Study Questions: M.A. Exam in Ethics—Winter 2012

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. 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.

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

4. 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?

5. 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?

6. 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.

7. 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?

8. 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?

9. Catherine Wilson argues such as Susan Wolf’s arguments such as against the idea of the ‘Moral Saint’ represent ‘a form of philosophical progress’ but also ‘a form of socio-political regress’. Explicate Wilson’s claim here and then assess it.

10. What is Nietzsche’s critique of morality? How compelling is it? Discuss with reference to at least one contemporary philosopher.

11. What would be ‘naturalism’ with respect to morality, and what might speak for it? What speaks against it?

12. 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.