Reading Guide #3

Rand “The Virtue of Selfishness”*
Plato, The Euthyphro

1. An altruistic action, in common speech, is one in which you sacrifice yourself for the sake of someone else. On Rand’s view, altruism is elevated to a normative ethical theory (i.e. a theory which tells us, in all cases, what we ought to do). State this theory. (Your answer should have an “ought” in it.)

2. According to Rand, when it comes to distributing goods, there are two questions that must be answered:
   1) what counts as a good thing?
   2) how should we distribute these good things?
   How, according to Rand, does altruism answer (or not answer) these two questions?

3. This question asks about the possibility of having bad desires. Suppose that the only time that you act upon those desires is in a virtual world so that no one gets hurt by these desires? Imagine for example that there is a very elaborate virtual reality machine that can simulate down to the feeling, touch, and smell just about any experience. If I satisfy my desires in this virtual world only and never in the real world, are these desires in any sense bad ones? Explain how this is possible or give a persuasive example.

4. Rand disagrees with altruists who say that pursing your own interest is immoral because it hurts other people. But, she thinks that there might be other reasons that something could be wrong besides for the fact that it hurts other people. Can you think of an example? [Hint: think of question #3]

5. Imagine that someone were to define good art as follows:

   Good art = (definition) whatever art is praised by the critics.

   Now suppose that we ask the following. Is the good art praised by the critics because it is good or is it good because it is praised by the critics? Suppose that we answer that it was good because the critics praise it.
   a. Why does this make it hard (or maybe very very easy) to be a critic? Can a critic have any reason to praise a piece of art?

   b. Keep on supposing that good art is good because the critics praise it. Now let’s take a child’s kindergarten drawing. Let us suppose that no critic right now would praise this art, and it is therefore bad. Is there anything about the piece of artwork itself that makes it bad? Could everything about the artwork remain the same but the artwork suddenly switch from bad art to good art?
6. Now suppose that you say that the reason that it was praised by the critics was because it was good. I claim that this causes trouble for the original definition. Here's why. Let's suppose that in order for a definition to be good, everything that is true of the left hand side (LHS) is also true of the right hand side (RHS). [So if you say ‘a tiger = a cat with stripes’. It is a problem for your definition that some cats with stripes are small and domesticated (think Garfield) whereas tigers are not small and domesticated. Therefore, there is a property had by some objects on the right hand side (small and domesticated) that is not shared by objects on the left hand side].

LHS = good art
RHS = objects praised by critics

Can you find a property that is true of LHS that is not true of RHS? (Hint: consider the property = is the sort of thing that it is BECAUSE it is praised by critics. This property is true of one of the sides but false of the other. Explain!)

7. Euthyphro defines piety as follows:

Piety = (def) whatever is beloved by the gods.

a) Now reflect on your answer to #1a and b, do you think that the gods love things because they are pious or are they pious because they love them?

b) So let us suppose that the gods love things because they are pious. How is this a problem for Euthyphro’s definition? (Think about your answer to question #2.)

8. Let us suppose that we change Euthyphro’s definition from piety to morally right.

the morally right = (def) whatever is loved/commanded by God.

a. Is it right because it is loved/commanded by God or does God love/command it because it is right? Suppose you say that it is right BECAUSE it is loved/commanded by God. Is there any standard that God is appealing to when s/he is deciding whether to command something or love something?

b. Still supposing that it is right BECAUSE it is loved/commanded by God, is it possible that God could have commanded rape and murder? If you think that it is not possible explain why your answer differs from question #1b.

9. Alright, suppose that you say that God commands something because it is right? Does that mean that ethics exists apart from God? That something is good or bad
completely independently of whether God loves it or commands it? If yes, explain why. If not explain, how the argument thus far has gone wrong.

10. If you woke up one night believing that God commanded you to kill your roommate would you do it?