

KANT

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(b) How useful is Kant's theory of duty as a basis for morality? [17]

(a) 'People should always do their duty.' Explain how Kant understood this. [33]

- Candidates could explain that Kant understood duty as deontological and focussed on the idea of a moral law. They may explain that duty over-rides inclinations or motives.
- They might explore Kant's understanding of good will and duty and the link between the two.
- They might explain that Kant saw moral statements as categorical and explain the Categorical Imperative and its universality; that people are to be considered ends in themselves and that people work towards a kingdom of ends.
- They might contrast the hypothetical and the categorical imperative.
- Better candidates might refer to Kant's four examples and might explore the idea that moral statements are a priori synthetic.

(b) How useful is Kant's theory of duty as a basis for morality? [17]

- Candidates might consider it to be not very useful, referring to inflexibility and the conflict of duties.
- They may use examples and real issues to illustrate this.
- On the other hand they might point to Kant's underlying logic and the need for universal moral principles.
- They might point out the objectivity of Kant's theory and how the emphasis on treating people as ends in themselves underpins human rights.

All deontological (duty or rule-based) systems will have problems when two rules come into conflict. It is possible to have a third rule (Always tell the truth unless doing so endangers someone's life), but this complicates the theory, resulting in rules with lots of clauses and sub-clauses (a little like our legal system).

There could also be literally millions of rules that are not self-contradictory but, if universalised, would seem absurd. Here Kant says that *we should reject those rules which, if universalised, would produce a state of affairs utterly objectionable to all rational people*. This suddenly looks less convincing than before - how can we tell what rational people would find objectionable? As with Utilitarianism, many philosophers prefer to adapt Kant's theory rather than discard it completely.

WD Ross - Ross adapted the Kantian approach. He described our obligations as 'Prima Facie' duties. This means that they are, 'at first appearance', things that we must do. Just like Kant, he might say that we have an obligation not to kill, steal etc. In fact, he lists our obligations as follows, although this is not an exhaustive list:

- Duties of fidelity.
- Duties of gratitude.
- Duties of justice.
- Duties of beneficence to others
- Duties of self-development.
- Duties not to injure others

So, Ross may actually agree with a utilitarian that we have a duty or obligation to bring about the greatest good! This doesn't sound very Kantian at all, but wouldn't we will universal laws that brought about the greatest good?

So, we have obligations, but Kant said these were absolutes, Ross disagrees. They appear to be absolute (prima facie), but if two of them contradict, we clearly cannot honour both obligations. We need to determine which is the greater obligation, and then we have an absolute duty to follow that.

For example, I have promised to stay with a colleague's class while he makes an urgent phone call. I am clearly obliged to honour my promise. Someone rushes in and announces that a student is dying next door, and I am the only one who can save her (I have a First Aid Certificate). I clearly have a duty to save the student's life (save the cheerleader, save the world...). So, which duty am I obliged to honour? Ross would say I have a prima facie obligation to keep my promise, but an absolute obligation to save the student.

UTILITARIANISM

(a) Explain the main differences between Act and Rule Utilitarianism. [33]

(b) 'Rule Utilitarianism ignores consequences.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain the main differences between Act and Rule Utilitarianism. [33]

- Candidates might explain that Act Utilitarianism applies the principle of utility directly to each situation – the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by the pleasure or happiness caused by the action. It looks at the consequences of an action and is very flexible as it takes account of individual situations.
- They could contrast this with Rule Utilitarianism which sees a good act as one which, when followed by the whole community, leads to the greatest result. This means there would be some moral rules, formulated according to utilitarian principles and followed universally.
- Good candidates will probably explain the difference between strong and weak Rule Utilitarianism.

(b) 'Rule Utilitarianism ignores consequences.' Discuss. [17]

- Candidates might consider that all Utilitarianism relies on knowledge of consequences, but predictions may be mistaken or unclear.
- They may discuss the fact that obeying a rule may not lead to the greatest good or the best consequences as in Hare's objection (lying is wrong even to protect a person hiding from a maniac) - Rule Utilitarianism could still allow morally unacceptable practices.
- However, they might also consider that weak Rule Utilitarianism might take more account of consequences and break the rule accordingly.

Bentham - The Hedonic Calculus

There are some circumstances when you can usefully use the calculus as a guide to determining the overall effects of a course of action, such as in choosing how to spend lottery money, or in deciding how to prioritise medical procedures in a hospital. However, many of our moral decisions do not have predictable or measurable outcomes at all. It is unclear what counts as pleasure or how to equate pleasure and pain. There are three key points here:

1. **Unpredictable** - You can't know the future, and things rarely turn out as we think they will. It cannot be right to judge an action right or wrong based on outcomes that are down to chance.
2. **Incalculable** - Even if you knew exactly what would happen, it is impossible to add up all of the pain and pleasure resulting from a course of action. There's simply too much to calculate
3. **Immeasurable** - A more fundamental flaw. Even with the simplest event - choosing whether to buy a toy or a magazine for a child - it is impossible to decide on a value to give for happiness. Is the joy of reading a magazine more intense than the joy of playing with a toy? Pleasure cannot be measured, so the idea of adding it all up doesn't work.

There is also something instinctively wrong with judging the morality of an action by its outcome – a person motivated solely by greed or revenge might choose a course of action that happens to make the greatest number of people happy. Does this make him a good person? Even more concerning is the possibility of sadists whose pleasure at torturing others is so great that this in itself makes their actions good. The theory seems to support the exploitation and abuse of minority groups if it pleases the ruling majority.

Mill - Higher Pleasures

How do you decide whether white-water rafting is a higher-level pleasure than listening to Beethoven played live or eating an Indian takeaway? Mill's theory seeks to reduce everything to a consideration of happiness, when moral decisions are actually a lot more complicated than that. It also still allows for great injustices to be carried out just as long as the greatest good is served.

VIRTUE ETHICS

(a) Explain what is meant by Virtue Ethics. [33]

(b) 'Virtue Ethics does not work in practice.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain what is meant by Virtue Ethics. [33]

- Candidates may refer to Aristotle's system or the more contemporary approaches since the 1960s. The idea of hierarchy may be described and the connection with religious virtues.
- Good candidates would explain that Virtue Ethics is person-centred, rather than act- or end-centred and that it depends on the practising of the virtues.
- Examples may be used to illustrate the practice of Virtue Ethics.
- Better candidates would explain that the practising of Virtue Ethics takes account of the needs of the individual and of society, but that at the same time it takes moral behaviour beyond simply obeying rules and looks at promoting well-being and autonomy within the context of the needs of society.

(b) 'Virtue Ethics does not work in practice'. Discuss. [17]

- Some candidates may contrast the theory with other theories or point to the need for a theory that includes virtues.
- They may consider how it is not clear what we should do when virtues conflict.
- The issue of the irrelevancy of the theory to practical problems should be discussed, as Virtue Ethics provides no answers to specific moral problems such as abortion or euthanasia, nor does it expressly forbid any actions as immoral.
- Candidates may conclude that it is difficult to decide who is virtuous as motives also need to be considered.

The biggest criticism of Virtue Ethics is that it doesn't give clear guidance on how to act in specific circumstances. It cannot tell us what the law should be about abortion, euthanasia, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis etc. It gives no clear answer to questions such as 'Is the environment intrinsically valuable?'. The lack of moral rules or a method of addressing dilemmas is the main concern here, but there is also uncertainty about how you decide on what the virtues are. Many critics say Virtue Ethics simply doesn't do the job of an ethical theory.

There are many responses to this.

- There are no absolute answers to these questions (MacIntyre takes this view). Contemporary ethics has distanced itself from real people and real issues by debating fine legalistic points which they will never agree on. Virtue Ethics asks a much more important question - what sort of person should I be? This question may have different answers depending where and when it is asked, but it gives real direction and purpose to people.
- There are absolutes (Nussbaum says this). However, it is virtues that have value, not rules. We should strive for Justice, Wisdom, Temperance etc. rather than looking for absolute rules. When thinking about whether to go to war, there are no absolute rules (You must not kill an innocent person, for example, is seen as impractical as all wars lead to innocent people dying). However, we have elected a leader who we want to act justly, to be temperate, to have wisdom etc.
- Issues such as Embryo Research depend a lot on answers to questions such as 'When does an embryo/foetus become a person?' These questions cannot be answered by ethical theories. MacIntyre would say that to move forward in these issues, we need to better understand the context. For example, we are a society where thousands of embryos die at various stages of the IVF process. There is therefore a contradiction between our society's comfortable response to IVF and the often violent negative reaction to embryonic stem-cell research. When approaching these issues, we should aim to respond with wisdom, right ambition, temperance etc.

Virtue Ethics responds confidently to many of these criticisms by drawing attention to the failings of deontological theories and 'consequentialist' positions (GEM Anscombe coined the phrase 'consequentialism' in her 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy" which attacked contemporary ethical theories for being out of touch with the real world. This article may have been largely responsible for the resurgence of interest in Virtue Ethics).

There are other criticisms, though. For example, Virtue Ethics rejects moral absolutes such as 'Do not lie', but then values the virtue of honesty. Critics claim that the virtues are really another way of stating moral rules, and that the virtues depend on the existence of these rules. Honesty is precisely a virtue because it is wrong to lie. This sort of criticism can lead to a circular debate, but it is actually the biggest threat to the virtue theorist.

NATURAL LAW

(a) Explain what is meant by Natural Law. [33]

(b) 'Natural Law is a very fair way of making ethical decisions.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain what is meant by Natural Law. [33]

- The basic definition is that there are certain precepts or norms of good and right conduct which can be seen by everyone. This view is found in Plato and Aristotle as a natural justice, or right thing to do, which most people can recognise. Aquinas expounds this view in Summa Theologica.

(b) 'Natural Law is a very fair way of making ethical decisions.' Discuss. [17]

- Answers need to consider the points about Natural Law which have been made in (a).
 - They may choose to argue with or against some of the modern ethicists who have generally rejected Natural Law theory.
 - They may also comment on the fact that, in the latter half of the 20th century, a number of countries chose to base their political institutions on the principles of Natural Law.
 - Others may argue for the use of Natural Law by the Roman Catholic church, although this is not without qualification.
 - One of the problems with Natural Law is that it assumes that we all share a definition of what is 'natural'; and a strict application of Natural Law would lead to conclusions such as that infertile couples should not have sex or that vegetarianism is unnatural and therefore immoral because we have canine teeth.
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- Using reason to determine God's purpose for humans does not give consistent results – something might have a number of functions or uses, so how can you determine which is its God-given purpose?
 - Natural Law is supposed to produce objective moral principles, but we would often be influenced by our society's morality. For example, Aquinas believed that Kings, barons, knights, freemen and serfs was the natural order of society
 - Aquinas needs to look at the human as a whole, not just at functioning parts; this way, we can understand the emotional and psychological value of sex, not just the physical 'purpose' of intercourse
 - You may get a different set of rules if you look at the purpose of human society rather than of the individual (used as a justification for celibacy in priests, but could be a way to justify things such as homosexuality)
 - Protestants have argued that Natural Law removes the need for God's grace, as being good means following the rules, not being saved
 - Many argue that there is no purpose in life; to support this argument, they point to tragedies such as the recent terrorism in New York, 'acts of God' such as floods or genetically inherited diseases and say that there is no designer behind the universe
 - In some cases it seems cruel to follow a rule when the consequences are terrible; if we accept that it is occasionally alright to break Natural Laws then the whole theory is weakened.
 - Do men and women have the same ultimate purpose, or are they intrinsically different?

SITUATION ETHICS

(a) Explain the main characteristics of moral relativism. [33]

(b) 'Moral relativism cannot be justified.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain the main characteristics of moral relativism.

- Candidates should explain that moral relativism holds that moral truth varies depending on place, culture, time and religion and opposes absolutism which holds that moral truth is universal.
- Moral relativism sees the morality of actions as subjective and relative to the situation. They could give examples to illustrate this. Good candidates will also refer to normative relativism such as Situation Ethics or Utilitarianism and some may even include meta-ethical relativism.

(b) 'Moral relativism cannot be justified.' Discuss.

- Some candidates will stress the need for universality and absolutism in ethics and the need for consistency.
- Good candidates will refer to obligations, duties and principles.
- On the other hand they may defend relativism as it means it is possible to do the right thing in the situation and appreciate cultural differences.

Situation Ethics has great appeal, especially when faced with the realities of deontological ethics. It seems ludicrous that a Catholic might choose to remove a fallopian tube from a woman with an ectopic pregnancy (thereby resulting in the termination of the pregnancy but also in an inability to have further children) rather than simply abort the foetus. Abortion, Natural Law tells us, is a wrong act. Yet compassion, and even common sense, tells us it is better to abort a foetus to save the mother rather than let both die. Situation Ethics also seems more in line with the example of Christ - Jesus seemed to put people before principles.

However, Situation Ethics has fierce critics. They argue that it allows terrible things to happen in an attempt to do the right thing. Many Christians are not happy to let go of universal human rights. They feel that certain actions simply are wrong, and that our priority should be doing God's will not just making people happy. An eternal perspective means that even if bad consequences arise out of our actions (such as a pregnant woman dying), God will make all things fair and right in heaven.

Others say that Situation Ethics makes morality subjective. In other words, this would mean there is no fact about whether an action is right or wrong, merely different opinions. This seems to contradict basic Christian beliefs about God making the world with a particular design and purpose for humans.

Situation Ethics is further criticised for being individualistic. The individual has too much control or influence, and people tend to be selfish. If I am given complete freedom with no rules governing me, I am likely to misuse this power. Agape - an unselfish, unconditional love - is a great ideal but is rarely achieved in practice. People need rules to live by, and can't really be trusted to do the right thing without those rules.

Situation Ethics also receives the sorts of criticisms that Utilitarians face - outcomes or consequences are unpredictable, incalculable and immeasurable. It just isn't possible to work out which action will have the best consequences.

RELIGIOUS ETHICS

(a) Explain the ethical teachings of the religion you have studied. [33]

(b) 'Religious ethics are too rigid for moral decision making.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain the ethical teachings of the religion you have studied. [33]

- Candidates may explain ethics as a result of religious belief and describe the rules, duties and commands from revelation.
- They may explain that religious ethical behaviour comes from a sense of obedience to God and a desire to live life in the way God wishes it to be lived.
- When explaining Christian ethics candidates may also refer to Natural Law, Situation Ethics and Virtue Ethics.
- They may explain the principles of any other world religion.

(b) 'Religious ethics are too rigid for moral decision making.' Discuss. [17]

- Candidates will probably need to evaluate the deontological and teleological approaches to ethics in the context of religious ethics to attain level 3.
- Some may argue that an absolute approach is right and others may reject this.
- If they are answering from the viewpoint of Christian ethics they may consider that most Christian ethics are deontological and contrast this with a situationist approach or that of Virtue Ethics.

Each of the theories that fall under the broad heading "Christian Ethics" have their own short-comings:

- **Natural Law**
- **Situation Ethics**
- **Virtue Ethics**

It is also possible to think critically about other aspects of Christian Ethics. Relying on prayer, the conscience, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, religious experiences etc. can give very subjective results. For Christians, their relationship with God is central to their faith and impacts on every decision they make. However, this means that two Christians within the same church, reading the same Bible translations can respond in completely different ways to dilemmas such as euthanasia, genetic engineering, IVF etc.

For Catholics, the church plays a much more central role than in other denominations. This makes Catholic ethics less subjective. However, the Catholic Church has many critics. Pope John Paul II was very conservative, and his successor, Pope Benedict, seems even more so. This means that the church continues to be criticised for being inflexible and out-of-touch with the modern world. The Church still prohibits the use of condoms in all circumstances; homosexuality is seen as a tendency towards 'intrinsic moral evil' (Pope Benedict) etc.

Protestant ethics relies much more heavily on scripture. This has been criticised on a number of levels. Firstly, many people see the Bible as a collection of writings from a patriarchal, homophobic era, written by people whose ethical thinking is now outdated. The Bible is also criticised for contradicting itself; the 'God of the Old Testament' is different from the 'God of the New Testament'. A different sort of criticism of the Bible is that it is so large (66 books in the non-Catholic Bible; more if you count the Apocrypha) it can say anything you want it to say.

ABSOLUTE AND RELATIVE ETHICS

(a) Explain what is meant by moral absolutism. [33]

(b) 'Moral absolutism cannot be justified.' Discuss. [17]

(a) Explain what is meant by moral absolutism.

- Candidates should explain that moral absolutism considers actions are right or wrong intrinsically – consequences or circumstances have no bearing – and that a moral command is considered objectively and universally true.
- The answer could include reference to Divine Command Theory, Natural Law or Kant's theory with a view to defining different kinds of absolutism.
- They may contrast moral absolutism with moral relativism. Better candidates will use examples to illustrate their answers.

(b) 'Moral absolutism cannot be justified.' Discuss.

- Candidates may point to the need to have a universal truth that transcends cultures and history.
- They may also refer to certain unchanging principles e.g. do not murder, do not lie etc.
- They may refer to the need for a set of absolutes that apply to all people, regardless of where they live.
- However they may also consider that moral absolutism cannot consider the circumstances or consequences of an action and that absolutism may seem intolerant of cultural diversity and the need to accommodate different life styles.

Criticisms of absolutist ethics

- Absolutist ethics are inflexible
- It puts rules before people
- Following absolutist rules doesn't necessarily lead to a better society
- Sometimes the end does justify the means
- It is elitist and intolerant of other cultures and societies

Criticisms of relativist ethics

- Relativism makes it hard to criticise horrific acts like those of the Nazis
- People need rules and society cannot function without laws
- It is much harder to apply relativist theories
- What do you do if two relativists disagree?

You may have studied **Cultural Relativism**. Cultural relativism is a very weak ethical position. It doesn't really allow ethics to happen, because it claims that the right thing to do is to follow the rules of your society. It also doesn't acknowledge that any society has a variety of rules that may contradict - which do you follow?

Someone like MacIntyre recognises that values change from one society to the next, and we have to understand the context of an issue to understand the ethical decisions people make. However, this is not the same as saying that MacIntyre is a cultural relativist. He isn't saying that something is good simply because it is valued by a society.

Fletcher is another moral relativist who is a long way from being a cultural relativist. It is important not to merely criticise cultural relativism and presume that you have dealt a heavy blow to Virtue Ethics and Situation Ethics.