Epistemology Exam – Spring 2012

Part I

1. “The skeptic repudiates science because it is vulnerable to illusion on its own showing; and my only criticism of the skeptic is that he is overreacting.” What objection to skepticism is Quine lodging when he criticizes skeptics for overreacting? Explain whether this objection is, or is not, an adequate response to skeptical challenges.

2. Philosophers from Arnauld and Locke on, if not before, have introduced the analytic-synthetic distinction to handle certain problems in epistemology. In recent times, however, Quine and others have argued that the distinction is not tenable and must be abandoned. What is at stake in abandoning the distinction?

3. “No naturalistic criterion for justified belief is possible, for given any naturalistic criterion, one could still ask whether we are justified in accepting beliefs that satisfy the criterion, and that question would not be trifling.” Discuss this argument as a sweeping reply to naturalized epistemology.

Part II

4. “It is important to remember that talk of deception only makes sense against a background of general non-deception. (You can't fool all of the people all of the time.) It must be possible to recognize a case of deception by checking the odd case against more normal ones.” (Austin) Is this a good line of response to the argument from illusion?

5. “We know that it must be possible to define material things in terms of sense-contents, because it is only by the occurrence of certain sense-contents that the existence of any material thing can ever be in the least degree verified.” (Ayer, Language, Truth, and Logic) Explain and criticize.

6. When skeptical hypotheses (e.g., the dreaming hypothesis or the evil-demon hypothesis) are put forward, they are almost invariably accompanied by the claim that they are completely consistent with all our experience. What does someone mean when they say this? What can be done to show that it is, or is not, correct?

Part III

7. Probabilism is the view that our degrees of belief should cohere with the axioms of probability theory. A common argument for probabilism, called the Dutch Book argument, rests on the claim that if our degrees of belief fail to cohere, then we are vulnerable to a series of bets that guarantees a loss. Does the Dutch Book argument succeed in demonstrating that probabilistic coherence is rational? Why or why not?
8. The prevailing approach in formal epistemology relies on probability to represent confirmation relations between hypotheses and evidence. Does probability do an adequate job capturing the nature of confirmation? Or does it have limitations that make an alternative framework necessary? Defend your answer.

9. Hume famously posed the problem of induction. Goodman claimed that while Hume gave an adequate answer to that problem, there was a “new riddle” of induction to worry about. What is Goodman’s new riddle? In what ways (if any) does Goodman’s riddle differ from Hume’s original problem? What, in your view, is the most promising solution to Goodman’s riddle?