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.