

General Examination for Andrea Taylor

Fall, 2008

You have four hours to complete this exam. Answer four questions, one from each section. Please identify your answers clearly, by section and question number. Use examples to illustrate your ideas wherever appropriate, and make your answers critical and not solely expository. Unless you are specifically directed to discuss a particular philosopher, you are free to select your sources or examples from either western or Chinese philosophy, or both.

Section I - Chinese Philosophy

1. There is no talk of autonomy in early Chinese philosophy. Why is this? Are there relevantly similar concepts that serve to perform some of the “work” of autonomy in western philosophical discourse? Are there modified versions of something like autonomy implicit in any of the early Chinese philosophers? If so, what would be the modification(s)? If not, does this undermine the capacity of these philosophers to meaningfully address moral agency? Be sure to address at least two Chinese philosophers in your answer.
2. Both the Confucians and the Daoists appear to associate spontaneity with ethical mastery. In the Confucians this manifests in the sage’s ability to operate in accord with the demands of virtue as though such accord is “second nature.” In the Daoists, spontaneity manifests more along the lines of an accord with the demands of a changeable natural world. Use one Confucian and one Daoist to draw out the affinities and discrepancies between these two approaches to spontaneity. Also consider, more generally, of what value it is to include spontaneity as an ethical value. That is, putting aside the differences between these traditions, what motivates both to seek a prominent place for a species of spontaneity in their ethical ideals? How might they argue that spontaneity is a necessary or at least highly desirable element in ethical mastery?
3. Mencius and Xunzi famously disagree about human nature. However, it is not entirely clear just how deeply they disagree, nor is it self-evident that one’s position regarding human nature would substantially change the work necessary for ethical cultivation. Assay the disagreement and explain the significance of Mencius’ and Xunzi’s positions regarding human nature to the ethical model each proposes.

Section II – History of Ethics

1. Discuss the roots in ancient philosophy of the concept of autonomy. What features of Plato's and Aristotle's ethical thought anticipate modern arguments about self-rule? Is there anything that distinguishes ancient and modern treatments of the concept?
2. In the *Emile*, Rousseau describes an educational program that is designed to foster autonomy by controlling the development of *amour propre*. Explain the psychological mechanisms he is concerned with, showing, in particular, both how Rousseau understands autonomy and how *amour propre* compromises it. But you should also state your view on whether the program of manipulation (if not outright deception) the Tutor implements in fact produces a person who is genuinely autonomous.
3. Explain Kant's idea that persons are end-in-themselves and must never be treated as mere means. What feature of the self does Kant believe accounts for the "infinite worth" he assigns to persons? Contrast Kant's views with the views he rejects when he argues against heteronomy.
4. How does Mill understand the character of individual freedom? What is it, according to *On Liberty*, that society ought to protect? In addition to his arguments in that work, be sure to consider his account of pleasure in *Utilitarianism*. Explain how he distinguishes between higher and lower pleasures, and how that distinction contributes to his conception of individual freedom.

Section III – Ethical Theory

1. What do you think is the proper subject for ethical theory: people's *actions*, their *characters*, or their *relationships*? That is, should ethical theory be a matter of explaining what makes an action right or wrong, what makes a person good or bad, or what makes human interactions morally worthy? Illustrate each position with references to at least one philosopher, and highlight their differences. Then state and justify your own view.
2. Some contemporary ethicists are attracted to virtue ethics because of problems they see in deontology and consequentialism. What are some of these problems? Can they be solved or avoided by a virtue approach? Discuss the views of at least two recent authors, and present and defend your own position.
3. What role does literature play in ethical inquiry? To what extent is the claim that literature has a central place in ethical thinking linked to a critique of ethical theory? Discuss the views of two contemporary writers on these questions, and present your own position on the ethical function of literature.

Section IV – Relational Autonomy

1. What do you take to be the standard picture of autonomy, against which “relational autonomy” must be understood. Provide an overview of the standard picture, covering at least three contemporary philosophers’ views. Be sure to discuss the place of the concept of autonomy in the wider context of each philosopher’s views.
2. What is “relational autonomy?” How is it distinguished from the standard picture of autonomy? Give both an historical overview of the development of the notion, explaining who introduced it and why, and a critical evaluation of the leading expositions of the concept. In your view, what value does the concept add to current discussions of the self?
3. Consider the following line of argument: any position that emphasizes the role of relationships to the self ignores the threat that the self is compromised if it becomes too “other-directed.” Develop that critique, explaining sympathetically the danger it points to, and then offer a rebuttal. You should refer to the works of at least three authors, and present your responses to their ideas, as well as your own position on the question.