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24.02 Moral Problems and the Good Life
Fall 2008

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FIRST PAPER TOPICS

Write a short (5-7 page) paper on ONE of the following topics. Your paper will be evaluated based on (i) the clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*, (ii) your demonstrated understanding of the readings and the material covered in class, and (iii) the insight and creativity shown in engaging the issues.

1. It is 2025 and a brilliant neuroscientist at MIT has created Nozick's experience machine. You have a young child, age 4, and are given the opportunity to place your child in the machine. You want the best for your child. You can define the sort of life experiences you most hope your child to have and to have them programmed into the machine (you can also have it programmed to erase the child's memory that they were put into such a machine). Once your child enters, however, it will be traumatic to leave the machine because experiencing the contrast between reality and the illusion will be psychologically damaging. Would you have your child enter the machine? Why or why not? What goods, if any, would be left out of such a life? What does this thought experiment tell you about what constitutes a good life?

2. Imagine the following conversation between two parents, concerning their child Rosa, who has just started college:

Mom: Rosa seems very excited about going to MIT. I know she is hoping to become an engineer, but it doesn't really matter to me *what* she does, as long as she is happy doing it.

Dad: But that's crazy. Suppose what makes her happy is gambling, or doing drugs, or even something ridiculous like building sandcastles all day on an ocean beach where they will be washed away by the next tide. Surely she must accomplish something in her life. I want her to become passionate about engineering and to use her skills in ways that will really help people. Then she'll have a good life.

Mom: Those examples aren't fair. Gambling and doing drugs don't really make people *happy*. But if what makes her happy is building sandcastles, that's fine with me. She'll make the best sandcastles in the world, I'm sure. Her grandmother has plenty of money and I'm sure Rosa will be able to support herself on her inheritance.

You are Rosa's sibling. How would you contribute to this discussion? Taking into account the readings and positions we've covered, write a paper arguing for what you think would enable Rosa to have a good life, responding to Mom's and Dad's points.

3. Suppose you found a lamp and upon rubbing it, a genie appeared and gave you one wish that he would then fulfill. However, it was a condition on the wish that your objective in making it is *your own well-being*. You wish that all your desires, throughout your life, be satisfied. How exactly should this wish be articulated to make it plausible that its fulfillment will give you a good life, e.g., do you want all your present desires to be fulfilled? Is this what you *should* wish for in order to have the best life? Discuss the pros and cons of this wish. If it isn't the wish that would enable you to achieve the best life, what would you wish for instead?

4. Like Eleana Makropolis, you have the opportunity to drink a magic elixir and live forever. Would you drink it? Why or why not? If it is possible to live a good life, isn't more of such a life better? Is it possible for immortality – in this world, with ordinary human powers – to be the best choice for a life? (Under what conditions?)

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.* 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. You may write on a topic of your own design if you submit a proposal in writing to your TA at least 72 hours in advance of the deadline, and it is approved.
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. (For 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). (For 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.