M.A. Exam in Ethics—Winter 2012

Part I

1. One of the formulations of Kant’s categorical imperative is that we must act in such a way that we always treat people as ends in themselves, and never merely as means. What does this mean? Present and evaluate Kant’s argument for the requirement, and try to identify a significant weakness.

2. According to Hume, there is no substantive distinction between moral virtues and other kinds of virtues. What is his argument for this claim? Is there a way of drawing a substantive distinction between moral evaluations of people and evaluations of other kinds?

3. Explain Aristotle’s so-called “Unity of the Virtues” thesis and his argument for it. Explain the view of one contemporary theorist who denies this strong version of the Unity of the Virtues in favour of a weaker version. What are their reasons for rejecting the strong version of the thesis, and for adopting a weaker version? Which version of the thesis do you find most plausible and why?

Part II

4. Some philosophers have argued that people have natural (as opposed to political or legal) rights. What might those rights be, and why believe that people have them? Are there natural rights? Assess the significance of your answer to moral philosophy.

5. Some modern moral theories take action (or the maxim of an action) as the basic unit of moral assessment. Some neo-Aristotelians would argue that the basic unit of assessment is, or ought to be, an agent’s character, and that the assessment of action is, or ought to be, grounded in the assessment of character. What speaks for or against either position on the basic unit of moral assessment? Discuss with reference to at least two philosophers.

6. Peter Singer has argued on utilitarian grounds that most of us are doing far less than we are morally required to do. Susan Wolf argues that the same conclusion may be reached on Kantian grounds. Is this true? Do Kant’s and Mill’s theories entail that most of us are doing far less than we are morally required to do? If these theories do entail that, what is the significance of this? If not, why not, where do Singer and Wolf go wrong in interpreting the theories?

Part III

7. What, in contemporary moral philosophy, is meant by ‘moral luck’? What is the philosophical/theoretical significance of moral luck?

8. Philosophers like David Wiggins and John McDowell have proposed an analogy between moral judgments, on the one hand, and judgments concerning secondary (and aesthetic) properties, on the other hand. In what exactly does the analogy consist? What is Wiggins’s and McDowell’s point in invoking it? What philosophical views or assumptions are they seeking thereby to question? Is their argument successful?

9. Explain the distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons. Should agent-relative reasons play any role in moral reasoning? Discuss with respect to at least two philosophers.