

Final Exam Preview

What will happen

The Final Exam is scheduled for Monday, December 14 at 9 am. This is not my fault.

It will have two parts. I think that each part should take about forty minutes to complete. The exam lasts two hours. That is about one and a half times as long as I think you need. Of course, writing styles and speeds vary. So you might take more or less time with no cause for concern.

The first part will involve analyzing passages. The second part will involve writing an essay. They will be weighted equally in the grade for the exam. I will first explain what I mean by “analyzing passages”. Then I will give you a selection of essay topics from which to choose.

Part 1: passages

In the first part of the exam, you will be asked to choose *two* out of four passages drawn from the readings throughout the term. For these two passages, you will be asked to do the following.

1. *Identify* the author.
2. *Describe* what the author was doing. This usually involves choosing an appropriate verb phrase such as: raising an objection, summarizing a position, stating a principle, posing a question, giving an example, and so on. It also requires *explaining* how the passage does what you say it does: how it raises, summarizes, states, poses, gives and so on.
3. *Evaluate* the passage’s significance. Why does it matter for the author’s position? For instance, a passage may be significant because of its relationship with other claims that the author makes. Or it may give rise to an objection to the author’s position. Or it may explain why the author’s position is superior to an opponent’s.

Here is an example of how to do this. Suppose I gave you the following passage.

“Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses — for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen ... But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake — indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events — that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire — when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.”

Your answer should include the following information:

1. The author is Descartes.
2. He is arguing that we cannot know things on the basis of the senses. For example, his belief that he is sitting by the fire because he can see and feel the fire seems beyond question. However, if he were dreaming that

he was sitting beside the fire, everything would seem exactly as it does: he would think that he feels the fire and sees the flames even if he were, in fact, tucked in bed far away from the fire. In order to *know* that he is sitting beside the fire, he has to know that he is not dreaming. He says that he cannot know this because there is no “sure sign” to indicate that he is awake rather than dreaming. So he cannot know that he is sitting by the fire simply because he seems to see and feel the fire.

Note that what you leave out can be as important as what you put in. I made no mention of Descartes’s claim that dreams are sometimes as crazy as the thoughts of madmen. It’s not relevant to establishing his conclusion. You could mention it to make that point, but I decided to spend my time elsewhere.

The third question is the most important. It’s also the one that is most open. My evaluation of your answer turns on both the accuracy of what you say and your judgment in choosing something interesting to discuss. Here is one example of how you might answer this question. I can think of several more that are equally good.

3. The interesting result comes from extending the example of sitting by the fire to everything we seem to know on the basis of the senses. How can I know that any of my sensations are genuine rather than the product of dreams? It is no good to say that I saw, smelled, tasted, heard, and felt things. That is exactly how things would seem if I were asleep and dreaming about them. But there is no other way of telling that I was awake and having sensations rather than asleep and dreaming. So, I cannot know that any of my experiences are genuine rather than the product of a dream. And if I cannot know that any of my sensory experiences were genuine, Descartes concludes, I cannot know anything based on them.

However, the argument in the passage does not establish this conclusion. Descartes says that he does not know that he is dreaming “while asleep.” But what is at issue is whether we can trust what we learn from the senses *while we are awake*. Descartes has to show that we cannot

know that we are not sleeping while we are awake in order to establish his conclusion. He has not shown this, so his argument is incomplete.

Furthermore, the argument seems to be not just incomplete but wrong. My waking experiences are regular in a way that my dreams are not. Since this is so, someone might say that there is a “sure sign” to distinguish genuine experiences from dreams. And that is enough to answer the dream argument.

Descartes might develop his argument to meet this challenge. Dreams *could* be as regular as our waking experience even though most of them are not. To know that we are awake, we would have to know that we are not having a regular-seeming dream. But none of the evidence at our disposal enables us to conclusively settle this question. Consequently, we cannot know that we are not dreaming when we seem to be awake.

Part 2: essay

In the second part of the exam, you will be asked to write an essay on one of the following topics. I will ask that you not use notes during the exam.

1. Tomorrow morning, a person is going to wake up with almost all of your memories, plans, hopes, anxieties, knowledge, desires, skills, and character traits. Chances are good that this person will see a familiar face in the mirror: yours. But what if this person wakes up with a body that is completely different than the one you currently call yours? That person would answer to your name, know things that only you know, and start the day by thinking, and maybe even saying, something like “I’m in a different body!” Would that be you or would it be someone else? Give what you regard as the best reasons for reaching each conclusion. Then explain your own answer.
2. Is the Teletransporter that Parfit describes a wonderful device for travel or a horrific machine that kills everyone who uses it? Give the best reason

for thinking that each description is the right one. Then explain what you think.

3. Lucretius believed that the thought of death makes us unhappy because we do not understand it. If we understood what death involved, we would realize that this is a mistake and, hopefully, our emotions would eventually come into line with this realization. Here is how he described what he regarded as our mistake:

“‘Never again,’ mourners say, ‘will your household receive you with joy; never again will the best of wives welcome you home; never again will your dear children race for the prize of your first kisses and touch your heart with pleasure too profound for words. Never again can you enjoy prosperous circumstances or be a bulwark to your dependents. Wretched man,’ they cry, ‘one wretched, damnable day has dispossessed you of every one of life’s many precious gifts.’ They omit to add: ‘No craving for these things remains with you any longer.’ If only they fully grasped this fact and expressed their feelings accordingly, they would relieve their minds of great anguish and fear.”¹

Should this relieve us of our anguish and grief over death? Give the best reason for thinking that it should and the best reason for thinking that it should not. Then explain what you think.

¹ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, translated by M. Smith (Hackett, 2001), Book 3, lines 894-903.

