Short Essay: Civil Disobedience and Cultural Relativism

For this 500 to 1000-word short essay, you can choose one of the following essay topics.

**Option 1 (Civil Disobedience and the Draft):** Suppose that your nation has entered a war that you believe to be unjust (perhaps because it is based on ethnic/racial/religious hatred), and has begun drafting people into the military. You are eligible for the draft. You are a longtime admirer of MLK, and wonder what he would advice you to do. In this essay, you should:

1. Explain some of the conditions that might may a war “unjust” (we haven’t talked about these in class, so use your imagination!).
2. Describe MLK’s general account of civil disobedience, and when it is justified.
3. Explain what sorts of actions (short of civil disobedience) that MLK might recommend as a “first step”?
4. Explain what it would mean in the context of YOUR decision if these steps didn’t work (and you ended up being drafted). In particular, what might MLK say about the following options:
   1. Move to another country?
   2. Accept your obligation to be drafted and fight in the war? (And kill if ordered to.)
   3. Stay, refuse to serve if drafted, and be imprisoned?
5. What do you think YOU would do in this situation? Why?

*NOTE: If you want to use a law/policy besides the military draft that might warrant civil disobedience, you can. You should still go through the same steps: explain why it is unjust, describe MLK’s theory, explain “first steps,” apply it to your decision, etc.*

**Option 2 (Cultural Relativism).** Until relatively recently (2003), many states in the US criminalized sexual relations between same-sex couples. Moreover, in some of these place, significant majorities of people felt that such relations were “immoral.” This still the case in many parts of the world (especially in places without democratic governments). In this essay, I’d like you to consider how a cultural relativist would respond to this. In the essay you should:

1. Explain the metaethical theory of cultural relativism in as much detail as you can.
2. Apply cultural relativism to the question “Is it morally OK for people *in these societies* to have same-sex sexual relations?”
3. Consider how a person adopting a metaethical theory OTHER than cultural relativism might respond to this same question (for example, existentialism, divine command theory, or moral realism).
4. Which approach do you prefer? Why?

*NOTE: If you want to use an issue besides the criminalization of same-sex relations, that’s fine. You should still go through all the same steps. So, you’ll need to explain cultural relativism, apply it to the question, compare it with another theory, etc.*

## Short Essay General Criteria (From Syllabus)

You’ll have the chance to write a number of short essays for the course. Here’s a bit more about what this will entail, and how they are graded.

1. Each essay should be between **500** and **1000 words.** I won’t penalize you for going over, though please make an effort to be concise as is possible, given the material. Basically, make things “as simple as possible, but no simpler.”
   * A-level essays are often (though not always!) closer to 1,000 words than 500.
2. Material I’ve provided you with in our “textbook” (which contains both my lecture notes and other readings) can be cited informally by identify the chapter, page, and author (if needed). If you choose to use outside resources, please use a standard citation style (such as APA, MLA, or Chicago), and provide a full citation. As a rule, **no more than 15%** of your paper should be quotes.
3. Please don’t use the words or ideas of others without proper attribution. Please see the syllabus for details on the policy regarding **plagiarism and academic integrity.** I regularly use [www.turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com) to check for plagiarism or related issues.
4. Since the goal of the exam is to demonstrate how well *you* understand the class material, you should try to **use your own words and examples to explain what you’ve learned.** Essays that simply reproduce the handouts will not receive good grades. Nor will essays that simply “give your thoughts” on an issue (without demonstrating knowledge of the class material, and the ability to apply it to novel cases).
5. Please submit your essays as MS Word files. I will grade them on a **first-submitted, first-graded** basis.

## Essay Grading Rubric

Each essay is worth FIVE points. Your grade will depend on how well you do each of the following:

1. How well are you able to **explain** and **apply** the relevant course material? By the end of the essay, the reader should come away with a clear idea of what you’ve learned in the class, and how it applies to whatever problem/issue you are writing about.
2. To what extent does your essay offer a coherent and creative response to the problem/question? In an argumentative essay, for example, you should make an (evidence-based) **argument** for a **thesis,** and make sure to fully consider any potential **objections.**

Factors such as your paper’s **structure** (e.g. intro/body paragraphs/conclusion) and **language** (e.g. grammar, style) are important to the extent they influence the above. The grading criteria are as follows:

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| Grade | Description |
| *0* | No answer submitted, or evidence of plagiarism. |
| *3 or below (D or F)* | Fails to meet minimal requirements in terms of content (e.g., addresses a related question) or word count. Essays that simply report what you “believe” or “feel,” without providing an *argument* may receive grades in this range. |
| *C (3.5 points)* | Meets minimal requirements in terms of both content (it offers an answer the assigned question, and attempts to defend this answer) and word count. However, there may be some significant errors or omissions when it comes to the explanation of relevant class material, or providing a detailed, complete response to the question. |
| *B (4 points)* | Fully meets both content and word count requirements, and provides satisfactory explanations of most major arguments and concepts from class. There are no significanterrors in argumentation or explanatory gaps. However, explanations/examples/arguments may at points suffer from lack of clarity or completeness in comparison to A essays. |
| *A (5 points)* | Meets and exceeds minimal requirements. The essay’s treatment of course material shows a full mastery of the relevant content, and provides a creative, well-thought-out response to it. |

I will grade essays in the order they are submitted (first-come, first-serve).

## Tips on Writing Philosophy

Philosophy essays can be a bit different from other sorts of writing. However, from past students have told me, they’re not actually that bad, once you start writing them! Here are some general tips:

1. You should have an **introduction** that concisely introduces the topic, and a **thesis sentence** that clearly states your position. Philosophy papers often begin with theses of the form “I will argue X because Y.”
2. When discussing tough ethical or philosophical issues, **avoid phrases like “I feel,” “I think,” or “I believe.”** Part of taking these issues seriously involves granting that one’s actions and beliefs have consequences for other people, and that (for this reason) they need to be defended with the sorts of ***arguments*** and ***reasons*** that these other people could actually accept. For this reason, appeals to your *own* emotions, religious beliefs, etc. are generally (though not always) inappropriate.
3. Pretend you are writing to **an intelligent and interested (but relatively ignorant) 12-year-old** who doesn’t know anything about the subject (rather than your philosophy professor). This means you’ll need to write clearly, explain new concepts, and offer interesting, memorable examples. A significant portion of your grade will be based on your ability to explain the arguments/concepts we’ve been studying using your own words and examples.
4. Your essay should have multiple paragraphs, each of which has a clear **topic sentence** that clearly relates back to your thesis. When writing philosophy, it’s easy to get “off topic.” So, always ask yourself: is this paragraph helping me provide evidence for my thesis? If the answer is “no,” it should be cut or revised.
5. You should always consider possible **objections** to your thesis. Ask yourself: “How would a smart, well-educated opponent respond to my argument?” In some cases, this might be a real author who you can cite; in other cases, you’ll have to play your own “devil’s advocate.”
6. The conclusion should help the reader appreciate the way your argument fits into the “big picture.” For example, what exactly do you take yourself to have shown? How does this relate to similar cases? What might be the “next step” of this argument be, if you had more time and space?