

# BioMedical Admissions Test (BMAT)

## Section 3: Writing Task

### Philosophical and Political Concepts

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## Philosophical and Political Concepts Relevant to Medicine

### Consequentialism

Broadly, consequentialism judges whether a decision is ethically correct by what its **outcome** is. If the outcome is positive, “the end justifies the means”, and the morally correct decision is that which produces the **most positive results**.

Consequentialism does not dictate what defines “positive results”, so there are various branches of consequentialism depending on what is believed to be the best result. However, traditional consequentialism incorporates happiness as the most fundamental positive outcome.

#### Arguments for:

- Only the **results** of actions remain.
- Goal-centered plans may be more **effective**.
- It is wrong to choose something that may produce an **overall worse result**.

#### Arguments against:

- It is not possible to **predict** outcomes with 100% certainty, so making a decision based on its consequences is in some way risky from the start.
- The **decisions** made in order to achieve an outcome may be **morally questionable** themselves.
- Consequentialism assumes that we look at what is good from an impartial point of view, but practically everyone has their own **biases**.
- The “most positive outcome” may not align with ideals of **fairness or equity**.
- Actions justified under consequentialism may, in practice, infringe on **personal rights**.

### Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a branch of consequentialism that strives to maximise **utility**. In this context, utility refers to happiness and well-being. Thus, given a choice, the utilitarian will choose what gives the **greatest good to the most people**.

A medical application of utilitarianism would be to remove NHS funding for particular ‘self-inflicted’ diseases such as alcoholism and obesity, as this would result in greater funds for the use of the rest of the population, maximising the overall utility. Utilitarianism is also the moral reasoning applied in justifying military action, as well as being the principal approach within the business sector.

In a BMAT essay, the utilitarian perspective might be a useful argument to consider, particularly given its wide application within policy-making. However, to achieve a high mark it is important



to consider the **limitations** of this approach, which are broadly the same as the limitations of consequentialism as a whole.

## Universal Healthcare

Universal healthcare provides all residents of a country with **healthcare without financial hardship**. The funding of healthcare may be provided by the government (e.g. NHS in the UK) or insurance companies in countries where it is mandated that all citizens must purchase health insurance. Universal healthcare does not mean that all aspects of care are provided, and it is up to each country to decide **which services are covered**. Fundamentally, universal healthcare strives to give everyone the opportunity to achieve the **highest possible level of health**.

Universal healthcare as it is provided in the UK can be considered somewhat **socialist** given the social ownership of the health services through its funding via taxes.

## Evidence-Based Medicine

Evidence-based Medicine (EBM) is the “process of systematically **reviewing, appraising and using clinical research** findings to aid the delivery of **optimum care to patients**” (*Rosenberg and Donald*). While all medicine is, to some extent, based on research and evidence, EBM highlights the importance of rigorous, well-designed, unbiased and well-conducted research (such as randomised controlled trials).

EBM is the method via which **‘best practice’** is chosen in the NHS and NICE - the recommended course of action. A common argument cited against “complementary and alternative medicine” is that there is insufficient proof with regards to its effects - it is not Evidence-based Medicine.

## Logical Positivism

Broadly, logical positivism is a theory which states that all meaningful human knowledge can be **reduced to logical and scientific foundations**. It is based on the idea that whatever exists and is meaningful can be tested through experiments, observation and/or logical proof. Effectively, logical positivists believe in **objective** truth. Thus, statements can be in one of three categories: true, false or meaningless. “Meaningless” statements are those that cannot be tested via logic or an experiment.

While this theory is complex and exceeds the level of understanding that you would require for a BMAT essay, it might be useful to mention that an argument takes a “positivist stance”.



E.g. It could be argued that the positivist nature of Evidence-Based Medicine limits its applicability as the gold-standard of medical practice, since social and philosophical dimensions of good healthcare may be missed.

## Relativism

Fundamentally, relativism is the idea that there is **no universal truth**, but each idea has its own truth. To some extent, all points of view become equally valid as they have their own context and framework by which their truth is validated. Within relativism, no standpoint is privileged over the others.

Its branches include **moral relativism**, whereby there is no one set of morals that is universally correct so moral judgements may differ among cultures. **Cultural relativism** considers this through its doctrine of judging beliefs, values and practices against the context of the culture (rather than against the criteria of another culture). Effectively, what is “right” and “wrong” are culture-specific, rather than universal truths.

Particularly when considering the Four Pillars of Medical Ethics, the idea of relativism may provide some interesting arguments - for example, when considering beneficence. While acting in the patient’s best interests is an immovable moral, what constitutes these best interests may vary from patient to patient. Thus, in some sense, relativism is at play when considering beneficence.

## Cartesian Dualism

Very briefly, Cartesian Dualism is the belief that **mind and body are distinct and separable**. Applied to the medical field, this views the body as more of a ‘machine’, encouraging logical and scientifically-based solutions for illnesses.

It could be argued that this distinction between the body and mind led to the ‘old medicine’ approach to treating the physical body without much concern towards mental health and psychological well-being, as this was not part of the ‘body machine’. You might say that the newer, holistic approach to medicine whereby all aspects of a person’s well-being are considered signifies a move away from this dualism.

