Study Questions: M.A. Exam in Ethics—Spring 2014

1. In the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues against moral theories that he calls “heteronomous.” What makes a moral theory heteronomous, according to Kant? Why does he think that no such theory can be valid? Do you find Kant’s reasoning here compelling?

2. Do ethical judgments have cognitive content? Lay out what you take to be the best argument for the view that they do not. Then lay out what you take to be the best argument for the view that they do. Discuss with respect to at least two philosophers.

3. 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.

4. Catherine Wilson argues that papers such as Wolf’s ‘Moral Saints’ represent ‘a form of philosophical progress’ but also ‘a form of socio-political regress’ (‘On Some Alleged Limitations to Moral Endeavor’, 276). Explicate Wilson’s claim here and then assess it.

5. What is the source of moral normativity? Discuss with respect to Korsgaard and at least one other philosopher.

6. Describe the position known in contemporary ethical theory as “particularism.” What do you take to be the best argument for it? What might be its main weaknesses? Discuss with respect to at least one proponent and one critic.

7. What is Nietzsche’s critique of morality? How compelling is it? Discuss with respect to at least one other philosopher.

8. Describe Michael Smith’s so-called moral problem. What is the allegedly inconsistent triad of propositions he points to? If the propositions are inconsistent, which one or ones should we deny?

9. Can moral rights or principles of justice be defended strictly on utilitarian grounds? How might the importance of rights and justice be weighed against the maximization of happiness overall? Discuss with respect to at least one philosopher.

10. 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.

11. What is the Aristotelian thesis of ‘the unity of the virtues’? What is the argument for it? Do you agree with the thesis? Defend your answer to this last question.

12. What, in contemporary moral philosophy, is meant by ‘moral luck’? What is the philosophical/theoretical significance of moral luck? Discuss with respect to at least two philosophers.