Spring 2015 Comprehensive Ethics Exam

Answer one question in each of the three parts.

Part 1

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? Explicate this formulation of the categorical imperative and how it is to be applied in practice. Then critically evaluate Kant’s idea that this is (one formulation of) the fundamental requirement of morality.

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? Critically discuss these issues with reference to at least one major ethicist writing prior to the 20th century.

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? Critically evaluate Mill’s position on this matter.

Part 2

4. 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 regarding at least one philosopher.

5. Virtue theorists claim that their theories give a more adequate account of moral experience than do theories based on principles. Evaluate this claim and explain what is at stake in the debate between virtue theorists and proponents of moral principles.

6. Some moral theories take action or the maxim of an action as the basic unit of moral assessment. By contrast, some ethicists 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 one philosopher.
Part 3

1. There are some persistent moral disagreements. What is the significance of this observation for metaethics? Critically discuss with reference to at least two philosophers.

2. There is a point of agreement between error theorists and realists in metaethics. On what do they agree? And what is the most fundamental disagreement between them? Having explained clearly these two positions and the relation between them, critically evaluate a major challenge that proponents of one of these positions have made to the other.

3. What is Moore’s “open question” argument? What is it supposed to show, and why is this supposed to be important? Discuss the argument critically.