

## **Answering exam questions on practical ethics**

Unlike other areas of philosophy, practical ethics touches on everyday life immediately. So it is easy to slip out of doing good philosophy into thinking in more ‘everyday’ ways. Doing well in exam questions on practical ethics involves thinking hard about the question in a philosophical way. Here are some tips to help:

1. While the facts are important, just talking about the facts is not philosophy. Nor is repeating what people generally say or feel about these cases. You are not doing social science, but discussing justifications for certain ways of making decisions.
2. Whether an action is right or wrong can depend on the facts, and as philosophers, we may not know all the facts. So philosophical arguments are often ‘conditional’. It is not just acceptable, but good, to say ‘if it turns out like this, then this follows (the action is right/wrong)’. For example, you might say ‘if a woman’s life is harmed by having a child now, abortion is right’; don’t discuss whether her life would actually be harmed, how it ‘might happen’ that she comes to love the child, and so on.
3. Avoid oversimplification wherever possible. Practical moral issues are very complex. In particular, if you are evaluating a theory, e.g. deontology, by its success in practical cases, the complexity is crucial to being fair. Consider whether practical ethics ‘ought’ to be easy or not. Can we expect clear rules and algorithmic decision procedures in life? Is the presence of grey areas really a failure? Deontology and practical wisdom suggest not.
4. Likewise, try to avoid objections that just point out our ignorance. For example, ‘who knows what consequences follow from an abortion?’ is not helpful. This move is simply a refusal to do philosophy. A utilitarian will quickly reply that we must simply do our best to work out the consequences. The same with ‘who is to say what is right?’. You as a philosopher are to say what is right, as you see it and to the best of your ability (this is not arrogance, but the contribution of a rational human being to a rational debate).
5. Make a distinction between morality and legality. Whether a practice should be legalized is a separate debate from whether it is moral acceptable.
6. Separate metaethical issues from practical issues. So relativism and non-cognitivism should be kept out of discussions of practical ethics as far as possible. The premise of practical ethics is that we are searching for the (or a) right thing to do. Challenging this premise is unhelpful in this context.