

Ph.D. General Examination for John Cheek
Epistemology
November, 2012

Instructions:

1. The exam will last four hours and you should answer a total of four questions. ***You must answer at least two from section I.***
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.

Section I.

1. Carefully and clearly articulate the coherence theory of justification. Use either Lawrence BonJour's or Catherine Elgin's theory as a model. What are the motivations for offering a coherence theory? What are the major weaknesses of it? What are its unique strengths?
2. There are many accounts of the distinction between internalism and externalism about epistemic justification and/or knowledge. Describe and motivate what you take to be the best such account. Then ***answer one of the following:***
 - (a) What are the biggest challenges facing internalism as you define it? Critically evaluate the prospects for internalism overcoming these challenges. Are there any specific theories of justification that take the approach you defend?
 - (b) Carefully delineate two different sorts of externalist views of justification. Be sure to explain how and why they count as externalist on your account. What are their relative advantages and disadvantages?
3. Carefully lay out what you take to be the best or most interesting argument for Cartesian skepticism. Explain how the relevant alternatives approach to theories of knowledge can be seen as a response to this form of skepticism. How good a response is it?
4. 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.
5. Some epistemologists claim that the practical stakes involved in whether one is right in one's belief regarding *p* can affect whether it is appropriate to say that one knows that *p*. Articulate at least one argument for this claim. What are the major objections to accepting that knowledge-ascriptions are contextual in this way?

6. 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. Articulate a version of each and assess their relative merits.
- (b) Many accounts of testimonial knowledge and/or justification centrally incorporate the notion of “trust,” though not everyone means the same thing by this. Explain (and defend) what you take to be the most important and relevant notion of trust for testimonial knowledge and/or justification. How and why is this notion important to testimony? Is it epistemically relevant in any other way?

Section II.

- 7. Explain the phenomenon of epistemic injustice as articulated by Miranda Fricker. Is this an epistemic failing, a moral failing, a political failing, or some combination of the three? Does this phenomenon hook up in any interesting way with other epistemic phenomena or epistemic evaluations? Explain.
- 8. What makes a theory of knowledge a “virtue theory?” Lay out one virtue theory of knowledge in some detail, choosing from among those of Greco, Sosa and Zagzebski. Critically evaluate it.
- 9. “Traditional” epistemology tends to assume that some things can be known “objectively,” without respect to the contingent and allegedly incidental characteristics of the knower, such as race, gender, social location, background, etc. Critically evaluate this assumption, being sure to clarify what you mean by “objective,” and appealing to at least two different philosophers’ criticisms of this assumption.
- 10. Alvin Goldman is a well-known proponent of “social epistemology.” Explain what social epistemology encompasses, according to Goldman. What are his fundamental assumptions that make what he is talking about both “social” and “epistemology,” according to him? Is this understanding of social epistemology too restrictive, too inclusive, or just right? Defend your answer.
- 11. Some feminist philosophers and philosophers of race argue that the notion of “ignorance” should have an important role in any complete and adequate epistemology. There are different understandings of ignorance and different views about the epistemic significance of it. Articulate at least two different understandings of “ignorance” and explain and critically assess their alleged epistemic significance.