Short Essay: Dialogue or Movies

For this 500 to 1000-word short essay, you can choose ONE of the following essay topics.

**Option 1: A Conversation.** Write a three-way dialogue between a utilitarian, deontologist, and a virtue ethicist on some ethical theory that interests you (for example, abortion, euthanasia, gun control, the death penalty, universal healthcare, etc.). Your essay should do the following:

1. The utilitarian should explain their view, and show how it might apply to the topic in question.
2. The deontologist should explain their view, and show how it might apply to the topic in question.
3. The virtue ethicist should explain their view, and show how it might apply to the topic in question.
   1. NOTE: If you’ve already read the chapter on natural law theory, you can choose to include natural law theorist instead of virtue ethicist.
4. They should note the areas on which they differ.
5. They should note the areas on which they agree.

Note that there’s no single, universally accepted answer as to how a given theory “should” answer a question (so, when it comes to abortion, some deontologists are pro-choice, some are pro-life, and some are in between—it just depends on which “rules” they accept).

**Option 2: Ethical Theory at the Movies.** Watch a movie that somehow involves ethics from the list provided below (you can watch other movies as well, but need to get my permission FIRST). Now write a “lesson plan” in which you use the events portrayed in the movie as a way of exploring utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, or natural law theory (choose only ONE theory). Your essay should include the following:

1. A short introduction to the movie where you tell the reader a bit about the overall plot, and any relevant details they need to know about the characters and setting to understand the rest of your essay.
2. A description of some of the specific ethical problems/puzzles that came up in the movie.
   1. These might involve choices the characters make, or the laws/policies portrayed in the movie, or anything else that occurred to you as ethically interesting while watching the movie.
   2. The problems might be “big” ones (nuclear war! the death penalty! slavery!) or “small” ones (does the main character treat their friends/family well?) or some combination of these.
3. A section in which you explain the ethical theory you’ve chosen, and show how it can help us understand/solve the various problems/puzzles you’ve identified. It’s your job to “teach” the reader this theory and about its applications, and to do so using examples from the movie.
4. A conclusion in which you discuss the “real world” implications of all of this. What can we learn from the movie you’ve chosen?

## List of Movies:

Here is a list of movies. I’ve included a link to the various streaming options. A number of these should be available for free (just look for the list of “free” streaming options at the line), but there are some you’d need to rent (or have Netflix/Amazon/etc.). If you’d like to watch a movie that isn’t on the list, you’ll need to get my permission first.

*Note: Please let me know if links aren’t working, and I’ll update the list.*

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| A Man Called Ove (2015) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/a-man-called-ove> |
| A Man for All Seasons (1966) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/a-man-for-all-seasons> |
| All Quiet on the Western Front (1979) -- Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/all-quiet-on-the-western-front-1979> |
| Angry Inuk (2016) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/angry-inuk> |
| Animal Farm (1999) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/animal-farm-1999> |
| Blindspotting (2018) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/blindspotting> |
| Cider House Rules (1999) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-cider-house-rules> |
| Crucible, The (1996) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-crucible> |
| Crying Game, The (1992) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-crying-game> |
| Dead Man Walking (1995) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/dead-man-walking> |
| Deliver Us From Evil (2006) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/deliver-us-from-evil-2006> |
| Detachment (2011) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/detachment> |
| Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (2004) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/eternal-sunshine-of-the-spotless-mind> |
| Four Lions (2010) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/four-lions> |
| Frontline: Police on Trial (2022) - Free | <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/police-on-trial/> |
| God Knows Where I Am (2016) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/god-knows-where-i-am> |
| Gook (2017) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/gook> |
| Groundhog Day (1993) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/groundhog-day> |
| Half Nelson (2006) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/half-nelson> |
| Lincoln (2012) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/lincoln-2012> |
| Malcom X (1992) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/malcolm-x> |
| My Sister’s Keeper (2009) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/my-sisters-keeper> |
| Schindler’s List (1993) | https://[www.justwatch.com/us/movie/schindlers-list](http://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/schindlers-list) |
| Selma (2014) | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/selma> |
| Short Term 12 – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/short-term-12> |
| Sons of Perdition (2010) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/sons-of-perdition> |
| Sophie’s Choice (1982) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/sophies-choice> |
| The Act of Killing (2012) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-act-of-killing> |
| The House I Live In (2012) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-house-i-live-in> |
| The Lesson Plan (2010) - Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/lesson-plan> |
| Whistleblower, The (2010) – Free | <https://www.justwatch.com/us/movie/the-whistleblower> |

## Short Essay General Criteria (From Syllabus)

You’ll have the chance to write a number of short essays for the course. Here’s a bit more about what this will entail, and how they are graded.

1. Each essay should be between **500** and **1000 words.** I won’t penalize you for going over, though please make an effort to be concise as is possible, given the material. Basically, make things “as simple as possible, but no simpler.”
   * A-level essays are often (though not always!) closer to 1,000 words than 500.
2. Material I’ve provided you with in our “textbook” (which contains both my lecture notes and other readings) can be cited informally by identify the chapter, page, and author (if needed). If you choose to use outside resources, please use a standard citation style (such as APA, MLA, or Chicago), and provide a full citation. As a rule, **no more than 15%** of your paper should be quotes.
3. Please don’t use the words or ideas of others without proper attribution. Please see the syllabus for details on the policy regarding **plagiarism and academic integrity.** I regularly use [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com) to check for plagiarism or related issues.
4. Since the goal of the exam is to demonstrate how well *you* understand the class material, you should try to **use your own words and examples to explain what you’ve learned.** Essays that simply reproduce the handouts will not receive good grades. Nor will essays that simply “give your thoughts” on an issue (without demonstrating knowledge of the class material, and the ability to apply it to novel cases).
5. Please submit your essays as MS Word files. I will grade them on a **first-submitted, first-graded** basis.

## Essay Grading Rubric

Each essay is worth FIVE points. Your grade will depend on how well you do each of the following:

1. How well are you able to **explain** and **apply** the relevant course material? By the end of the essay, the reader should come away with a clear idea of what you’ve learned in the class, and how it applies to whatever problem/issue you are writing about.
2. To what extent does your essay offer a coherent and creative response to the problem/question? In an argumentative essay, for example, you should make an (evidence-based) **argument** for a **thesis,** and make sure to fully consider any potential **objections.**

Factors such as your paper’s **structure** (e.g. intro/body paragraphs/conclusion) and **language** (e.g. grammar, style) are important to the extent they influence the above. The grading criteria are as follows:

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| Grade | Description |
| *0* | No answer submitted, or evidence of plagiarism. |
| *3 or below (D or F)* | Fails to meet minimal requirements in terms of content (e.g., addresses a related question) or word count. Essays that simply report what you “believe” or “feel,” without providing an *argument* may receive grades in this range. |
| *C (3.5 points)* | Meets minimal requirements in terms of both content (it offers an answer the assigned question, and attempts to defend this answer) and word count. However, there may be some significant errors or omissions when it comes to the explanation of relevant class material, or providing a detailed, complete response to the question. |
| *B (4 points)* | Fully meets both content and word count requirements, and provides satisfactory explanations of most major arguments and concepts from class. There are no significanterrors in argumentation or explanatory gaps. However, explanations/examples/arguments may at points suffer from lack of clarity or completeness in comparison to A essays. |
| *A (5 points)* | Meets and exceeds minimal requirements. The essay’s treatment of course material shows a full mastery of the relevant content, and provides a creative, well-thought-out response to it. |

I will grade essays in the order they are submitted (first-come, first-serve).

## Tips on Writing Philosophy

Philosophy essays can be a bit different from other sorts of writing. However, from past students have told me, they’re not actually that bad, once you start writing them! Here are some general tips:

1. You should have an **introduction** that concisely introduces the topic, and a **thesis sentence** that clearly states your position. Philosophy papers often begin with theses of the form “I will argue X because Y.”
2. When discussing tough ethical or philosophical issues, **avoid phrases like “I feel,” “I think,” or “I believe.”** Part of taking these issues seriously involves granting that one’s actions and beliefs have consequences for other people, and that (for this reason) they need to be defended with the sorts of ***arguments*** and ***reasons*** that these other people could actually accept. For this reason, appeals to your *own* emotions, religious beliefs, etc. are generally (though not always) inappropriate.
3. Pretend you are writing to **an intelligent and interested (but relatively ignorant) 12-year-old** who doesn’t know anything about the subject (rather than your philosophy professor). This means you’ll need to write clearly, explain new concepts, and offer interesting, memorable examples. A significant portion of your grade will be based on your ability to explain the arguments/concepts we’ve been studying using your own words and examples.
4. Your essay should have multiple paragraphs, each of which has a clear **topic sentence** that clearly relates back to your thesis. When writing philosophy, it’s easy to get “off topic.” So, always ask yourself: is this paragraph helping me provide evidence for my thesis? If the answer is “no,” it should be cut or revised.
5. You should always consider possible **objections** to your thesis. Ask yourself: “How would a smart, well-educated opponent respond to my argument?” In some cases, this might be a real author who you can cite; in other cases, you’ll have to play your own “devil’s advocate.”
6. The conclusion should help the reader appreciate the way your argument fits into the “big picture.” For example, what exactly do you take yourself to have shown? How does this relate to similar cases? What might be the “next step” of this argument be, if you had more time and space?