Philosophy of Human Nature: Essay Portion for Unit #3

Part I: Essay

Choose one of the following topics from either Section I or Section II, and write an argumentative essay of approximately 3-4 pages (typed, doublespaced and with appropriate margins). Remember that for Part II of the examination you will be taking an in-class short answer test on the other area (the area you do not cover in the essay).

Your essay should go beyond the texts and lectures, although a clear statement of such information could be taken as a starting point for your own analysis. In your essay, you should offer reasons or arguments in support of the positions you take -- do not just state your ideas without some evidence to back them up. The crucial element is to state why you think what you do; try to persuade your reader of your claims. It is by the strength of your arguments and analysis, as well as your comprehension of the philosophical theories, that you will be graded. You are welcome to do some research outside the texts we're using in the course to develop your essay, however, your essay should reflect your own thinking on the subject. Each essay will be graded on a 10 pt. scale.

Due date: Friday, November 9 (in class)

Section I: Existentialism

1) Present and critically evaluate Camus' claim that human life is absurd? Why does he say that values cannot be discovered, but only created or invented? How does Sisyphus exemplify the human condition as well as the "heroic" attitude in the face of the absurd? Argue for or against Camus' analysis.

2) Evaluate Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence?" How does this relate to each person's freedom to "make man?" Is there no given human nature, as Sartre says? Do you agree with Sartre's characterization of the human condition?

3) Does Sartre's existentialism imply "desperate quietism?" Build a case for or against such a position. Why are freedom and action central to existentialism? Contrast the person who lives authentically and the person who lives in "bad faith."

Section II: Asian Philosophy

1) Present and critically evaluate the Hindu claim that the self (atman) is one with Reality (Brahman)? What are some of the key philosophical problems with such a view? Can they be resolved?

2) Critically evaluate the Buddha’s claim that life is fundamentally unsatisfactory (dukkha)? Is egotistical craving the source of that unsatisfactoriness? In your essay, be sure to include a discussion of the following concepts: dependent arising, impermanence, and nonattachment.

3) Compare and contrast the Hindu and Buddhist theories of human nature (atman and no-self theories). Both traditions use the “chariot metaphor” to describe their position, which is more plausible? What does Buddha mean by referring to a person as made up of five bundles (skandhas)? Defend the position that is most plausible.