Study Guide #2: Metaphysics and Epistemology

1. Plato maintained that there were two hierarchies of reality, the World of Becoming (The Realm of appearances) and the World of Being (The Realm of the Forms). Explain the difference between the two.

2. Why does Plato reject the material world as ultimately or independently real? Include in your answer the problem of change & the problem of perfection. Explain Plato's, “Allegory of the Cave” as a metaphor for why we might be confused about the true nature of reality.

3. Explain why Plato argued that the World of Becoming is dependent on the World of Being. In your explanation, include a description of his allegory of the cave. Is this a problematic relationship? Why or why not?

4. Explain Plato's Forms (Eidos). What are they and what do they have to do with the individual objects in the world?

5. How does Plato argue for the Forms as innate knowledge? Why change and illusion a problem for the kind of knowledge Plato is was looking for? Explain Plato's story of the “Divided Line” as an illustration of why knowledge must be innately born.

6. Why must the soul be immortal according to Plato? (Hint: it has to do with the nature of the realm of the Forms.)

7. Plato argued that art and theatre are not good pursuits for the true lover of wisdom. Given your understanding of his theory of the Forms and what we ought to pursue, why do you think he would say that? (Hint: It has to do with the fact that they are symbolic representations of the empirical world.)

8. Why did Aristotle call Plato’s notion that things in the material world “participate” in their corresponding forms, “poetic nonsense?”

9. Explain the difference between what Plato meant by Eidos and what Aristotle meant by eidos. What is the relationship between form and matter for Plato? What is the relationship between form and matter for Aristotle?

10. Why did Aristotle argue that Plato could not explain how things in the material world change? How does Aristotle explain change?

11. Explain Aristotle's various definitions of "substance." How does he argue that substance must exist?

12. Given that Aristotle argued for a teleological picture of the world, why is having a good explanation of causality important?

13. Explain Aristotle's notion of causation. How does it differ from our modern notion of "cause?" Why did Aristotle claim that to know a thing necessarily involved knowing its causes?

14. Explain what Descartes' goal was in his “Meditations.” Why did he start with the process of radical doubt?

15. Explain why Descartes rejects the empirical method in favor of rationalism.

16. Explain the wax metaphor in Descartes’ “Meditation II.” What conclusions did Descartes draw from the fact that all the properties of the wax were subject to alteration?

17. What argument does Descartes offer to support the indubitability of the statement, “Cogito ergo sum?”

18. Why must the knowledge of one’s own existence be “innately born” according to Descartes?

19. Explain what role the existence of God plays in Descartes’ arguments for the existence of the material world.

20. Explain what’s dual about Cartesian dualism. What reasons does Descartes give for believing that reality is made up of two sorts of things? How does Descartes define “substance?”

21. Do Plato and Descartes agree about the nature of the relationship between the world of ideas and the
material world?
22. Explain the problem of circularity with Descartes' argument.
23. Why does Locke reject the notion of "innate ideas" and instead argue for a “tabula rasa” picture of knowledge?
24. Why did Locke prefer induction over deduction?
25. Explain Locke's argument for why we should rely on our senses to tell us about external objects in the world.
26. What is the relationship between the “quality” of objects and the ideas we have of them, according to Locke?
27. Why did Locke think it was significant that we can distinguish between primary and secondary qualities? What conclusions did he draw about the nature of the material world from this distinction?
28. Berkeley agrees with Locke that all we've got is our perceptions, sensations and ideas. Where did he disagree? Explain Berkeley's argument rejecting Locke's conclusion that we can know that the world is really out there.
29. What is implied by Berkeley's "esse est percipi"? In other words, if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to perceive it, did it make a noise?... Did it really fall? ... Does it really even exist?
30. Explain Berkeley's argument claiming that a thing can exist only in the mind. Does this imply that I can just think anything into existence? Why or why not?
31. How do we know that the tree in the quad doesn't disappear when no one is around? If you answered because God sees it, then what assurance do we have that God is always around according to Berkeley?
32. Explain the key item of difference between Berkeley's "subjective idealism" and Hume's "skepticism."
33. Explain "Hume's Fork." Why did he think that these were the only kinds of things we could claim to know?
34. Explain why Hume rejects the principle of induction. What is the general assumption behind induction that Hume argues is an unjustifiable foundation.
35. Explain why Hume rejects the principle of universal causation – that every event has a cause? Explain Hume's idea of causality being merely a “constant conjunction of perceptions.” Why doesn't this give us knowledge?
36. Explain why Hume rejects belief in the external world. Explain why we can't make a warranted distinction between how things look to us and how things really look according to Hume.
37. In class, we discussed that the logical outcome of Hume's radical skepticism was in Hume's own words "philosophical melancholy and delirium." What does Hume imply we should do to avoid this unfortunate conclusion? Is he saying that his argument is wrong?
38. Explain Nagarjuna's rejection of causality and his explanation of sunyata (emptiness). What does Nagarjuna claim that we can know? Is there a difference between intellectual knowledge and experienced knowledge?
39. How does Nagarjuna's skepticism differ from Hume's theory?
40. Explain Uma Narayan's argument that oppressed people might have a clearer picture of reality than their oppressors. What implications does Narayan's argument have regarding the relationship between subjective perspective and objective knowledge of the world?

Suggested Books for Additional Help:
Sophie's World, Jostein Gaarder, Berkeley Books 1996
Philosophy Made Simple, Richard Popkin and Avrum Stroll, Doubleday 1993
Does the Center Hold?, Donald Palmer, Mayfield 1991