

# Sample Moral Philosophy answer

In peep show Mark's ex-fiancé buys him driving lessons so he can drive her to the hospital to have his baby. Unfortunately Mark decides not go to these lessons and three months later receives the phone call asking him to act as chauffeur. Sophie is staying at a country house three hours from the hospital and the taxi operator says she has no spare cars for a similar length of time. Should Mark drive to get her? Discuss with reference to consequentialism and Kantian ethics.



Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory that claims that the moral action in any situation is the one which brings the greatest good to the greatest number (consequentialist principle). This is usually measured in terms of pleasure and pain for, as Bentham claimed, these are the two masters that govern man. This idea is also known as the hedonic principle. These two principles combine with a third, the idea that everyone is equal, to give us Utilitarianism.

The other contribution of Bentham was a method for comparing various potential pleasures known as the hedonic calculus where contesting pleasures were subjected to seven criteria designed to calculate the magnitude of pleasure that would be attained in following certain courses of action. This notion has been widely criticised on a number of levels, firstly that it gives rise to an ethics that is no more refined than that 'of the swine.' Another criticism is that all pleasures are not clearly comparable, for example how can one compare sleeping with their partner and eating an orange. Surely these are pleasures of a different sort.

JS Mill, a pupil of Bentham's, tried to resolve this shortfall by introducing what he called higher and lower order pleasures. Mill was sure that it would be 'better to be a sad Socrates than a happy pig' and so suggested that there was something more valuable about human (or higher order) pleasures. Of course his opponents thought this distinction unsustainable and so Mill argued that once one had experienced the 'finer' things in life one would never wish to regress to lesser/lower pleasures. This ability to differentiate, he thought, allowed many to be competent judges of this distinction.

Since Mill Utilitarianism had developed and even split into rival groups. Some utilitarians try to carry out calculations for every single action they carry out, whereas others have sought to follow broad rules. These rules are chosen in order that, in their keeping, happiness will be maximised. Problems come however when one of these rules demands an action that will not lead to increased happiness on an individual occasion. Again there are differing responses here. Some, who we might call strong rule utilitarians, would insist the rule was upheld. Others would not, but in this case there is not often much to set these weak utilitarians apart from their act by act calculating counterparts.

Kant's deontological ethics are very different in that they insist that the moral worth of an action is located intrinsically, or put another way there are some actions that are just morally right. Kant was very much a child of his age and understood 'human-ness' almost completely in terms of rationality. Indeed it was due to this universal rationality of humanity that he was able to insist a universal moral code existed.

In order to locate these absolute moral rules Kant sought to apprehend the maxim or underlying moral message in any given action. He insisted all moral maxims were categorical by nature, that is to say the demanded absolute rather than hypothetical obedience.

Now clearly come categorical imperatives are immoral such as 'always steal' so Kant developed three tests or formulations to separate moral/immoral imperatives. The first formulation was that one should act only in a way that you would be happy for everyone to act all of the time. Now this removes some faulty ideas through creating the notion of a world we would not want to inhabit, and other through logic, considering them to be irrational. An example of the latter would be everyone should lie all the time as when followed 'til its conclusion this would destroy the institution of word-keeping, and so render lying impossible.

The other two involved not using (as means rather than ends) other people as they themselves were rational beings able to have their own desires and to apply these moral rules equally, and considering what actions would bring about what Kant called a 'Kingdom of Ends'.

This alone leads us to a rather negative of 'denying' sort of morality which is perhaps unfair on Kant. He seeks to solve this by making reference to duty. Though many ascribe Kant as a philosopher exalting good intentions this is rather misleading. Kant sees that the usual candidates for describing good intentions are all corruptible. The oppressing soldier who tortures obediently is not acting morally. All that is exempt is something he calls the good will which Kant says 'shines like a jewel'. This will might most simply be understood as acting in line with the categorical imperative. Again this could be done out of duty, but equally out of compassion or even vindictiveness. Interestingly, Kant really only regards acts done truly from duty as morally praiseworthy.

In the situation a Kantian would have to insist that Mark did not drive. He does have a duty to Sophie (all men to women bearing their children) but also many others that conflict. Clearly one could not wish that everyone (license or not) drove all the time and it is this formulation that makes our decision most clear. If his reason for driving is so that she doesn't find out and give him a hard time, then this would be rather close to lying understood as not respecting someone as an end them-self.

Utilitarians (at least of the act variety) would almost certainly encourage Mark to drive. There is little chance of someone experiencing pain or suffering (unless of course he crashes) compared to the certain and potentially fatal suffering that Sophie and her unborn child might undergo were they not to get to hospital. Soft rule utilitarians would no doubt see this as an exception and also get in the car in that the reason for not driving without a license is not to force pregnant women to have their babies in guesthouses. On the other hand the string variety would insist on keeping the already calculated rule.

This situation illustrates nicely some of the major shortfalls of Kantian ethics. Firstly most of us find it somewhat strange to disregard consequences fully (though his emphasis on intention appears to be a strength). Secondly, the notion of moral absolutes seems problematic, we might question whether some actions are wrong in every circumstance.

When it comes to maxims most agree that Kant struggles to articulate with enough clarity to be convincing. It is far from simple to work out the maxim underlying an action or to work out whether it is moral. It is particularly difficult, and Kant admits this, to know whether an act is done from duty or other, more dubious, motives. In disregarding emotional or actions of inclination we might conclude that Kant's moral philosophy does not do humanity justice. Certainly post-Holocaust few of us find it easy to celebrate humanity's often cold rationality.

Warburton also accuses Kant of offering an 'empty' ethics, one that is able to describe actions as wrong and not wrong, rarely more. We might also object to his emphasis on rationality, asking whether someone with a certain mental condition or even an animal is not of moral worth. Others have suggested that his different formulations are not as compatible as at first sight and that his writing on duty is not precise enough to help us choose between the most deserving of two or more conflicting duties. Nor can he acknowledge that moral dilemmas really do exist.

Utilitarianism though not without critics does seem to have a lot going for it. Certainly it is represented in our legal system at least as much as deontology and we are all undeniably concerned with consequences. It is hard not to be impressed by its ease of application also. Unfortunately there are several shortfalls.

MacIntyre has criticised utilitarianism as the 'ethics of Auschwitz' alluding to what is often referred to as the 'tyranny of the majority'. He describes it as a moral philosophy with all the morals sucked out. Indeed any notion of justice is hard to account for on purely utilitarian grounds. It is virtually impossible to compare all consequences short/long term and global to local. There are more practical problems.

Bentham's calculus assumes pleasure is purely quantitative which seems incredibly naive, and Mill's distinction is all too easily disregarded as pure subjectivity not to mention the dark and sinister acts that it potentially justifies. Masochists and those who take pleasure in the things most of us consider 'bad' further weaken the utilitarian position. Are we really to take these in to account in moral calculations?

We might also question utilitarianism's two other principles. It is far from certain that morality should be equated with pleasure, or that all men are in fact to be treated equally. At first this sounds ridiculous, but could an actor really be expected to regard his mother as of equal worth to someone he had never met? Perhaps so. Certainly it seems rather odd to dismiss a moral philosophy for being too demanding.