

Scenario Questions

It's obvious when you think about it but when the examiners set a scenario question they are not trying to find out what people should do in that situation nor are they trying to find out what utilitarians or Kantians would do. They are trying to find out how much you as the candidate understand about utilitarian and Kantian ethics.

The examiners also aren't really interested in finding out how much you know. True they want you to give them correct information and they will be impressed by an in-depth knowledge of the subject but they don't want you to tell them everything you know. The examiners want you to demonstrate understanding by carefully selecting the information that is relevant to the scenario. Simply padding out your essay with information that you happen to know or is part of a pre-learned response isn't going to earn you high marks.



Philosophy is often about making fine distinctions and those who can do so accurately demonstrate more understanding. For example, there may be an important difference between 'Always tell the truth' and 'Never tell a lie'. There may be fine distinctions that need to be made when analysing how the theory applies to the scenario.

The first thing to do when answering a scenario question is to identify the important issue or issues. You must always answer the question that has been set but, since, despite appearances, the question is really about the theory not the situation, it can be helpful to reformulate the question into something more direct. Consider this question from 2010:

Your close friend says she wants to tell you a secret but before telling you makes you promise to tell nobody. She then explains that the previous night she had been out with her friends stealing and had nearly been caught. The police are now asking questions and your friend says she needs an alibi. Your friend tells you that unless you lie to the police she will get a criminal record.

Explain and evaluate the advice Kantians would give to you in this situation.

You won't go far wrong if you reformulate this as:

Discuss the problem of conflicting duties as it relates to Kantian ethics.
Illustrate your answer by making reference to the given scenario.

Having thoroughly discussed the problem in this way the conclusion of the essay would then be a good place to check that you have clearly responded to 'Explain and evaluate the advice...'

Now consider this question from 2018:

Read the following:

'Late one night a parent discovers that their child has a very severe headache and decides to take the child to hospital by car. They come to a junction where the traffic lights are at red. Seeing that there are no other cars at the junction, the parent decides to cross the red light. This is seen by police officers who stop the parent, question and breathalyse them. This is standard procedure for any driver stopped for committing a traffic offence. After issuing the parent with a fine for crossing the red light, they allow them to go on their way to hospital. Because they were stopped, they arrived later than they would have done if they had waited for the lights to change.'

Analyse and evaluate how utilitarians might respond to the parent's decision to cross the red light.

In your answer you should make clear the difference between act and rule utilitarianism.



Which of the following topics should you focus on when answering this question? Be prepared to explain your choices.

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Hedonism | <input type="checkbox"/> The hedonic calculus |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nozick's experience machine | <input type="checkbox"/> The act utilitarian use of rules |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Consequentialism | <input type="checkbox"/> Mill's higher and lower pleasures |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Universalism | <input type="checkbox"/> Rule utilitarianism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Special responsibilities | <input type="checkbox"/> The greatest happiness principle |



How would you reformulate this into a more direct question?