

Applied ethics FIL2302

FIL2302 essays should take the form of an argument. It can be tempting to say that ethical issues are a matter of opinion or subjective interpretation. If people's opinions never differed, perhaps we wouldn't need to worry about how to evaluate ethical arguments, and it would simply be a question of individual values. But the real challenge of ethics is to face the problem of dealing with differences of opinion or interpretation. If your friend, colleague or family-member has a different view from you about what is ethically appropriate in a particular situation, you will need to achieve some kind of resolution. If you think you are right, you will need to be able to present arguments to support your view, and to explain why you believe they should agree. Conversely, you will need to be able to recognise and evaluate the strength of other people's arguments.

A good essay will outline *why* there is a problem, and will explain the ways in which a solution could be found. This is often about identifying the tension or conflict between different ethical values. So if your topic is whether euthanasia is morally acceptable, you could explore the arguments a person seeking euthanasia might make, such as the value of being able to exercise self-determination in the time and manner of one's death, or perhaps avoiding terrible pain. These should be compared against the counter arguments. You should try to show the strengths and weaknesses of each position, drawing on appropriate sources from the literature. Your essay should have a clear conclusion.

Try to avoid creating a list of pros and cons.

References and reading

If in doubt as to what to include in your references, look at a journal such as the *Journal of Medical Ethics* for guidance. For books you should include author, title, publishing house and year; and for journal articles, author, title of article, title of journal, volume number and year.

Do not be tempted to insert references material if it doesn't directly relate to what you are saying – this will simply waste time and space. If you feel that an external source is needed to support your arguments, or if you want to cite or attack an argument made by someone else, you will need to provide appropriate references. In each of the examples below I've provided snippets that might appear in a student's essay or presentation to show where references are needed, and how the information referenced might be linked to the argument being made.

1. "Alcohol related illness costs the health service a huge amount,* so doctors should persuade their patients to drink less."
**This is a factual claim, and requires a reference.*
2. "John Harris argues that embryos do not have the same moral status as adult human beings because they lack certain morally important properties.* However, it could be argued that the value of a person does not depend on the properties that they have, but simply on the fact that they are a member of the human species."
**This draws on another person's work and requires a reference.*
3. "The general medical council states that doctors should be 'honest and trustworthy and act with integrity'.* But is honesty on the part of a doctor always beneficial to patients? If not, deliberately deceiving a patient might sometimes be justified."
**This is a direct quote and requires a reference.*

Note that even where the claim is accurately referenced and forms part of an argument, it needs to be a GOOD argument! In the first example, even if the initial factual claim is true, the second point does not necessarily follow from the first. A lot of implicit ethical assumptions have been made (eg

that reducing costs is the primary ethical goal; that persuading patients to drink less will succeed in achieving this goal; that doctors have either the right or the duty to try to alter patients' lifestyle choice, etc). Unless the student goes on to identify and evaluate these assumptions in the context of their argument, this will be a poor piece of work.

In the second example, the student identifies two conflicting views on the ethical status of the embryo. To do well, the student would need to analyse the two approaches and compare their merits and we can't tell from this snippet if this is going to happen. Simply citing the two views would not in itself get the student very far, but it is a reasonable start.

In the third example, the student notes that published guidance might conflict with the idea of benefitting patients. Again, some implicit assumptions have been made (eg that benefitting patients is likely to be of greater ethical importance than being honest). And again, the student would need to identify and explore these assumptions if they are to do well in the essay. Nevertheless, again to have identified the potential ethical conflict is a good start.

Finally, note that all three of the examples above could have been reworded so that they *didn't* need to cite external sources. EG:

1. "If alcohol consumption costs the health service a lot of money, doctors should use their authority and power to discourage their patients from drinking..."
2. "Moral status might be seen to depend on the properties that an entity has; alternatively, it might be seen to depend solely on whether that entity is or is not a human being..."
3. "Telling the truth may be ethically important, but if there are situations in which the truth would distress or harm a patient, perhaps doctors should feel justified in telling a lie..."

Keeping within the word limit

The maximum length for essays is 10 pages. Part of the task is to get your point across within the allotted space, so if you go over the limit you have already demonstrated your inability to do this. Or, in other words, you have shot yourself in the foot! If you find you're over the limit and are struggling to know what to cut, get in touch and I may be able to advise. If you've left it too late, or if I've already looked at your work too many times, then you must use your initiative and prune away anything that's waffly, descriptive, or otherwise not central to your argument.

In the essay, be careful about structure. The essay should be organised into clear chunks, rather than being a long ramble. You should use 'signposts' at the beginning of each chunk, telling the reader what you have to do in this chunk. Try to anticipate objections and counter-examples and respond to them in the essay itself as far as possible.

Breakdown of marking criteria

Overall structure: is it clear to the reader what the essay is about? Does the student set out and adhere to a clear rationale for their approach to the question?

Use of English: has the student written clearly and concisely? Is the grammar, spelling and punctuation correct? Has the student mis-used or mis-interpreted words or phrases?

Engagement with relevant literature: is the student aware of relevant material that has been published on the topic? Do they show how the material they cite relates to their own argument? Have they cited their references appropriately, and formatted their references correctly?

Critical reasoning: does the student show an ability to recognise and evaluate ethical arguments put forward by others? Do they undertake critical analysis of key concepts and terms?

Logic of argument: does the student construct their own argument, taking account of counter-arguments? Do they reach a clear conclusion that follows logically from what has been discussed throughout the essay?