Study Questions: M.A. Exam in Ethics—Winter 2013

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. Does it matter for the moral value of human conduct whether it results from reasoning, as opposed to habit or inclination? What speaks for the view that it does matter? What speaks for the view that it does not matter? What role, if any, do reason or reasoning play in moral goodness?

3. Explain Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures. What is the basis of this distinction? What is Mill’s point in drawing it? Does introducing a distinction such as this make utilitarianism more plausible by accounting for the role of reflection in moral thinking?

4. 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.

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 favor 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. 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.

10. What similarities are there between reasoning in Rawls’s Original Position and applying the Kant’s Categorical Imperative? What are the most interesting differences?

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.