it with essential skills, and ensures that there are teachers with a good understanding of the discipline available to advise all students on their university choices. As a small discipline, our supply of high-quality, motivated students depends upon there being a good understanding of what we do in schools, and we believe that this A-level is part of the way to provide that.

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