Winter 2016 Comprehensive Ethics Exam

Answer one question in each of the three parts.

Part 1

1. Kant claims that a beneficent action performed out of natural sympathy has no moral worth. Why does he think this? Discuss Kant’s position critically, with reference to at least one of his critics on this subject.

2. Explain Aristotle’s “Unity of the Virtues” thesis and his argument for it. Contrast this strong version with a weaker version. What reasons are there for rejecting the strong version of Unity of the Virtues in favor of a weaker version? Which version (if any) of the thesis do you find most plausible and why?

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? To what extent is the distinction reconcilable with Mill’s theory of Utilitarianism? 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. What role, if any, should blame and praise play in moral life and moral philosophy? Discuss with reference to at least two philosophers.

6. Some ethicists argue that the basic unit of moral assessment is, or ought to be, an agent’s character, rather than individual actions, and that the assessment of actions is, or ought to be, grounded in the assessment of character. What speaks for and against this position on the basic unit of moral assessment? Discuss with reference to at least one philosopher.

Part 3

7. Explain what is at issue between cognitivists and non-cognitivists in metaethics and briefly review the *prima facie* case for each position. What do you consider the best reason or argument in favor of accepting one rather than the other? Anticipate counter responses that your opponent is likely to offer.

8. Why be moral? Compare, contrast, and discuss critically two different approaches to answering this question.

9. Can morality be (fully) understood/explained from the perspective of empirical science? Why or why not? Discuss with respect to at least two philosophers.