Introsuction to Ethics and Value Theory
~ Philosophy 27ooF ~

ESSAY TOPICS

Instructor: Dr. Steve D’Arcy
Due Date: 28 November, by the beginning of class
Submission via WebCT

Assignment: Drawing textual support exclusively from material in the Coursepack, and from your own reflections, write a 1,600-2,000 word essay on one of the following topics. Note: the coursepack editions must be cited. Claims about what the authors believe must be backed up with quotations, or at least with references to the page on which the author makes the claim.

1. Consider the case of the deluded sadist. Imagine a universe consisting of one sentient being only (the deluded sadist), who falsely believes that there are other sentient beings and that they are undergoing extreme torment. Far from being distressed by this thought, he takes great delight in these imagined sufferings. Would that universe be better or worse than a universe containing only one sentient being with the same beliefs but who sorrows at the imagined tortures of his fellow creatures? How would Bentham respond, and why? Would Mill have any reason to take a different view? Why or why not? Are the hedonist theories of Bentham and Mill good guides to this question? (In other words, does the goodness of the universe really depend on the pleasure it contains, as they suggest?) Why or why not?

2. Imagine you have borrowed a chainsaw from a friend, promising to return it whenever she asks for it. Imagine she then shows up at your door in a visibly drunken state, accompanied by a bound and gagged companion who has already been severely beaten and is in a state of terror. “I need you to return my chainsaw now, please” she says. Ought you to return it, under those circumstances? Explain the categorical imperative, and apply it to this case. How might a Kantian handle this scenario, and why? Does the theory handle such cases well? Why or why not?

3. It is sometimes said that, if there is no god, everything is permitted. In your view, does the rise of secularism erode the basis for conventional morality (including, say, prohibitions against cruelty or injustice)? Explain in some detail how Nietzsche thinks about this question? How compelling is his perspective on it?

4. Does a woman who adopts a conventionally feminine role live – for that reason – a less valuable life than one who rejects that kind of role? How does Beauvoir approach this issue? How would you respond?

5. Suppose a person is “dispassionate” about every possible activity or experience. She craves nothing and feels no attachment to anything: not to her friends or family, not to art or literature or music, not to swimming, dancing, or traveling, not to sex or nature, sports or politics, etc. Lacking any passionate interests, can she ever be happy at all? Will she be happier than most people, or less happy? What would the Buddha say and why? What do you say, and why?