FIRST PAPER TOPICS

Write a short (5-7 page) paper on ONE of the following topics. Be sure to follow the “Guidelines for Papers” that appears as page 2 of this assignment. Remember you are required to submit an electronic copy of your paper to your TA.

Papers are due Friday 10/6 in your recitation section.

1. According to Bentham, pleasure alone is intrinsically good, and the best life is one with the greatest amount of pleasure, according to his hedonic calculus. Bentham’s view is an instance a more general idea that what makes a life good is the amount and quality of experiences in it. Nozick’s “experience machine” objection is intended to show that this general idea is false and that there are things other than experience that make a life good. Carefully reconstruct and evaluate Nozick’s argument. What are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you agree with his conclusion? Why or why not?

2. Someday you may have a child, and if so, you will need to convey to this child, some way or another, what you think is most important in living a good life. It is likely, however, that at least by their teens, your child is going to question your opinion on this. Imagine yourself writing a letter to your teenaged child, setting out in as convincing a way as you can what you think makes a life good, giving reasons to support your view. Consider in the letter any objections or alternatives your (reasonable) child might raise and address them as well.

3. There is some evidence that a complex though remote ecosystem in the Aleutian Islands has recently collapsed, and moreover, it is likely the unintended result of human activity. See, e.g., http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/swcbd/species/otter/worldcatch.html
Suppose it has collapsed and nothing will bring it back (as the article says, “But even if all the elements the forage fish, the otters, the sea lions, the kelp were to return, these islands will never be the same. Like marble chips in a kaleidoscope, they would fall in different patterns”). Is there anything bad about this? If so, what is bad about it? If not, why isn’t it bad?

4. Human lives are not the only lives that can go better or worse. All else being equal, a life of suffering is worse than one with less suffering, whether the life be a human life or the life of a non-human animal. Do we have an obligation to treat the suffering of non-human animals as equal in importance to that of humans? Explain and critically evaluate Singer’s argument for the conclusion that we do. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? If not, what are our obligations, if any, to non-human animals, and on what principle do these obligations rest?
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. 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.