Mid-Semester Paper

This paper assignment has two parts. In the first part you are asked to answer four questions. Each of these questions directs you to an issue you need to think about carefully before doing the second part of the assignment. Answers to the first three questions can be given well in about 250 words each, answers to the fourth questions will take a bit more. The second part of the assignment involves writing a long (1500-1800 word) essay. A draft of both sections is due in lecture on Monday, March 7th. Please bring two copies, one to hand in, another to give to the classmate assigned to offer you a critique. Keep the original for yourself. Critiques are due in lecture on Wednesday, March 9th. Again, bring two copies to class (keeping the original for yourself) -- one to hand in, one to give to the author of the paper you critiqued. The final version of this assignment, which should be typed, is due in section on Friday, March 11th. This final version should have your name appear only on a front cover sheet and not on the subsequent pages. In addition, you should send an electronic version of your paper -- both parts, in a single document -- in Word, to your TA, as an email attachment, no later than 5 pm on March 11th. When you do this, please

(i) put Mid-Semester paper in the subject heading of your email and
(ii) name your paper using the following scheme:
    Firstname_Lastname_Mid.doc
    (e.g. Jane_Smith_Mid.doc).

Part I

Please answer the following questions (relying on Aristotle's definitions of the italicized words). Try to keep your answers short, while also giving enough information to make them clear and complete. To answer the questions, and to do the rest of the assignment, you need to read a few short articles discussing Christopher Pittman’s killing of his grandparents. The central focus of the assignment will be on whether Pittman is morally (as opposed to legally) responsible for his actions. To do the assignment you will need a bit of information about the case, which you can get from the web at:

http://www.cnn.com/2005/LAW/02/14/zoloft.trial/


Here are the questions:

1. Did Pittman voluntarily kill his grandparents? Explain your answer, being sure to state clearly the conditions under which an action counts as voluntary.

2. Did Pittman decide to shot them? Again, explain your answer. To do this well you need to say what constitutes choice, according to Aristotle.

3. Assume, at least for the sake of the argument, that you are a prosecutor who accepts Aristotle's theory of character acquisition and responsibility and that you think Pittman is responsible for the killings: what would you reject of the defense's argument or add to Aristotle’s theory, in order to support your view?

4. Think of some animal that you believe is NOT morally responsible for any of its actions. How would that animal have to be different in order for it to be morally responsible for some of its actions? What would that animal have to be like, or have to be able to do, to qualify (according to you) as a responsible agent?
For this part of the assignment, too, you need to read the articles mentioned above.

Those articles explore (albeit briefly and superficially) the question of whether Christopher Pittman is responsible for the murders he committed. Using your own words, explain carefully the position that Pittman’s defense attorneys are taking (and again in your own words) set out the argument(s) that they seem to be offering in support of that position focusing on the moral, rather than the merely legal, aspects of the view they hold. Do not bother rehearsing the details of the case except as you need them to make what you say clear. Along the way, relate the defense’s position to Aristotle’s theory of responsibility. Doing this well requires that you are clear both on Aristotle’s theory and on the theory of responsibility implicit in the argument(s) offered by the defense attorneys. You will see that they do not deny that he acted voluntarily in Aristotle’s sense. But they think that, even though his actions were due to neither external force nor to ignorance of particulars, they were none the less not something for which he is responsible.

The best way to understand their view, and the problem it raises for Aristotle’s theory, is to understand the objection Aristotle considers at 1114b. The up-shot of the objection appears to be that people are never responsible for what they do. Most people think this cannot be right. We are, most people think, often responsible for what we do, even though we are pretty clearly not responsible for everything we do. The challenge facing this common view is to set out in an intelligible and justifiable way what the difference is between those things for which people are responsible and those for which they are not. This is a huge challenge, but coming to grips with the challenge is itself an important accomplishment. A crucial first step is figuring out what -- if anything -- one thinks is wrong with the argument for thinking that people are never responsible for what they do. There are two main possibilities here. Either you think the argument works, and so think people are never responsible for what they do (and so think is not responsible for the), or you think people are sometimes responsible for what they do (whether or not you think Pittman is), so there must be something wrong with the argument. (A third possibility is that you think the argument does not work but you think some other argument with the same conclusion does work, so you think people are never responsible for what they do.)

Many people discover themselves flipping back and forth on this question, sometimes being convinced by the argument that people are never responsible for what they do, other times being sure it can not be right. Your essay -- that is, Part II of this assignment -- is to come to grips with the challenge raised at 1114b as it plays out when it comes to Pittman and what he did. In your essay, present Aristotle’s theory of responsibility, being sure to relate it carefully and accurately to his theories of action and character acquisition and to the position taken by Pittman’s attorneys. To do this well you will need to bring out explicitly what Aristotle thinks people are responsible for and why (and what he thinks people are not responsible for and why). Against that background, or along the way, consider the objection at 1114b, being sure to relate both Aristotle’s theory and the objection at 1114b to Pittman and to the commonly accepted idea that those who are insane (as well as those who are under the influence of mind altering drugs the effect of which was not known), are not responsible for their actions. In considering the objection, you should (i) present it as clearly and forcefully as you can, (ii) explain how Aristotle might best respond to the objection and (iii) make clear in the process what you think of the adequacy of Aristotle’s resulting view and why. You should, in doing these three things, relate what you say, as appropriate, to Aristotle’s theories of action and character acquisition.

It is fine, and in fact desirable, for you to give help to each other. BUT, you should also be sure to respect the constraints imposed by the honor code. If you receive help from someone, or if you should pick up on and use someone else’s idea, YOU MUST GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE -- whether the help comes from the person who wrote a critique of your paper, a TA in the course, or from someone else. It is perfectly appropriate to have a footnote saying "I owe this point to xyz" or "XYZ made clear to me that Socrates could respond in this way." It is neither appropriate nor acceptable for you to present someone else's ideas as your own.

You are being asked to consider an important challenge to Aristotle's position not because the challenge is clearly successful but because it is important and because critical engagement is the key to doing -- as opposed merely to reading - - philosophy. In formulating your essay pay close attention to the text and be very careful to include all and only relevant information. We expect a clear and concise essay that shows you understand the philosophical issues raised by the assignment. Advice on writing philosophy papers can be found on the course website.

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Make sure you have done the following things:

[ ] Answered all four questions constituting Section I clearly and accurately. These answers should be set off from the essay that you write for Section II.

And then, in Section II,

[ ] Described in Aristotle’s accounts of responsibility, action, and character acquisition accurately and with appropriate detail.

[ ] Described forcefully the objection at 1114b relating it to the defense offered by Pittman’s attorneys and, more generally, to the idea that insanity and mental disability reduce responsibility and sometimes eliminate it altogether.
Presented a plausible reply to the challenge, on Aristotle’s behalf. (Keep in mind that sometimes the best reply to an objection is to change one’s view.)

Made clear your own views concerning the adequacy of Aristotle’s theory — and your reasons for holding those views.

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In the critique you should offer substantive comments on the style and the content of the paper. Don’t bother including unhelpful compliments (e.g. “this is a very nice paper” or “you’ve got great handwriting” or “you seem to have read and understood the material”). Do bother including specific advice (e.g. “you should pay more attention to the analogy with the state because...”), serious questions about clarity (e.g. “I don’t see what this paragraph is doing here” or “You seem to think..., but I don’t see why”), and philosophical challenges (e.g. “You argue... But aren't you overlooking...” or “Socrates doesn't believe what you say he does, look at page...” or “How can you believe that?!? Think about...”). Also please help each other with matters of style. In short, treat your classmates with respect by taking their work seriously. Feel free to use the back of the form in setting out your comments.