Exam: M.A. Exam in Ethics—Spring 2013

Answer three questions, one from each section.

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. Kant claims that a beneficent action performed out of sympathy has no moral worth. Why does he think this? Could we have good reasons for actions that have no moral worth? Discuss the views of at least one critic of Kant.

3. What does blame add to the judgment that a person has acted wrongly? Is blame central to the moral life? Discuss with reference to at least two philosophers.

II

4. Explain the central idea of Scanlon’s contractualist account of morality. How does Scanlon argue against Utilitarianism? Does Scanlon’s account provide a plausible standard of right and wrong?

5. Rawls believes that the “burdens of judgment” under conditions of freedom make pluralism a fundamental fact of political life. Is it possible to resolve matters of justice on the basis of “public reason” despite this pluralism?

6. 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.

III

7. Both Plato and Aristotle think that akrasia (weakness of will, lack of self-control) is a phenomenon with deep significance in moral psychology and the theory of virtue. With respect to either Plato or Aristotle, discuss: (a) Whether the phenomenon of akrasia is possible and how it is possible in their moral psychological theories; (b) Their analysis of the phenomenon (What happens, precisely, when an agent acts akratically, and why does this happen?); and (c) The significance of this phenomenon for thinking about the nature of virtue.

8. What kind of moral obligations might we have to people we do not know or specially care about? Evaluate Hume’s “narrow circle” argument and compare or contrast it with the views of at least one contemporary philosopher.

9. 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?