

a) Explain why some people believe there are no moral absolutes.

#### Sample answer

Kant argued that moral rules are Categorical Imperatives - absolute rules that know of no exception. One reason to reject this claim is that any deontological system will face circumstances where rules conflict. Jewish doctors in the Holocaust performed abortions to prevent women from being sent to the gas chambers. The two rules - Doctors should save lives when they can; Doctors should not perform abortions - conflicted, and clearly both couldn't be absolute rules.

You can't have absolute rules, as they would eventually conflict.

Kant claims that these moral absolutes can be worked out by using reason, universalising a maxim to see if it is self-contradictory or a contradiction of the will. However, each person's will may be different, and this would lead to rules that not everyone would agree to. Also, choosing to do something oneself is not the same thing as saying everyone must do that. I might want an abortion because the time isn't right for me to have a baby. This doesn't mean I have to make a universal rule that everyone should do the same thing.

Everyone's will is different, so whose will do we base the absolute rules on?

Natural Law produces moral absolutes that say abortion, euthanasia and embryology are all wrong, as they go against God's design or purpose for human life. However, many people reject the claim that humans were designed for a specific purpose. They argue that we arrived as a result of evolution, and that people have different natures.

Everyone's nature is different so we weren't designed for a specific purpose

The same claim may be made by modern Virtue Ethicists. Martha Nussbaum claims that Aristotle's theory is absolutist, and that virtues like Courage, Temperance and Patience are part of human nature and good in all societies. However, MacIntyre rejects this claim. Societies change, and so do the virtues. Heroism may have been valued in small Greek villages, protecting the community, but today a different set of virtues is appropriate. MacIntyre would say there is no absolute, universal set of human virtues, and therefore no absolute moral rules - morality is relative to culture. Cultural relativism appeals to many people, as they believe it is wrong to force one set of ideals onto another culture.

All cultures are different so people will have different values - there are no absolute values

Utilitarians may reject moral absolutes because they think the consequences of an action are important. Bentham, often labelled an 'act utilitarian', said that the right action was the one that brought most pleasure and least pain. There would be no moral rule he would not break if breaking it led to greater happiness. Even Mill, often thought of as a 'rule utilitarian', recognised that the greater good may come from breaking a rule, even if that rule was designed to bring about the greater good.

You can't have moral absolutes because in some circumstances breaking the rule leads to the best outcome

Joseph Fletcher, who wrote 'Situation Ethics', rejected moral absolutes. He said there were times when you had to put your principles to one side and do the right thing. The rules were useful, but did not apply in all situations and were therefore not absolute. He said that morality was relative to the situation.

The most loving thing may be to break a rule, so it is not absolute

b) "Moral absolutes are unhelpful when making decisions about medical ethics."

#### Sample answer

Some doctors would reject this claim, arguing that moral absolutes help decision making in medical ethics. For example, the rule 'Do not kill' is part of the oath taken by doctors. Some doctors would agonise over a decision whether to kill a terminally ill patient who has asked to die. These doctors might then feel guilty if the family turned out to have different wishes, or if a cure was later found for the illness. Having absolute moral rules helps doctors, because they don't have to think about the individual circumstances or worry about possible consequences that are impossible to calculate or predict.

Absolutes help doctors to make decisions without agonising over hard cases

Others claim that this oversimplifies modern medicine. It is not clear, they may say, what would count as killing someone. Doctors disagree about the definition of death as 'brain-stem death'. Some doctors would consider withholding food as killing a patient, while others would disagree. Doctors may say that, rather than trying to apply inflexible moral absolutes, it is better to focus on the well-being of the patient. If giving a high dose of painkillers prevented a patient from dying in agony, doctors might say it doesn't matter what rules were or weren't broken. Others would disagree, saying that clear rules are essential to protect patients and doctors. Doctors who had to kill Mary to save Jodie believed that the positive outcome to Jodie was a more important consideration than whether killing Mary broke an absolute rule.

Doctors should consider patients' well being, not just rules, but rules do protect doctors and patients.

Some people agree with moral absolutes concerning foetuses. Many Roman Catholics argue that the foetus is human from the moment of conception and should be protected by law. The Church of England does not take an absolutist stance on abortion. They disagree that a foetus is a person at the earliest stages, and believe that moral absolutes such as 'Abortion is wrong' lead to greater evils, such as forcing a very young child who has been raped to risk her life having a baby.

Catholics believe in moral absolutes; Church of England says abortion may be 'the lesser of two evils'

Stem-cell research holds out the hope of providing cures that would save millions of lives. Situation Ethicists may believe that allowing such research is the compassionate, loving thing to do. The Catholic Church teaches that it is always wrong to kill an embryo. This particular moral absolute is considered unhelpful by supporters of stem cell research. It doesn't take into account the positive consequences to many millions of people. However, some Christians try to hold onto absolute principles while supporting the research. They might agree that it is wrong to kill, but might believe human life begins at a much later stage, meaning that stem-cell research is acceptable.

Absolutes don't take into account the effects of our actions which may, with stem cell research, affect millions of people.