Study Questions: M.A. Exam in Ethics—Winter 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. What does it mean to ask whether 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 argue that this basic unit is, or ought to be, an agent’s character, and that the moral quality of action is grounded in character. What speaks for or against either action or character as the basic unit of moral assessment? Discuss with respect 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 and assess Wilson’s claim with respect to how the likes of Wolf might respond.

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? How deep is “the moral problem” Smith identifies?

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 two philosophers.

10. Hume offers an argument that is meant to show that “the ultimate ends of human actions can never, in any case, be accounted for by reason.” Interpret Hume’s claim and his argument in its support. Is Hume right? Discuss with respect to at least one other philosopher.

11. What is the Aristotelian thesis of “the unity of the virtues”? What is the argument for it? Would you accept a stronger, a weaker, or no version of the thesis, and why?

12. In contemporary philosophy, what is meant by “moral luck”? What theoretical significance might moral luck have? Discuss with respect to at least two philosophers.