

24.02: Moral Problems and the Good Life
Prof. Sally Haslanger
December 12, 2006

Study Questions for Final Exam

The final exam for the course will be on

Wednesday, December 20, 1:30PM - 4:30PM, Johnson Athletic Center

It will be closed notes and closed books. The exam will have three parts (with their weighted percentage of the grade indicated in parentheses). It will cover material from the whole term. **In order to pass the course students must earn a passing grade on the final exam.**

I. Identifications

The first part (35%) will consist of identifications: you will be given five quotations and a list of 12 authors whose work was assigned for class. For each quote, you must provide (i) the author's name (which will appear on the list provided), (ii) an explanation of the quote's meaning in your own words, and (iii) a brief description of the debate to which it contributes, including a statement of (at least) one of the opposing views.

EXAMPLE:

"...actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."

i) Mill.

ii) This is a statement of Mill's "Greatest Happiness Principle" which is the basic principle of utilitarianism. Mill is claiming that the right action is the action that maximizes (average) happiness for all. Nothing matters in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action other than its consequences.

iii) Mill is taking a stand on the question what makes actions right or wrong. Utilitarianism focuses on consequences. Kantianism looks at what rules are implicit in our action; right actions are ones that conform to rules required by reason, such as: treat others always as ends in themselves and never as means only. Virtue Theory says that the right action is the one the virtuous person would perform in the circumstances, but would think that the main question is not what action is right, but what kinds of character are virtuous.

II. Short Answers

The second part (15%) will consist of short answer questions, e.g.,

1. Scanlon says that there is an important difference between humanitarian objections to inequality and egalitarian objections to inequality. What is distinctive of an egalitarian objection to inequality? Give an example.

Answer: Egalitarian objections are concerned about the gap between the haves and have-nots, so an egalitarian concern would be addressed equally well by having the haves brought down or the have-nots brought up. In his terms, the concern must be "comparative" and "unspecific". Objections to different life expectancies in different countries are not egalitarian;

objections to a city government providing better services to some neighborhoods than others is egalitarian.

III. Essays

The third part (50%) will consist of essay questions drawn from the list below. You will be given *three of the following five* questions, and will be asked to write on *two* of them.

REMEMBER: Be sure to answer the question(s) asked. Although it may be useful to summarize some background material you will be penalized if you fail to address the specific questions posed. Essays will be evaluated both on the degree to which they demonstrate competence with the material covered in class, and a thoughtful engagement with the issues. In preparing for the exam, at the very least make an outline for your answers with a clear thesis and supporting arguments.

1. Discuss the most compelling consequences of some or all of the three main global moral theories we studied--utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics--for theories of distributive justice. For instance, is a utilitarian more likely to be a libertarian, or an egalitarian, or a liberal egalitarian, and why? Do not feel compelled to discuss all permutations of theories and consequences. E.g. you may argue that there are no connections between these global theories and policies of distributive justice, or you may pick a particular connection and defend it in detail.

2. Consider a individual, Smith, who is independently wealthy (so he does not need to work to support himself), has no dependents (no children or the like), and takes great pleasure in counting blades of grass. He counts the blades of grass in his yard each year, and if he finishes that, he moves on to parks, football fields, and other public spaces. The information is not used for any scientific purpose. He does it entirely for his own enjoyment. Is Smith leading a good life? Why or why not? Are his actions morally right (or even morally permissible)? Why or why not? What relationship (if any) is there between a life's goodness and its moral status?

3. According to the UNICEF website, \$15 can provide 250 sachets of oral rehydration salts (for lifesaving treatment of dehydration caused by common illnesses); \$21 can provide antibiotics for eight HIV-positive mothers or children for one year. It is the holiday season (if you don't celebrate any December holidays, imagine that it is a time when you would normally give gifts to loved ones). If you forego giving a gift to someone on your list, you could probably make a huge difference in someone's life. What would a utilitarian say you should do (and why)? What would a moral relativist say you (i.e., you in particular) should do (and why)? What do you think is the right thing to do (and why)?

4. In a liberal democratic state such as the United States, it is a founding principle that the state should allow people to pursue their own conception of the good, compatible with others doing the same. Many have interpreted this to mean that the laws should not enshrine a single conception of the good life, but should allow leeway for individuals to live according to their own idea of the good. (E.g., Smith (in question 2) may be wasting his life, but it would be another thing altogether to make counting grass illegal.) Against this background what reasons, if any, are there for having the institution of marriage be recognized by the law? Are there reasons, compatible with this, for the institution of marriage to be restricted to heterosexuals? (You may also want to consider: How far should (or can) the state be "neutral" on conceptions of the good?)

5. Studies have repeatedly shown that one's chances of being sentenced to death for a crime are affected by numerous (seemingly) arbitrary factors, including one's own race, the race of one's victim and the geographical region in which the trial is held. With this in mind, consider the

following view:

There is no way to eliminate the influence of luck in moral life. Good or bad luck—in natural endowments, social assets, etc—can profoundly affect one’s social position. Bad luck can turn a shooting from a manslaughter to a murder when the victim dies; good luck in missing the pedestrian as one runs the red light can leave one with a clean driving record. In the same way, luck cannot be eliminated from the judicial system and the imposition of the death penalty. You are unlucky if you are tried for a capital offense in Texas (and lucky if in Massachusetts); you are unlucky if your victim is white or if you are black. Bad luck, however, is not injustice. So the racial and geographical disparity in death sentencing is no reason to abolish it.

Critically discuss this view, indicating its strengths and weaknesses.