Preparation Packet
for
PHIL 896 EXAMINATION
Philosophy Department M.A. Qualifying Exam

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Philosophy 896 Packet Guidelines

Contact the Graduate Coordinator if you have any questions about the guidelines below.

General Overview

1. PHIL 896 exam is the Department's qualifying examination for Graduate students. The exam tests the student's ability to comprehend, explain, compare and explore the views of four key philosophers in the following texts: Plato's *Republic*, Descartes' *Meditation on First Philosophy*, Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and Kant’s *Prolegomena*. The exam also satisfies the University's Written English Proficiency Requirement for graduate students.

2. The PHIL 896 is a mandatory CR/NC course. It may be repeated once if NC is earned the first time. It must be completed with a CR before the student may officially begin work on the master's thesis. Students are permitted two attempts to pass the 896 examination. Students who fail a second time will be disqualified from the program.

3. All students should confer with the Graduate Coordinator before enrolling in the course. Students who are Conditionally Classified are generally advised not to take the exam until all prerequisite work is completed. Students are strongly encouraged to have successfully completed courses in Ancient and Modern Philosophy, Epistemology and Metaphysics, and/or seminars on as many of the four philosophers as possible prior to attempting the exam.

4. Students who fail the exam for the first time will be contacted by the Graduate Coordinator for a mandatory conference. Students will not be allowed to retake the exam without having this mandatory conference.

5. The exam is a three hour, closed book and closed notes exam. Students type the exam on computers in the Critical Thinking Lab.

6. The exam is entirely comparative in nature. Students are required to answer three comparative questions based on the four authors and texts, e.g., Plato and Descartes, Hume and Kant, Plato and Kant, Descartes and Hume, and so forth.

7. The passing grade for credit is a B-. The four faculty instructors grade each question on the exam and meet to assign the final grades. The results of the examination will be mailed to students within two weeks after the date of the exam.

8. It is possible to pass the exam with distinction, although this honor will not appear on your transcripts.

9. Meeting times for the class will be posted in the glass bulletin board by the Philosophy Department office (HUM 388). Submit to the instructor the written essay question for each one week before the group session on that philosopher. Essay questions are found in this 896 Packet.
10. Remember that the actual exam is closed book and closed note. You will not have access to either the primary texts or secondary literature during the actual exam. These "practice" essay questions allow instructors to assess your writing ability and your comprehension of the texts. While you certainly may use secondary literature in your preparation for the exam, avoid referring to such literature in these practice essays. Likewise, avoid quoting large portions of the primary texts.

Helpful Hints

1. This class meets formally only four times each semester—once with the instructor for each philosopher. While each instructor is available during office hours throughout the semester, students are encouraged to meet informally among themselves in study groups/workshops in order to enhance their individual and collective understanding of the texts.

2. The exam focuses on the major metaphysical and epistemological issues that have arisen in western philosophy. To get the most out of the formal class meetings, be prepared with specific questions. Try to formulate questions that will lead you into the central metaphysical and epistemological issues within each text. This will help you to see the larger picture that emerges with each thinker.

3. Practice. Practice. Practice. Practice answering sample exam questions both verbally and in writing. Also practice writing answers to previous exam questions within the time constraints of the actual exam. Work in your study groups to develop comparative questions based on the four texts and practice answering them. Some initial study questions on each text are included in the 896 Packet. Your instructor may provide you with further questions.

4. Students are encouraged to read entries on each philosopher in standard encyclopedias of Philosophy (e.g., The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the Rutledge and Cambridge encyclopedias). In addition, the relevant sections of Frederick Copleston's History of Philosophy series may be helpful.

5. The exam requires a working knowledge of and the ability to accurately describe the view of each philosopher and the differences between them with respect to central epistemological and metaphysical questions. In addition, you should be prepared to articulate your own views on these issues. Be sure to directly answer all parts of the question, and try to stay close to the "text". While original thought is valued, the purpose of the exam is not the assess the creativity of your philosophical thought.

6. Don't wait until the last two weeks of the semester to really start studying.
Letter to 896 Students

Dear 896 Student,

Remember that the 896 exam is a three hour, closed note and closed text examination. It calls upon you to answer questions on the four assigned texts without the benefit of stopping to refer to any text or study aids. The practice essays are not term papers. They are designed to help you prepare for the experience of answering questions on the timed 896 exam. To that end, the instructors suggest that you thoroughly read the specific assigned text, complete your study (read encyclopedia entries, etc.), and answer all the study questions before you begin your written answer to the essay question. Write your answer without using books or notes; do not take more than an hour to complete your answer.

Sincerely yours,

Dr. Alice Sowaal & Dr. David Landy

Graduate Coordinators
Americans with Disabilities Act Accommodation

The University is committed to providing reasonable academic accommodation to students with disabilities. The Disabilities Programs and Resources Center provides university academic support services and specialized assistance to students with disabilities. Individuals with physical, perceptual, or learning disabilities as addressed by the Americans with Disabilities Act should contact Services for Students with Disabilities for information regarding accommodations. Please notify the graduate coordinator so that reasonable efforts can be made to accommodate you. If you expect accommodation through ADA, you must make a formal request through Disability Programs and Resource Center in SSB110 (415) 338-2472.
PLATO ESSAY QUESTION

(Submit this question to the Plato instructor one week before the group session)

How does Plato distinguish and justify his distinction between genuine knowledge and right opinion? In your answer discuss the three major approaches which Plato takes to this question:

a. psychological: based on the structure of the self
b. epistemological: based on the establishment of standards of truth
c. metaphysical: based on a theory of reality

In general, how do you understand the relationship between psychology, epistemology and metaphysics? Can the question "what can we know?" be answered apart from considering the questions "what is the structure of the mind?" and "what is most real in the universe"?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is there a relationship between stages of the levels within the ideal republic and the levels of knowledge indicated on the divided line?

2. The relationship between pleasure and knowledge: why does Plato say the philosopher is capable of the greatest happiness?

3. Were on the divided line would you place the various aspects of contemporary scientific theory?

4. Is The Republic primarily a social, psychological or metaphysical document? In the light of Plato's thought, discuss the relationship between social, psychological and metaphysical concepts of justice.

5. Which ideas of The Republic does the myth of Er illustrate?
In the beginning of Meditations, Descartes works through a method that empowers him to doubt his previous metaphysical convictions, that is, the ordinary beliefs acquired while growing from infancy to adulthood, plus the philosophical beliefs instilled by his Scholastic training. By the conclusion of the Meditations, he has established as certain an ontology with room for both a Christian God and a modern account of matter. In doing so, he supplies a metaphysical ground for the new mechanistic science.

Describe the Cartesian ontology, being sure to answer the following questions:

a) What exists?

b) What are the attributes of each (kind of) thing?

c) How does each differ from the other(s)?

d) What argument(s) does Descartes use to establish the distinctive attributes and differentia of each?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the three forms of doubt Descartes mentions in the First Meditation? Discuss each form of doubt in terms of (a) the characteristic beliefs that are doubted, (b) the beliefs that the form of doubt cannot reach and shake, (c) the epistemological principle called into question, and (d) the way that form of doubt ultimately is dissolved in the Meditations.

2. For Descartes, what is/are the relationship(s) between doubt and certainty?

3. Examine Descartes' consideration of “the cogito” (‘I am, I exist’ [AT 25, CSM 171. How does the cogito function? Having explicated and defended your interpretation of how the cogito functions, explain how it serves as a foundation for knowledge. Could Descartes have made the inference, “I sweat, therefore I am”?

4. By the end of the Second Meditation, what does Descartes conclude about the following: how he comes to know the wax, the essence of the wax, his knowledge of mind compared to his knowledge of body.

5. In the first part of the Third Meditation, Descartes presents a rule for being certain about more metaphysical beliefs (AT 35; CSM 24). What is this rule, and why does he decide to refrain from relying on this rule at this point in the Meditations.
6. In the second part of the Third Meditation, and in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes responds to doubts that God exists. Discuss each objection to God's existence, and Descartes' answer to each objection. Why is it important for Descartes to prove God's existence?

7. In the Fourth Meditation, what is the "problem of error" that makes Descartes again doubt God's existence? How do his considerations of judgment, will, intellect, forms of freedom, and ways of avoiding error enable him to dismiss this problem as a reason for doubting God's existence?

8. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes gives a proof that the essence of material things is independent of thinking subjects. State the steps of this proof. How is this proof similar to, and how is it different from, the proof of the existence of God in the Fifth Meditation?

9. What is the import of Descartes' discussion of attention (i.e.: "mental vision," "seeing with," and "turning" the "mind's eye") in the Third and Fifth Meditations? [AT 35-6, 69-71, CSM 25, 481]

10. Relying mainly on the Sixth Mediation, explicate Descartes' accounts of sensory perception, imagination, and pure intellect, including the differences of one from the other. Given the "proper purpose" of sensory perception, what are the new problems of error that arise, and how does Descartes resolve them?

11. What is Descartes argument for the conclusion that "it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it"? [AT 78, CSM 541] How many substances does Descartes think there are, and what argument(s) does he give for holding that there are this number of substances?

12. What is Descartes' argument for the conclusion that "corporeal things exist"? [AT 79-80, CSM 551]

13. What is the distinction between an idea's being clear and its being distinct? What role(s) does Descartes assign to clarity (as in clear ideas)? To distinctness (as in distinct ideas)?

Abbreviations of cites:


Hume

ENQUIRY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

HUME ESSAY QUESTION

(Please complete your study and be sure you can answer all the Study Questions before you begin your written answer to the essay question. Write your answer without using books or notes, and do not take more than an hour to complete your answer.)

There is a way of reading Hume’s Enquiry such that Sections II through VII together constitute a single argument for the conclusion that we have no idea of necessary connection. Articulate the broad outlines of this argument. In doing so make sure to touch on the following, important topics from these sections:

(a) The origin of our ideas,
(b) The distinction between simple and complex ideas, and the association of ideas,
(c) The distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas,
(d) Hume’s skepticism about reason’s ability to provide knowledge of causes and effects,
(e) The problem of induction,
(f) Hume’s skeptical solution to these doubts.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In Section II of the Enquiry Hume draws two distinctions that are crucial to what follows: that between impressions and ideas and that between simple and complex perceptions. What is an impression? What is an idea? What is a simple perception? What is a complex perception? Is this a tenable account of all the elements of human thought?

2. Again, in Section II, Hume offers two arguments for his thesis that every idea is a copy of some impression (the Copy Principle). What is it for one perception to be a copy of another? What are Hume’s two arguments for his thesis? What is his response to the counterexample that he presents to his own thesis? To what end does Hume hope to put the Copy Principle? Can he legitimately do so?

3. In Section III, Hume claims that the only connections between impressions and ideas are certain associative mechanisms. What are these mechanisms? What is Hume’s argument for his thesis here? Do impressions, ideas, and these mechanisms adequately account for all of human thought?

4. In the first part of Section IV, Hume draws a distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas (Hume’s Fork). What are matters of fact? What are relations of ideas? How does this distinction interact with the distinction between simple and complex ideas? What does Hume mean when he says that neither matters of fact, nor their contradictions are “demonstrable”?

5. What are Hume’s arguments, from the first part of Section IV, that no causal relations can be known a priori? How does this argument depend on the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, and Hume’s claim that matters of fact are not demonstrable?
6. In the second part of Section IV, Hume articulates what has become known as the problem of induction: that we seem to have no reason to think that the future will resemble the past. What is Hume’s argument for this conclusion? How does this argument depend on what has preceded it? Does it follow that we ought not to think that the future will resemble the past?

7. In Section V, Hume articulates what he calls a skeptical solution to the doubts raised in the previous section. What is the skeptical solution? How do we come to think about causes and their effects? In what sense is this solution skeptical?

8. In Section VII, Hume finally concludes that we have no idea of necessary connection. If our idea of causation does not involve the idea of necessary connections, what is that idea? How does the Copy Principle factor into Hume’s argument here? Is this conclusion a matter of fact or a relation of ideas?

9. In Section XII, Hume presents various forms of skepticism. What is the difference between these forms of skepticism? Which, if any, of these does Hume endorse? Which does he reject, and why?
Kant

PROLEGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE SCIENCE

KANT ESSAY QUESTION

(Please complete your study and be sure you can answer all the Study Questions before you begin your written answer to the essay question. Write your answer without using books or notes, and do not take more than an hour to complete your answer.)

In the Prolegomena, Kant portrays himself as solving various problems that have inevitably arisen from the way that philosophy before him has proceeded (in particular from the underlying assumptions of both the rationalists and the empiricists). One of the central problems that he cites concerns our thinking about the necessary connections between distinct objects of experience. Articulate the broad outlines of this solution to this problem. In doing so make sure to touch on the following, important topics from this work:

(g) The distinctions between a priori and a posteriori judgments and between analytic and synthetic judgments,

(h) The transcendental ideality of Space and Time,

(i) The distinction between judgments of perception and judgments of experience,

(j) The pure concepts of the understanding, and

(k) The distinction between objects of possible experience and things in themselves.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In the Preamble, Kant presents two important distinctions: that between synthetic and analytic judgments, and that between a priori and a posteriori judgments. What is an analytic judgment? What is a synthetic judgment? What is an a priori judgment? What is an a posteriori judgment? How do these two distinctions differ from one another? Why is Kant’s way of carving up this territory particularly interesting? Give an example of each kind of judgment.

2. What is the significance of Kant’s discovery of synthetic a priori judgments? Give some examples of synthetic a priori judgments from different disciplines. What makes each of these synthetic? What makes each a priori?

3. In The First Part, what is Kant’s argument that there must be “pure a priori intuitions”? What is an intuition? What makes an intuition pure? How can a pure intuition be a priori (given that it is supposed to relate to an object of experience)?

4. In §13 Kant presents his famous argument concerning incongruent counterparts. How does this argument proceed? What is it meant to show? What is the picture that Kant subsequently gives of Space, Time, and spatio-temporal objects?
5. Regarding Kant’s remarks on The First Part, to what does mathematics apply? To what does mathematics not apply? In what sense is Kant not an idealist? Why does Kant contend that it is wrong to say that Space, Time, and spatio-temporal objects are illusions?

6. The Second Part concerns how pure natural science is possible. What is pure natural science? What are some of its laws? What are its objects?

7. What is a judgment of perception? What is a judgment of experience? What is Kant’s argument that objective validity and universal necessity are the same? How do all of these notions relate to one another?

8. What is the Transcendental Table of the Concepts of the Understanding? What does it tell us about judgments of perception and judgments of experience? What is the significance of ‘cause’ being on it? ‘Substance’? ‘Existence’?

9. In §22 Kant concludes that, “the pure concepts of the understanding are those under which all perceptions must first be subsumed before they can serve for judgments of experience, in which the synthetic unity of the perceptions is represented as necessary and universally valid.” What does each part of this sentence mean? What is Kant claiming here? What is his argument for this conclusion?

10. In §23, Kant claims that the problem of this part has been solved. So, how is pure natural science possible? What is the relation between judgments of experience, the Concepts of the Understanding, objects of possible experience, and pure science?

11. In Section I of The Third Part Kant argues that despite the fact that ‘the self’ is a grammatical subject, the self is not a metaphysical substance. What is his argument for this conclusion? How does it depend on his Transcendental Idealism more generally? What makes this conclusion so significant?

12. In Sections II and II of the Third Part as well as in its conclusion, Kant assigns a role to our thinking of God that makes that thinking both unavoidable, but also mistaken. What is the role of God in our thinking? Why is it unavoidable? Why is it mistaken?

13. Kant holds that there are representations that are specific to sensibility, the understanding, and reason. What kinds of representations belong to each faculty? What roles (if any) do each of these kinds of representations play in cognition? How are each useful, whatever their role?
Previous Exams
Spring 2011

Part A: Plato and Descartes
Write on one of the following:
1. For both Plato and Descartes the property of being real is connected in some way to perfection. Explain. For each philosopher, also discuss the way this connection is related to an account of human perfection. Be sure to compare and contrast the two philosophers on these two sets of issues.

2. For Plato and Descartes, compare the metaphysical bases of the epistemic method that philosopher develops to lead to knowledge (dialectic and the method of doubt, respectively). For each, how does this metaphysical account lead to what each philosopher says about the powers and limitations of human knowledge? What arguments does each offer in this regard?

Part B: Hume and Kant
Write on one of the following:
3. Explain how Kant addresses the question regarding how scientific knowledge is possible by beginning with the fact – as he takes it to be – that in mathematics we have synthetic a priori knowledge. Explain the conception of mathematics according to which that is so, as well as Hume’s contrary conception of math and how it connects to his contrary account of scientific knowledge.

4. When Kant addresses what he calls the “Humean doubt,” he acknowledges that Hume was right to insist that “we in no way have insight through reason into the possibility of causality.” Explain Hume’s view and Kant’s critique. Further, and again contrary to Hume, Kant holds that this concept of cause cannot could be “borrowed from experience.” Explain both views. So how is it possible for Kant to salvage the view that we do have knowledge of causal connections?

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant
Write on one of the following:
5. Compare Plato and Hume on the role that our senses can play in cognition. To what extent (and for what reasons) did each trust the senses to yield knowledge of the physical world? Contrast their reasons for limiting their trust in the senses.

6. What problems is Plato's theory of Forms designed to solve? How does it propose to solve them? In light of his (so-called Copernican) revolution in metaphysics, what objections might Kant be expected to raise against the theory of Forms?

7. Compare Descartes and Hume on the question of our knowledge of empirical truths. Are we rationally justified in believing that the sun will rise tomorrow on Descartes’ view? On Hume’s? Explain in detail.

8. Descartes argues from the indubitable ‘I think’ to the conclusion that I am a thinking thing. How does Kant criticize this argument, and what is Kant’s view of the ego?
Part A: Plato and Descartes

Write on one of the following:

1. Plato and Descartes agree that certainty is possible on certain subjects. According to them how is certainty possible, and about what, is it possible? In this regard, what does each argue about the powers and limitations of human knowledge?

2. Toward the end of Meditation III Descartes concludes that the idea of God “is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me.” What are Descartes’ reasons for his claim that these are innate ideas? How are Plato’s views about ideas similar to Descartes’ about innate ideas? And how are Platonic ideas different from Cartesian innate ideas?

Part B: Hume and Kant

Write on one of the following:

3. What is Hume's account of our knowledge of necessity? Compare with that of Kant.

4. What is a synthetic a priori judgment? What are examples of such judgments? How are such judgments possible, according to Kant? Compare his view to Hume's.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant

Write on one of the following:

5. What metaphysical problems is Plato’s Theory of Forms designed to solve? How does it propose to solve them? How would Hume apply his general objections to metaphysics to the Theory of Forms?

6. What is the relationship, if any, between the knowability of something and its metaphysical status, on Plato's view. Compare with Kant's view.

7. Hume and Descartes both bring up serious skeptical doubts about our ability to reach knowledge, and both also argue that we do reach knowledge on certain subjects. Using Hume’s division of the objects of reason and inquiry into matters of fact and relations of ideas, explain to what extent those skeptical doubts are overcome by Hume and Descartes.

8. What knowledge do we have of the self, according to Kant? Compare to the views of Descartes.
Part A: Plato and Descartes

Reply to one of the following prompts.

1. Both Plato and Descartes offer descriptions of the soul, but the descriptions differ with regard to the particular faculties that the soul has. Identify some of the points on which they differ and explain how each is led to his separate conclusions (about the faculties of the soul).

2. Both Plato and Descartes entertain doubts about whether it is possible to have knowledge about the physical world. Compare and contrast their reasons for doubting the possibility of such knowledge, and their conclusions about what we can know about the physical world.

Part B: Hume and Kant

Reply to one of the following prompts.

3. Compare Hume’s formulation of his distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas with Kant’s formulation of his distinction between analytic judgments and synthetic judgments. Compare how they apply their respective distinctions in their critiques of metaphysics.

4. While both Hume and Kant think that our judgments of causation are mind-dependent, they have very different conceptions of how exactly the mind contributes to our causal judgments. Explain as clearly as you can how the two philosophers differ as to the way that the mind contributes.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant

Reply to one of the following prompts.

5. Plato opined that reason is in charge or command of other elements of properly ordered human minds. Given this view, how would Plato have reacted to Hume’s "skeptical solution" to the problem of induction? Make sure to explain what the problem of induction is, and what the skeptical solution is.

6. Identify and describe at least one epistemological or metaphysical problem that Plato’s Theory of the Forms is meant to solve. Then explain how Kant might address the same problem.

7. Substances play a primordial metaphysical role in Descartes’ philosophy (the mental and extended “things” are substances with different properties—modes and attributes). Contrast Descartes’ metaphysics based on substances with Hume’s philosophical ideas about reality.

8. Compare and contrast the concept of reason in Descartes and Kant. How are their concepts of reason similar and how are they different? Why, for example, does Descartes speak of "the light of reason" and Kant speak only of transcendent ideas as given by reason? In what ways did Descartes' conception of reason go wrong, according to Kant?
Part A: Plato and Descartes

Write on one of the following:

1. Compare and contrast the status Plato and Descartes each ascribes to (a) the objects of sense perception, (b) to the body that senses these objects, and (c) to the mind that entertains the perceptions. For both philosophers, discuss also whether, and if so what, there is anything about these objects of which mind can be aware without relying on the senses.

2. One way of construing the relation between metaphysics and epistemology is to maintain that the degree of knowledge that is possible for a knower to have about some entity tracks the ontological status of that entity. In other words: one can only have perfect knowledge of x if x has perfect being; and if an entity has a degraded degree of being, one can only have a degraded degree of knowledge of it. To what extent do Plato and Descartes maintain this position?

Part B: Hume and Kant

Write on one of the following:

3. Kant has a starting point for addressing the question whether metaphysics is possible: namely, the fact – as he takes it to be – that in mathematics we have synthetic a priori knowledge. Explain Kant’s conception of mathematics, contrasting it with Hume’s. How does Kant use this point to develop a novel way of doing metaphysics?

4. Kant and Hume are both concerned with causes and what enables us to make causal judgments: Do we grasp causes by reason? By experience? Both? Neither? Explain the view each philosopher addresses this issue. Explain how Kant rejects on Hume’s views such that there are claims about causal connections that constitute knowledge.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant

Write on one of the following:

5. Both Plato and Hume believe that habit contributes to and/or interferes with the acquisition of knowledge. Compare and contrast their views.

6. Both Plato and Kant hold that we have some knowledge of what is necessary and universal in nature. How do they account for that, and how would they have criticized each other’s account of how such knowledge is possible? Take into account especially that neither Kant nor Plato would accept that perception, or experience in general, could teach us what is necessary and universal.

7. Both Hume and Descartes begin their investigations by questioning whether reason and the senses can provide knowledge about the nature of physical objects, or even knowledge of their existence. To what extent does each escape from this radical doubt and to what extent does each remain a skeptic at the end of his investigation?

8. Kant acknowledges that, taken in Descartes’s sense, it cannot be proved that the content of our perceptions corresponds to something outside them. Yet Kant maintains that it can be proved, if understood as an empirical question. Explain both how Kant distinguishes these two ways of taking the question, and his answer to the latter.
Part A: Plato and Descartes

Reply to one of the following two prompts.

1. Compare and contrast the notions of imagination and intellection in Plato and Descartes.

2. Compare and contrast the views of Descartes and Plato on the following questions:
   a. Is knowledge of the physical world possible?
   b. If it is possible, how is it possible, and in particular, what obstacle needs to be overcome and how is error avoided?
   c. If it is not possible, why is it not and is any knowledge possible?

Part B: Hume and Kant

Reply to one of the following two prompts.

3. What is Hume's account of our knowledge of necessity? Compare with that of Kant.

4. Neither Hume nor Kant believes that causal determinism undermines free will. Clearly outline their arguments for "compatibilism", and also the differences between the two arguments.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant

Reply to one of the following four prompts.

5. Both Plato and Hume could be characterized as believing that philosophical arguments warrant a skepticism about the existence of the external world. Clearly explain how each philosopher arrives at such a skepticism, and how the two differ as to how we should react to such a skeptical conclusion.

6. For Kant, how are synthetic a priori propositions possible? Does anything in Plato's metaphysics and epistemology correspond to these kinds of propositions? Why or why not?

7. Hume’s critique of abstract ideas, such as the concept of the triangle, is that they correspond to nothing in experience or imagination. For Descartes, on the other hand, geometric concepts such as the concept of the triangle are paradigmatic instances of clear and distinct ideas, at the basis of his claims for knowledge. How do you assess Hume’s critique and what do you imagine as possible rebuttal by Descartes?

8. What knowledge do we have of the self, according to Kant? Compare to the views of Descartes.
Fall 2013

Part A: Plato and Descartes
Reply to one of the following two prompts.

1. Compare the views of Plato and Descartes with respect to the epistemic process that leads to certainty. Compare what each philosopher says about the powers and limitations of human knowledge. What arguments does each offer in this regard?

2. What role does clarity and distinctness play in Descartes’ epistemology? In which respects might Plato agree or disagree with Descartes?

Part B: Hume and Kant
Reply to one of the following two prompts.

3. Kant contends that the characteristic vice of rationalism is dogmatism, and the characteristic vice of empiricism is skepticism. Explain what he means by this, and how he proposes to avoid these two vices. Include discussion of the following questions: (a) What is “dogmatism”? Why does rationalism tend to lead to dogmatism? (b) Why does Kant think that empiricism naturally tends to lead to skepticism? (c) Does your study of Hume lead you to think Kant is correct in his assessment of empiricism? Why or why not?

4. Early on in the Prolegomena Kant criticizes Hume’s view of mathematics, and argues that mathematical knowledge is not just knowledge of relations among ideas. Explain Kant’s criticism, with due attention to the distinctions between analytic and synthetic judgments and between a priori and a posteriori knowledge.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant
Reply to one of the following four prompts.

5. Hume says the following about what he calls “abstract ideas”:
   “Let any man try to conceive a triangle in general which is neither isosceles not scalenum, or has any particular length or proportion of sides, and he will soon perceive the absurdity of all the scholastic notions with regard to abstract and general ideas.”
What is he arguing for in this passage, and what is his argument for it? How would Plato respond?

6. Kant famously denies that we can have knowledge of things in themselves. In Plato’s Republic, Socrates seems to suggest that such knowledge is rare but nevertheless possible. How might Plato defend this claim against Kant?

7. Substances play a primordial metaphysical role in Descartes’ philosophy (the mental and extended “things” are substances with different properties—modes and attributes). Contrast Descartes’ metaphysics based on substances with Hume’s philosophical ideas about reality.

8. Descartes argues from the indubitable ‘I think’ to the conclusion that I am a thinking thing. Kant acknowledges the introspective evidence when he writes in the Prolegomena “Now, it appears as if we do confront this absolute subject in our consciousness of ourselves (of the thinking subject), and indeed that we have this in an immediate intuition …”. How does Kant nevertheless criticize Descartes’ argument, and what is Kant’s view of the ego?
Spring 2014

Part A: Plato and Descartes
Write on one of the following:

1. According to Descartes, why is human error possible? Discuss in relation to the intellect and will. How would Plato explain the possibility of human error? How do both Plato and Descartes resolve the problem of human error?

2. Plato and Descartes both make a distinction between different forms or levels or reality. Explain what they are for each philosopher and the relevance of this distinction to their epistemology.

Part B: Hume and Kant
Write on one of the following:

3. Compare Hume’s formulation of his distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas with Kant’s formulation of his distinction between analytic judgments and synthetic judgments. Compare how they apply their respective views on mathematics.

4. While both Hume and Kant think that our judgments of causation are mind-dependent, they have very different conceptions of how exactly the mind contributes to our judgments of causality. Explain as clearly as you can how the two philosophers differ as to the way that the mind contributes. Explain also what each philosopher says about what kinds of truths these are and what kind of judgments we make about them.

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume, and Kant
Write on one of the following:

5. Both Plato and Hume could be characterized as believing that philosophical arguments warrant skepticism about the existence of the external world. Clearly explain how each philosopher arrives at such skepticism, and how the two differ as to how we should react to such a skeptical conclusion.

6. For Plato and Kant what is the purpose of our faculty of reason? What can it do? What can’t it do? For each, what role does this account of reason play in their overall philosophical views?

7. Both Descartes and Hume maintain that we interact with the world via ideas (versus with the world directly). Explain the role that ideas play in Descartes' and Hume's arguments for or against skepticism. Be sure to explain Hume's explicit arguments against Descartes in Enquiry and how Descartes may reply to them.

8. Descartes and Kant both hold that we have a priori knowledge of the spatial characteristics of physical objects. Explain their difference regarding how we have this knowledge, and discuss whether and how this leaves room for the possibility of error with respect to specific judgments about those characteristics.
Part A: Plato and Descartes

Reply to one of the following two prompts.

1. Plato and Descartes both developed special methods to lead us to truth: Plato the method of dialectic, and Descartes the method of hyperbolic doubt. Explain how these seem very different, and seem designed to reach very different knowledge. Are there ways in which their methods are alike, as well? Could some knowledge be reached equally well by both methods? Why or why not?

2. Explain the relationship between intellect and will, according to Descartes, and how it is possible that we err. How would Plato explain the possibility of human error? How do both Plato and Descartes resolve the problem of human error?

Part B: Hume and Kant

Reply to one of the following two prompts.

3. Explain Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, and between a priori and a posteriori knowledge. Discuss the similarities and/or differences between these distinctions and Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Why is it important for Kant’s purposes to make two distinctions where Hume made only one?

4. When Kant addresses what he calls the Humean doubt, he acknowledges that Hume was right to insist that “we in no way have insight through reason into the possibility of causality”. Nor does he hold contrary to Hume that this concept could be “borrowed from experience”. So how is it possible for Kant to salvage the impression that we do have knowledge of causal connections?

Part C: Plato, Descartes, Hume and Kant

Reply to one of the following four prompts.

5. How does Hume relate the doctrine of innate ideas to his theses that simple ideas are copies of impressions, whereas complex ideas are assemblages of simple ideas? How would Plato critique Hume's view?

6. Experience is always of something that is momentary, specific, and actual. Both Plato and Kant take this into account, yet each holds that we have cognition with content that is necessary and universal. How do they account for that, and how would they have criticized each other’s account of how such knowledge is possible?

7. Both Hume and Descartes begin their investigations by questioning whether reason and the senses can provide knowledge about the nature of physical objects, or even knowledge of their existence. To what extent does each escape from this radical doubt and to what extent does each remain a skeptic at the end of his investigation?

8. Both Descartes and Kant maintain that we can have significant a priori knowledge. For each philosopher, indicate what he believes we can have a priori knowledge about, and give his explanation of how such a priori knowledge is possible
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