**Sample Essay**

**Introduction to Ethics**

*Summer Session A*

**TASK**

Your essay will have three parts.

(1) *Characterize*. Characterize maximizing consequentialism. To do this, you should (among other things) unpack any “loaded” words that you use in your characterization. You may also choose to give some examples showing how the theory works.

(2) *Motivate*. Give one, and no more than one, reason why a philosopher might be attracted to this view. Make sure you thoroughly explain this reason.

(3) *Object*. Give one, and no more than one, reason why a philosopher might dislike the view. Make sure you thoroughly explain the objection.

[1] In this paper, I briefly characterize maximizing consequentialism. I argue that while the view is attractive because of its parsimony, it has a difficult time explaining why we intuitively care about how much welfare *each* person has, as opposed to how much welfare collective humanity has.

[2] Maximizing consequentialism is a view about what we morally ought to do. [3] There are two components to this view. First, the view is *consequentialist*: someone who subscribes to this view holds what we are morally obligated to do turns entirely on facts about the consequences of our actions. Specifically, on this view, we ought to do the act that most increases the overall welfare.

[4] The consequentialist theory will need to spell out a number of crucial details. First, *whose* overall welfare counts? Should we only consider human welfare, or do animals’ welfare count as well? If animals’ welfare counts, should it count as much as humans?

Second, what counts as an act? For example, consider the trolley problem: you are faced with an opportunity to pull a lever to save five people and kill one person, or not pull the live to save one person and kill five people. For the purposes of practical deliberation, does failing to pull the lever count as an act or not?

Third, what counts as a consequence of our actions? Intuitively, we seem to care only about consequences that have a certain degree of “causal closeness” to our acts. Consider again the trolley case. It’s clear that the consequentialist wants to say that, in determining what we ought to do, we should consider whether we will save five lives or one life. But suppose that after we pull the lever, saving five people, one of the saved men becomes a serial killer, who then murders ten people. This is causally linked to my pulling the lever, so it is still an outcome of my act. If I hadn’t pulled the lever, the serial killer would have died, and he would not have killed ten further people. But this outcome doesn’t seem to affect the moral status of my pulling or not pulling the lever. The consequentialist will have to draw a principled line between consequences that morally matter and consequences that don’t.

Fourth, how should we understand welfare? This is an open philosophical question. Some philosophers think that welfare is increased when people’s desires, achievements, or preferences are fulfilled. Other philosophers think that welfare is increased when people have certain intrinsic goods, such as freedom, friendship, and intellectual fulfillment.

[5] An advantage of maximizing consequentialism is its extreme parsimony. The maximizing consequentialist only needs to posit *one* principle that determines what we ought to do. When we build explanatory theories, we want to make our theory as parsimonious as possible. Because the maximizing consequentialist appeals to only one principle, then her theory will be more parsimonious or at least as parsimonious as any other theory.

[6] You might worry that this extreme parsimony is actually a problem for the view, because it is doubtful that only one principle can cover every conceivable moral situation. However, because of the nature of the principle, this is not the case. For any given situation, we can calculate the net welfare. This means that we can calculate the welfare at the time *before* I undertake an action, we can calculate the welfare at the time *after* I undertake an action, and we can find the difference. In order to determine what I should do in a particular situation, I just go through this procedure for every possible act that I *might* do in this situation and select the act that yields the highest difference. So we have very good reason to believe that maximizing consequentialism, despite its extreme parsimony, still issues a verdict on any possible moral situation.

[7] Unfortunately, maximizing consequentialism, at least in its purest form, leads to a number of unintuitive predictions. For example, consider a situation in which I can choose between increasing the welfare of six billionaires by twenty units each and increasing the welfare of six destitute persons by two units each. Intuitively, it seems that I ought to increase the welfare of six destitute persons. However, selecting the first option will increase the *overall* welfare, so maximizing consequentialism says that I ought to increase the welfare of the six billionaires.

[8] There is an even worse version of this problem. Suppose that I can either increase one destitute person’s welfare by two units or I can add another person in the world, who has a welfare of exactly three units. Let’s suppose further that three units welfare is very low, so that this person is living a miserable life. According to maximizing consequentialism, I ought to add the second person to the world. But this doesn’t seem right.

[9] The problem is that the act consequentialist theorizes that we *only* care about humanity’s collective welfare. But that isn’t the only thing that we seem to care about. We also seem to care about how much welfare *each individual* person has. In other words, we seem to care about *how* the welfare is distributed among the population. My first case showed that, all else being equal, it is better to increase the welfare of badly off people than increase the welfare of well off people. My second case showed that, all else being, it is better to increase the welfare of a badly off person than to add another badly off person to the world. Because it only has one moral principle, maximizing consequentialism cannot explain this. Although maximizing consequentialism could add other principles that better accord with our intuitions, doing so would undermine the view’s parsimony. If the maximizing consequentialist wants to preserve the view’s parsimony, she should instead restructure her principle.

[1] Notice how sparse my introduction is. It gets the job done and has no extra frills. At the same time, it is clear what I’m about to do.

[2] Explain what kind of view you’re expositing. What is the view designed to do?

[3] I characterize the view.

[4] I unpack my characterization, drawing attention to a number of details that I don’t end up resolving.

[5] I motivate the view. Notice that I explain in depth *why* the motivating reason counts as a motivating reason.

[6] I explain why this is genuinely an attractive feature of the view, even though some might think it has downsides.

[7] I give my first objection in terms of a case.

[8] I consider an even worse form of the objection in terms of another case.

[9] I try to diagnose the problem in general terms.