

24.00: Problems of Philosophy  
Prof. Sally Haslanger  
November 21, 2005

### Third Paper Topics

Write a short (5-7 page) paper on ONE of the following topics. Be sure that your paper has a clear and comprehensible *thesis*; that it contains *arguments* for that thesis; and that it anticipates and responds to likely *criticisms*. Remember that it is your responsibility to show the author's ideas in their strongest and most plausible form, while remaining true to the text.

**Papers are due no later than Friday, December 9, 3pm.**

You are required to send an electronic version of your paper to your TA. TA's may also require hard copies. Papers turned in late without an extension will be penalized 1/3 of a grade per day. To receive an extension you must speak to your teaching assistant.

1. During the mid 1800's the dominant culture of the Southern US condoned chattel slavery. According to the cultural relativist, an action is morally right if it is consistent with the dominant cultural norms. Records show that Stephen Duncan owned 858 slaves in 1860 (<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~ajac/biggest16.htm>). It would seem to follow that Duncan's purchase of his 800<sup>th</sup> slave, call that slave James, was morally right or acceptable. Explain and evaluate the strongest possible argument you can in support of cultural relativism and show how it applies to this case. Given contemporary moral norms, Duncan's action was reprehensible. According to the relativist, what bearing does that fact have on the rightness or wrongness of his action? Do you agree that Duncan's action was right? Why or why not? Is relativism defensible? Why or why not?

2. Explain briefly the utilitarian account of right action, defending what you take to be the most plausible candidate for what good should be maximized (Pleasure? Happiness? Welfare? Desire satisfaction?...). Apply your chosen version of utilitarianism to *one* of the following problems:

a) *The Death Penalty*. What should a utilitarian's position on the death penalty be? Under what conditions should the death penalty be implemented? Do you agree with this position? Why or why not? If the legislative details matter to your argument, consider Mitt Romney's recently defeated "Act Reinstating Capital Punishment in the Commonwealth": [http://www.nodp.org/ma/death\\_penalty\\_4-28-5.pdf](http://www.nodp.org/ma/death_penalty_4-28-5.pdf)

b) *Famine Relief*. What should a utilitarian's position on famine relief be? To what extent are we obligated to donate substantial sums of time and money to famine relief? Do you agree with this position? Why or why not?

3. Explain briefly a Kantian or *deontological* account of right action, defending what you take to be the most plausible interpretation of the categorical imperative. Then apply your chosen version of the categorical imperative to *one* of the following problems:

a) *The Death Penalty*. What should a Kantian's position on the death penalty be? Under what conditions should the death penalty be implemented? Do you agree with this position? Why or why not? If the legislative details matter to your argument, consider Mitt Romney's recently defeated "Act Reinstating Capital Punishment in the Commonwealth": [http://www.nodp.org/ma/death\\_penalty\\_4-28-5.pdf](http://www.nodp.org/ma/death_penalty_4-28-5.pdf)

b) *Famine Relief*. What should a Kantian's position on famine relief be? To what extent are we obligated to donate substantial sums of time and money to famine relief? Do you agree with this position? Why or why not?

4. It is reasonable to think that an adequate moral theory will be able to answer the question: why be moral? In other words, the moralist should have something to say to those who seem to lack motivation to act morally. Considering Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Virtue Ethics, which of these provides the best resources for answering the morally unmotivated. Explain what the answer would be, and critically evaluate its effectiveness.

Remember: you may write on a topic of your own design if it is submitted to your TA and approved *in advance*. For details, e.g., about how far in advance, consult your TA.