Question Pool for Epistemology MA Exam, Spring 2013

1. It seems, for any standard skeptical hypothesis (e.g., the brain-in-a-vat, dreaming, or virtual reality hypothesis) that we can imagine evidence that would count in favor of its truth. Could the lack of any actual evidence to this effect give us good reason to suppose that the hypothesis is false? What, if any, response to Humean skepticism about the external world can the line of thought indicated by this question give us?

2. How is the argument from hallucination supposed to establish the existence of sense-data? Evaluate Austin’s objection to the argument.

3. Kim accuses Quine’s naturalized epistemology of jettisoning the normative. What does this mean? Does naturalized epistemology jettison the normative?

4. In defending his “clear and distinct” sufficient condition for knowledge in his Replies to the Second Set of Objections in the Meditations, Descartes argues, As soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear to false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged “absolute falsity” bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?

Evaluate this contention as a response to the objection that something can be perceived clearly and distinctly, yet be false. What potential, if any, does it have as a response to skepticism?

5. Do we have knowledge that isn’t justified true belief?

6. Many philosophers before recent times considered geometry as an exemplar of knowledge. Does geometry provide us with knowledge of necessary truths, or even truths about the world? What, if anything, might be learned from considering the case of geometry about other domains of inquiry?

7. What are the fundamental intuitions motivating the “internalist” and “externalist” positions as regards epistemic justification? Does the internalist/externalist distinction in epistemology have any analogues in other branches of philosophy? Is there any way of resolving the internalist/externalist dispute?

8. Some philosophers argue that for all we know we could be dreaming or could be in the throes of being fooled by an evil demon, and that therefore we don’t know anything about “the external world.” Explicate this argument and then evaluate it.

9. Is there a priori knowledge? Is the cogito an example of it or a specialized case? Can properties of the cogito be used to characterize other examples of a priori knowledge?

10. In ordinary contexts we seem to credit ourselves with knowledge even when the possibility of error has not been ruled out on logical or conceptual grounds. If this practice is legitimate, what—if anything—does it show about the role of certainty or infallibility in knowledge or knowledge claims?
11. Should Descartes’ dreaming argument be distinguished from his evil demon argument? Do they differ in the scope of the knowledge claims that they undercut?

12. “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 response to the argument from illusion? Is it a good response to the argument from hallucination?