

November 17, 2000

Dustin Denson

Ph.D. General Examination in Epistemology

Answer four of the following questions. You have four hours.

1. What is the dispute between foundationalism and coherentism? Explain how they are both intended to be a response to a form of skepticism. Do they succeed in answering the skeptical challenge? Which theory is more plausible, and why? Do you know of any plausible alternative theory of a rational (justified) belief structure?
2. Coherence theorists of epistemic justification claim that the only adequate response to the problem posed by the "regress argument" is to allow that justification can "circle back on itself."
 - (a) Carefully and clearly describe the "regress argument," explaining the problem it poses for theories of epistemic justification. How does the coherentist use it to motivate her position?
 - (b) What does it mean to say that justification can "circle back on itself?" Use some particular coherence theory to inform your answer.
3. Carefully and clearly distinguish externalism about epistemic justification from internalism. What reasons are there to prefer one of these general positions over the other? Briefly spell out a version of a theory of justification that exemplifies the position you defend, raising and critically discussing at least one objection to it.
4. Do both of the following:
 - (a) Carefully describe the "Gettier Problem," giving examples to illustrate and supplement your description. What, if anything, do the different standard Gettier cases have in common?
 - (b) Give the best response you know of to the Gettier Problem, and then critically evaluate it.
5. Describe a version of a *defeasibility* account of epistemic justification. What problem(s) is this account designed to solve. Use one or more examples to illustrate how the defeasibility account is supposed to work. Be sure to carefully describe the notion of defeasibility. Do you think this account succeeds. If not, why not?
6. What distinguishes virtue epistemology from the approach to epistemology that was standard in the second half of the twentieth century? What is reliabilism? Do you think reliabilism should be considered a form of virtue epistemology? How is it similar to (other forms of) virtue epistemology, and how does it differ?
7. Set out the most plausible version of skepticism you know. Then sketch out two or three responses to it, focusing on the one you think is the best. How successful is it?
8. What is the nature of mathematical truth and how do we come to know such truths? State at least two views and defend the view you think is stronger. What problems make the weaker view implausible and how does the stronger view overcome these problems? Does the stronger view have

additional problems it must overcome? If so, describe the problems you think are the most telling.

Answer no more than two of the following three questions--questions 9-11. (Of course you needn't choose to answer any of them.)

9. Describe two main views about the nature of the kind of inference that justifies or supports belief in scientific hypotheses and theories. What are some of the major weakness or problems with these views? Which view do you think is the most plausible, and why?

10. Describe a subjectivist version of Bayesian epistemology. What are the strengths of this view? Describe some of its weaknesses. Include a brief discussion of the problem of old evidence. Do you think there is another (non-subjectivist) Bayesian account that is better than subjectivist Bayesianism? If so, briefly describe it and say why it is a better account. If not, briefly describe one alternative (Bayesian account) to subjectivist Bayesianism, and describe at least one of the main objections to it.

11. Describe Hume's problem of induction. Do you think Hume's argument is a good one and that inductive inference cannot be justified?

a. If so, should we give up using inductive inferences--why or why not? Are we, for example, still warranted in believing that smoking causes cancer, based on the evidence?

b. On the other hand, if you think Hume's argument does not warrant the conclusion that induction cannot be justified, explain what is wrong with his argument. Do you think induction can be justified, or do you only think that Hume's argument is bad. Explain. And if you think that induction can be justified, say how.

Ph.D. General Examination

Epistemology

November 2006

Instructions

1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions, at least one from each of the three sections.
2. The questions are equal in weight so you should expect to spend about one hour on each question.
3. You are expected to mention arguments and views of philosophers whose work is pertinent to the question you are answering. You need not give a survey of all the published work you have read on the topic, but you should discuss the arguments or views you find most important.

I. Traditional Issues

1. Present the strongest form of the argument for radical skepticism you know of. Briefly review some of the replies made by philosophers to avoid the conclusion of the argument. Then focus on the move that you find most promising, explaining it carefully. Then evaluate it. What do you think is the philosophical significance of skeptical arguments?
2. What is evidentialism? How can evidentialism be defended? What do you think are the most important criticisms of the evidentialist principle? Should evidentialism be accepted? Why or why not?
3. Carefully and clearly distinguish externalism about epistemic justification from internalism. What reasons are there to prefer one of these views to the other; or, if you think both are required for an adequate account of justification, explain why. Briefly spell out a version of a theory of justification that exemplifies the position you defend, raising and critically discussing at least one of the main objections to it.
4. Answer both parts of the following question.

Explain in detail the “regress problem” of epistemic justification. How do four different theories of epistemic justification (foundationalism, coherentism, skepticism, and infinitism) arise from this one problem?

Both coherentism and foundationalism have recently been rehabilitated from their previously moribund states. Pick one of these to defend. Elucidate two of the traditional problems that have been thought to refute it, and respond to those objections on its behalf.

II. New Developments

5. Articulate the “virtue theory” approach in epistemology, distinguishing any major divisions that are appropriate. Do recent objections to virtue theory from so-called situationists undermine such an approach to epistemology? Does it undermine some forms of virtue theory more than others? Explain.
6. Critically evaluate a version of contextualism. Explain how it is supposed to be a response to skepticism. How successful is it at this? How plausible is it as a theory of knowledge, independently of how it answers the skeptic?
7. What is the “value problem” in epistemology? It has been argued that simpler versions of reliabilism have a particularly hard time solving this problem. Critically evaluate this claim. Then, either:

(A) argue that the value-problem can be “dissolved” rather than solved (in other words, argue that there only *appears* to be a problem, but really there is not), and clearly explain how to do so.

-or-

(B) describe the theory of knowledge that you think has the best chance of solving the value problem. How successful is it? Defend your answer.

8. While it has long been acknowledged that there is a kind of incompatibility between luck and knowledge, only recently has this relationship been studied in detail, with attention being paid specifically to a correct account of luck itself. Explain generally how you think luck is conceptually related to knowledge. Critically evaluate one theoretical account of luck. How well does it capture the general phenomenon of luck? What role can this account of luck play in the analysis of knowledge? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the resulting account of knowledge?

III. Miscellaneous

9. Carefully and clearly explain the distinction between “reductionism” and “non-reductionism” in the theory of testimony. Trace the historical roots of each position. Then, either (a) set out a current non-reductionist theory of testimony and defend it against reductionist objections, or (b) set out a current reductionist theory of testimony and defend it against non-reductionist objections.

10. Clearly explain and distinguish the modal notions of “safety” and “sensitivity.” Give examples to show how a true belief can be safe but not sensitive, as well as sensitive but not safe. Explain how different ways of defining “safety” lead to different conditions on knowledge. Critically evaluate the best “safety” theory of knowledge you know of, defending in particular the definition of safety that it employs.

11. Answer one but not both of the following:

(A) Alston argues that there are experiences in which the subject takes herself to be directly presented with God in the same way in which subjects take themselves to be directly presented with a physical object such as a tree. Explain Alston’s view of perception and evaluate his view that belief in God based on religious experience is analogous to belief in the existence of physical objects based on sense experience.

(B) Explain Plantinga’s “Aquinas/Calvin model” of belief in Christian doctrines. Explain and evaluate his argument that if the model is true, belief in the doctrines of the model is justified, internally rational, externally rational, and justified.

12. Are there any important epistemic values in addition to true belief, justified (rational, reasonable) belief, and knowledge? Focus on one of these values, explain what you think it is and how it ought to affect the way epistemology is practiced.

Ph.D. General Examination for Shyam Patwardhan
Epistemology
April, 2010

Instructions:

1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions.
 2. The questions are equal in weight, so you should expect to spend about one hour on each question.
 3. You are expected to mention arguments and views of philosophers whose work is pertinent to the question you are answering. You need not give a survey of all the published work you have read on the topic, but you should discuss the arguments or views you find most important.
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1. Carefully and clearly explain the distinction between “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” in the epistemology of testimony. What are the major objections to each? Which approach fares better against its objectors? Defend your answer.
 2. Carefully distinguish the two main branches of virtue theory in epistemology. Describe in detail a theory of knowledge from each branch. Give the best objection you know of to each.
 3. What is the “value problem” in epistemology? Are some kinds of theories more vulnerable to this problem than others? Explain and defend your answer. Then, describe the theory of knowledge that has the best chance of solving the value problem. How successful is it? Defend your answer.
 4. Carefully and clearly explain how the denial of the closure principle is supposed to help the dogmatist defend herself against the skeptic. In doing so, articulate what you take to be the best version of the closure principle. How successful is this attempt to respond to the skeptic? Is the denial of the closure principle a reasonable price to pay for such a response? Defend your answer.
 5. Critically evaluate a version of contextualism (or better: a theory of knowledge that allows “pragmatic encroachment”). Explain how such a theory is supposed to have a particularly powerful response to the skeptic. How successful is it at this? How plausible is it as a theory of knowledge, independently of how it answers the skeptic?
 6. Answer **one of the following but not both**:
 - (A) What is the relationship between luck and knowledge? In answering this, address the following questions as well: Is there more than one kind of luck that is relevant to knowledge? If so, carefully distinguish them. How should one’s theory of knowledge address the relevance of luck? Give examples of how different theories of knowledge attempt to deal with the importance of luck.
 - (B) It is widely acknowledged that certain kinds of luck are incompatible with knowledge. However, there are competing accounts of the nature of this sort of luck. Critically examine at least two different accounts of knowledge-undermining luck. Consider objections to each. Which is the more satisfying account? Defend your answer.
 7. Some have argued that understanding is a better candidate for the epistemic standing of interest to epistemologists than is knowledge. There are at least two properties of understanding that are alleged to make it superior to knowledge: (a) it cannot be gettiered, and (b) it is not subject to the value

problem. Critically evaluate the case for each of these claims. (To do so, you will need to articulate the particular account of understanding you are working with for the purposes of answering this question.)

8. Some of the more radical social epistemologists claim that the “traditional” approach to epistemology is deeply flawed. Consider at least two different charges against traditional epistemology made by such critics, and critically evaluate them.

9. Why does the fact that persons whom I take to be my epistemic equals disagree with me seem to pose a problem for the reasonableness of my own belief? Carefully and clearly lay out two different views about the correct epistemological response to such peer disagreement. Which is more plausible? Defend your answer.

10. Answer **both parts of the following question**.

Explain in detail the “regress problem” of epistemic justification. How do four different theories of epistemic justification (foundationalism, coherentism, skepticism, and infinitism) arise from this one problem?

Both coherentism and foundationalism have recently been rehabilitated from their previously moribund states. Pick one of these to defend. Elucidate two of the traditional problems that have been thought to refute it, and respond to those objections on its behalf.

11. Present the strongest form of the argument for radical skepticism you know of. Briefly review some of the replies made by philosophers to avoid the conclusion of the argument. Then focus on the move that you find most promising, explaining it carefully. Then evaluate it. What do you think is the philosophical significance of skeptical arguments?

12. It has been thought that the modal notions of “safety” and “sensitivity” can provide a theory of knowledge with the resources to avoid Gettier counterexamples. Clearly explain and distinguish the modal notions of “safety” and “sensitivity,” giving examples to show how a true belief can be safe but not sensitive, as well as sensitive but not safe. Then, pick one of the two and give the best argument you can that this notion can handle the most common Gettier cases. Evaluate its success.

Ph.D. General Examination for Gary Osmundsen
Epistemology
February, 2011

Instructions:

1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions.
2. The questions are equal in weight, so you should expect to spend about one hour on each question.
3. You are expected to mention arguments and views of philosophers whose work is pertinent to the question you are answering. You need not give a survey of all the published work you have read on the topic, but you should discuss the arguments or views you find most important.

1. What is the “value problem” in epistemology? Critically evaluate the prospects for solving the value problem of the following two families of theories: reliabilism and credit theories of knowledge. (Obviously, to do this you will need to briefly articulate and distinguish these two families of theories.)

2. Carefully explain the difference between so-called “responsibilist” virtue theories and “reliabilist” virtue theories in epistemology. Are these theories genuine competitors, attempting to give an account of the same epistemic phenomenon, or are they accounts of different epistemic phenomena, and hence could both be correct?

3. Summarize Plantinga’s account of knowledge. Explain why he thinks that (a) theism, and (b) distinctive Christian beliefs can satisfy his conditions for knowledge. Is he right?

4. What is the motivation behind contextualist theories of knowledge? Compare and contrast two different versions of contextualism, and evaluate how successful each is at fulfilling these motivations.

5. Answer one of the following **but not both**:

(a) W. K. Clifford famously said, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Many have taken this to express an extreme version of evidentialism about epistemic justification. Articulate what you think Clifford means to be saying about the “ethics of belief” by this quote, and then critically evaluate the resulting view. Is any version of such an extreme evidentialism defensible?

(b) Carefully articulate Feldman & Conee’s theory of “mentalism.” They claim that their view is a version of evidentialism. Do you think they are right in this claim? Why or why not? Is their view a version of internalism about justification or externalism (or both)? Defend your answer.

6. What is the relationship between luck and knowledge? In answering this, address the following questions as well: Is there more than one kind of luck that is relevant to knowledge? If so, carefully distinguish them. How should one’s theory of knowledge address the relevance of luck? Give examples of how different theories of knowledge attempt to deal with the importance of luck.

7. Carefully and clearly explain the distinction between “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” in the epistemology of testimony. What are the major objections to each? Which approach fares better against its objectors? Defend your answer.

8. Do Gettier cases all share some common features? In answering this question, pick some theory of knowledge and deploy at least three substantively different Gettier cases against it, explaining how, in each case, the particular theory of knowledge is allegedly refuted by the case. Are there significant differences among the different types of Gettier counterexamples, or are they all the same in their most essential features? Defend your answer.

9. Answer one of the following **but not both**:

(a) What does it mean to say that a theory of knowledge or epistemic justification is “deontological?” Contrast this type of theory with its alternatives. What are the particular strengths and weaknesses of a deontological approach to either knowledge or epistemic justification (you may discuss either)? In light of these points, critically evaluate one such theory. In your opinion, is a deontological approach to such theories viable?

(b) There is a broad and general commitment in contemporary epistemology to naturalism, at least as a background metaphysical assumption. First, what do you think this commitment amounts to? Second, what implications, if any, does this commitment have for an account of epistemic normativity? Does it make some accounts more viable than others? Does it eliminate some accounts as non-starters? Explain your answer.

10. Characterize in general terms the area of “social epistemology.” What are its major divisions, what are its characteristic questions and issues, and how does it differ from “mainstream” epistemology? Explain the phenomenon of “epistemic injustice,” making clear how a proper account of this phenomenon requires a theory that is social in the sense you have just articulated.

11. Carefully and clearly explain G. E. Moore’s response to skepticism. What type of skepticism is it a response to? How successful is his response? Is there a better response to this type of skepticism? Explain your answer.

Ph.D. General Examination for Josh Rollins
Epistemology
October, 2011

Instructions:

1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions. ***You must answer two from each section.***
2. The questions are equal in weight, so you should expect to spend about one hour on each question.
3. You are expected to mention arguments and views of philosophers whose work is pertinent to the question you are answering. You need not give a survey of all the published work you have read on the topic, but you should discuss the arguments or views you find most important.

I.

1. What is the “myth of the given?” Explain how this problem affects attempts to resolve the regress problem for epistemic justification. Give an example of an attempt to address the myth in order to develop a theory of justification. Evaluate that attempt.
2. It is widely held that acceptance of a “closure principle” leads to a very strong form of skepticism. Explain this view, being sure to carefully articulate what you take to be the best version of the closure principle. What are the implications of denying closure for the theory of knowledge? Do you think that acceptance or denial of the closure principle is more defensible?
3. There is a broad and general commitment in contemporary epistemology to naturalism, at least as a background metaphysical assumption. First, what do you think this commitment amounts to? Second, what implications, if any, does this commitment have for an account of epistemic normativity? Does it make some accounts more viable than others? Does it eliminate some accounts as non-starters? Explain your answer.
4. It is considered a virtue of virtue theories of knowledge that they often prescribe both internalist and externalist requirements on knowledge, hence finessing the internalist/externalist debate. Choosing from among the views of Ernest Sosa, John Greco, Linda Zagzebski, and Duncan Pritchard, explain how one of these views incorporates both internalist and externalist conditions on knowledge. How satisfied should internalists and externalists be with this view? How well does each requirement satisfy the motivations behind each of those broader commitments (i.e., internalism and externalism)?
5. Michael Bergmann argues that internalism is subject to a fatal dilemma. Clearly articulate the dilemma, and then critically evaluate its effectiveness at refuting internalism.
6. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman have developed a theory of epistemic justification that they consider to be an internalist version of evidentialism. Clearly articulate this view, and then critically evaluate **both** the extent to which it is genuinely internalist **and** the extent to which it is a version of evidentialism.

II.

7. The problem of disagreement has to do with determining the correct epistemic response to the discovery that an epistemic peer disagrees with something you believe. One factor that influences the various positions in this debate is whether the testimony of one's peer is taken to constitute *evidence* against one's belief. Critically evaluate the "equal weight" view about disagreement, highlighting the commitment this view is likely to have regarding treating testimony as *evidence*.
8. What is the relationship between luck and knowledge? In answering this, address the following questions as well: Is there more than one kind of luck that is relevant to knowledge? If so, carefully distinguish them. Give examples of how different theories of knowledge attempt to deal with the importance of luck. Which of these fares best?
9. Answer ***one of the following but not both***:
 - a. Carefully explain the distinction between reductionism and anti-reductionism in the literature on the epistemology of testimony. John Greco has argued that this is not a well-founded distinction. Explain his argument, and evaluate it
 - b. Critically discuss Jennifer Lackey's account of the epistemology of testimony. Is it reductionist or anti-reductionist? In what ways does it represent an advance in the testimony debate?
10. What are the motivations behind contextualist theories of knowledge-attribution? There is now a bewildering variety of different kinds of contextualism. Carefully explain and distinguish the major different versions of the view. Discuss how each of them fares with respect to satisfying the motivations behind contextualism in general.
11. There is some dispute among epistemologists as to whether, when, and to what extent knowledge is valuable. Discuss the contours of this debate. What are the major positions? How do one's answers to these questions constrain one's theory of knowledge? In the end, defend your own answers to these questions.

Ph.D. General Examination in Epistemology

Answer four of the following questions. You have four hours to do so. Each question is of equal worth. If your answer to one question can contribute to your answer to another question, you need not repeat what you have already written, you may refer to your earlier answer.

1. Present the strongest form of the argument for radical skepticism you know of. Briefly review some of the replies philosophers have made to avoid the conclusion of the skeptical argument. Then focus on the reply that you find most promising, explaining it carefully. Evaluate it. What do you think is the philosophical significance of skeptical arguments?
2. Describe Hume's problem of induction. Do you think Hume's argument is good and that inductive inference cannot be justified?
 - (1) If so, should we give up using inductive inferences? For example, does evidence still warrant our believing that smoking causes cancer?
 - (2) Alternatively, if you think Hume's argument does not warrant the conclusion that induction cannot be justified, explain. Do you think induction can be justified, or only think Hume's argument fails? If you think that induction can be justified, explain how.
3. Answer at most one of the following two questions:
 - 3.1 There are several kinds of Bayesian accounts of hypothesis confirmation. Explain the best Bayesian account you know of. What are its strengths and weaknesses (e.g. how is it better than alternative Bayesian accounts?). Describe how this Bayesian account differs from at least one alternative account (such as classical frequentist methods, or the hypothetico-deductive method, or falsificationism). Which approach provides the better account of support for scientific hypotheses? Explain.
 - 3.2 Describe a subjectivist version of Bayesian epistemology. What are the strengths of this view? Describe some of its weaknesses. Include a brief discussion of the problem of old evidence. Do you think there is another (non-subjectivist) Bayesian account that is better than subjectivist Bayesianism? If so, briefly describe it and say why it is a better account. If not, briefly describe one alternative (Bayesian account) to subjectivist Bayesianism, and describe at least one of the main objections to it.
4. Epistemologists usually appeal to the notions of full belief (or binary belief), but some also appeal to a notion of partial belief (credence, degree of belief, or comparative confidence). What is the relationship between these notions? Is either notion more basic than the other? Is either notion more important to epistemic theory? Defend your answer.
5. To what extent is psychological plausibility a desideratum for epistemic theories? In what ways do some major epistemic theories fail this desideratum? Defend your answer.
6. What is meant by "the myth of the given?" Explain how this issue affects attempts to resolve the regress problem for epistemic justification. Is "the given" really a myth? Give an example of an attempt to address this issue in order to develop a theory of justification. Evaluate that attempt.

7. What is evidentialism? How can evidentialism be defended? What do you think are the most important criticisms of the evidentialism? Do you think some version of this view is ultimately right? Why or why not?
8. Carefully describe the “Gettier Problem”, giving examples to illustrate your description. What, if anything, do the different standard Gettier cases have in common? Give the best response you know of to the Gettier Problem, and then critically evaluate it.
9. What is the dispute between foundationalism and coherentism? Describe the best version you know of each. Explain which of these views is more plausible, and why?
10. Carefully and clearly describe the differences between internalist and externalist accounts of epistemic justification. What reasons are there to prefer one of these positions over the other? Briefly spell out a more detailed version of your preferred (i.e. internalist or externalist) account. Critically discuss it.
11. Describe a *defeasibility* account of epistemic justification. Carefully describe the notion of defeasibility. What problem(s) is this account designed to solve. Use one or more examples to illustrate how the defeasibility account is supposed to work. Do you think this account succeeds. If not, why not?
12. Carefully set out a version of virtue epistemology. Critically evaluate it. What advantages does it have over more traditional theories of knowledge? What problems must it face that do not challenge more traditional views? To what extent does it succeed in dealing with these problems?
13. What is the relationship between luck and knowledge? Is there more than one kind of luck that is relevant to knowledge? If so, carefully distinguish them. Give examples of how different theories of knowledge attempt to deal with the importance of luck. Which of these fares best?
14. How are the notions of “safety” and “sensitivity” supposed to provide a theory of knowledge with the resources to avoid Gettier counterexamples? Clearly explain and distinguish these two modal notions. Give examples to show how a true belief can be safe but not sensitive, and sensitive but not safe. Then, pick one of the two and give the best argument you can that this notion can handle the most common Gettier cases. Evaluate its success.
15. What are the motivations behind contextualist theories of knowledge-attribution? There is now a bewildering variety of different kinds of contextualism. Carefully explain and distinguish the major versions. Discuss how each of them fares in regard to satisfying the motivations behind contextualism.
16. Carefully and clearly explain the distinction between “reductionism” and “anti-reductionism” in the epistemology of testimony. What are the major objections to each? Which approach fares better against its objectors? Defend your answer.