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24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life
Fall 2008

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SECOND PAPER TOPICS

Write a short (5-7 page) paper on ONE of the following topics. Remember, your papers should have a *thesis* and provide an *argument* to support it. They will be evaluated on the extent to which they address the topic, the degree to which they show an understanding of the material covered in lecture and readings, and the strength and originality of the argument. Remember you are required to submit an electronic copy of your paper to your TA.

Papers are due SES #16.

1. Let's define our moral community as all and only those individuals whose moral worth is equal to that of normal adult human beings. What is "equal moral worth"? Who and/or what is included in our moral community? Only normal adult human beings? All sentient beings? All living beings? All naturally occurring things (including mountains and rivers)? What about androids? Extra-terrestrials? Critically evaluate a criterion for drawing the boundary of our moral community that was proposed in one of the readings. Would you endorse this criterion as it is? If so, why? If not, why not? Would you suggest a fix?

2. Critically evaluate Peter Singer's argument for the claim that we should all be giving large amounts of time and money to famine relief. What is Singer's argument? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you agree that you are morally obligated to make a contribution of time or money to address such global needs? In justifying your answer, explain what account of right action you think should govern what you do in response to desperate suffering. If you disagree with Singer, explain what's wrong with the argument (e.g., what's wrong with the "Prevent Suffering Principle?"); if you agree with Singer, defend his view against what you take to be the strongest objection to it. In answering these questions, consider the Mercy Corps case we discussed in lecture. Recall that they offer a wide range of actions that can be taken to make a difference that can take from one minute to a lifetime, from sending an email, to volunteering your time or money:

http://www.actioncenter.org/take_action

If you set aside \$.35/day, you can afford to sign up for one of their \$10/month programs that provides food and water to those desperately in need, e.g.,

<http://www.mercycorps.org/mg/partnersinmercy>

I assume that none of you will suffer greatly if you contribute \$.35/day to a charity such as Mercy Corps; in Singer's terms, that you will not have to sacrifice anything of moral significance. If this is true, then it follows from Singer's argument that you have a moral obligation to join such a program and make the contributions. (If you are more financially strapped than I think and a contribution of \$.35/day would require you to sacrifice something of moral importance, substitute a minute a day of your time for the \$.35.) Do you think you should be giving at least this much to famine relief?

3. Critically evaluate the following claim, based on the readings:

The first and most fundamental step toward solution of our environmental problems is a clear recognition that our objective is not pure air or water but rather some optimal state of pollution.

That step immediately suggests the question: How do we define and attain the level of pollution that will yield the maximum possible amount of human satisfaction? (Baxter, 516)

What view of the value of the environment does this quote suggest? Compare and contrast it to the other views we considered, evaluating the arguments for each. What position do you think is the most defensible and why?

4. In her essay on world hunger, Onora O'Neill considers what is wrong with coercion from a moral point of view. What is coercion? Give what you take to be a clear example (e.g., being forced at gunpoint to give over your money?), and also a case you think is not completely clear. Consider your

examples in light of O'Neill's characterization of coercion and its wrongs. Does her Kantian analysis work for the cases you provide? Are there other cases you think don't fit her model? Do you agree with O'Neill? Why or why not?

You may also write on a topic of your own design if your TA approves it in advance.

GUIDELINES FOR PAPERS

1. All papers should be neatly typed, double-spaced, in an easily readable font. Be sure to include *your* name and *your TA's name* on your paper. For safety, keep copies of your papers. *Please number your pages and include a word count.* Papers should be turned in at the time and date indicated on the syllabus and on the paper topics.
2. All papers should be within the length guidelines specified. If you have more to say than you can fit within the page limits, pare down your discussion: make sure you have stayed on topic, focus your discussion on the most important points for your argument. However, note that because this is a HASS-D course, you must submit a total of **20 pages** during the term.
3. Essay topics must be taken from the list distributed in class, and your paper should be on *one* topic only. Stick closely to the topic; *be sure you address the question asked.* All papers should be clearly organized around a *thesis*, and should provide *arguments* for it. On some occasions your TA *may* approve an alternative paper topic. If you are interested in writing on a topic of your own design, speak to your TA well in advance of the paper deadline.
4. If you wish to attribute a position to a philosopher we have discussed, be sure to check that the text supports your attribution. On controversial points you should cite textual evidence, e.g., by quotation, or by giving the line numbers of relevant texts in parentheses. It is *imperative* that you indicate when you are quoting or paraphrasing an author, and when you do you *must* cite references to the original text. Failure to do so counts as plagiarism and will be handled accordingly. However, points made in lecture or in class handouts are "common property" for students in this class and may be relied upon in your papers without citation. (More on plagiarism, see syllabus.)
5. Although quotes are helpful, please keep quotation to a minimum. The paper should be, by in large, *in your own words.*
6. You do not need to consult additional secondary sources. If you do, this *must* be acknowledged in the paper. If you quote or paraphrase a secondary source, this must be attributed to the author; if you relied on texts in your preparation, which were not assigned in class, include reference to them in a bibliography at the end of the paper (even if you don't quote from them). (More on plagiarism, see syllabus.)
7. Papers are due at the date and time specified. After that time papers will be considered late and will be penalized one third of a grade per day, i.e., from a B+ to a B. If you foresee special difficulties with the deadline, speak to your TA well in advance.