

**A Description of the
Senior Comprehensive Examination
for Philosophy Majors**

A. An Overview of the Examination

1. The examination is held on three consecutive days, typically during the week before spring break and typically from 1:00-4:00 pm. The exact times and days may vary from semester to semester.
2. Students planning to take the examination must enroll in PHIL 498 for the Spring semester through Cardinal Station. Students who have not registered for PHIL 498 will not be eligible to sit for the examination.
3. On the days of each examination, students are excused from classes in philosophy.
4. Each of the three days of the examination will have a distinct form, as follows:

First day:	historical:	three out of seven questions.
Second day:	systematic:	three out of seven questions.
Third day:	analysis of texts:	two out of six questions.
5. On each day the student has a choice among questions.
6. Questions are solicited from all faculty members teaching undergraduate courses. These faculty members also grade the examinations.
7. At the beginning of the first day of the examination, students will be assigned an identification number. No other identifying mark is permitted.
8. *Each of the 8 questions is to be answered in a separate blue book (or books). Students are not to write their names anywhere on the blue book. If more than one is used per question, add: “first of two books”, “second of two books”, etc.*
9. Each essay is graded by two different graders.
10. Graders will assign a grade of H, P, F (honors, pass, or fail) to each essay they grade.

11. On days 1 and 2, students will receive six grades, two for each of three questions. In the case where the two grades for a given question are PH, the third grader does not get involved. In any case where the two grades for a given question are FP or FH, a third grader will grade the essay. If two of the resulting three grades agree, students will receive that grade (grades of FHH, for instance, will result in an HH). If all three grades differ (FPH), then students will receive the middle grade (PP). Students will thus receive three double grades for days 1 and 2 (for instance, FF, PH, PP or PP, HH, PH). Students fail for the day if they receive two FF grades, regardless of what they receive on the third double grade. Students receive honors for the day if they do not score a final grade of FF on any essay and receive at least three Hs. Students pass if they neither fail nor receive honors.
12. On day 3, students will receive 4 grades, two for each essay. FP and FH discrepancies will be resolved as described above. Any grade of FF for any one essay will result in failure for the day. Students will receive honors if they receive two H grades.
13. Students will thus receive a single grade for each day of comps: F, P, H. The final grade on the examination will be determined in the following way. Students will be awarded honors if they receive a grade of H on at least two days of comps. A grade of F on any one day of comps will result in failure for the entire exam. Every other combination will be recorded as a pass.
14. Students are informed by email of their overall grade.
15. The overall grade will be recorded as pass, fail or honors on the student's transcript.
16. The completed examination shall remain in the possession of the School of Philosophy. Upon request, and within a year of the examination date, students may examine their completed blue-books in order to review their answers, determine grades for individual essays, or read comments on the essays that may have been provided by the examiners.
17. Previous examinations are available to students as a basis for preparation.
18. *Systematic questions are not to be answered by an exposition of historical positions. Analysis of a text should keep to the text itself, and not be the occasion for historical or systematic excursions.*
19. The purpose of the examination is to determine to what extent students have consolidated a competence in philosophy. This purpose cannot be achieved in any one course or group of courses, due in part to restriction in subject matter, and in part to differences among

teachers and approaches. Rather, just as only the whole curriculum can hope to develop the competence, so the comprehensive examination should test for a whole ability, which, by the end of a student's undergraduate studies, will be more than merely the sum of the parts that helped to produce it. The examination is, therefore, neither a repetition of course examinations nor an opportunity to ferret out weaknesses. It is designed to allow students to show their strengths, but it also requires precise information and clear analysis.

B. How to Approach the Work of Each Day

First Day: History of Philosophy

In each essay you are to write, you will be asked to compare and contrast at least two, but no more than three, figures in the history of philosophy on some issue, controversy, or difficulty. No two figures considered should be from the same period. For the purposes of the examination, the history of philosophy is divided into the following periods:

- (i) ancient (prior to Augustine)
- (ii) medieval (Augustine through Ockham)
- (iii) modern (the renaissance through Hegel)
- (iv) contemporary (after Hegel to the present).

To compare and contrast means to state similarities and differences. Is the similarity one of function within a system, or is it only a similarity of positions serving different functions and thus having different meanings within a larger whole? Are the terms and arguments the same, or different, and to what extent? What differences in presuppositions account for the differences in positions? What specific common issue is handled in different ways?

It is necessary to delimit the general question so that what you write has some bite and precision, without losing philosophical relevance and interest. The questions set the limit within which you are to work during the time available; the answer will not be satisfactory if you work only on the level of the general question. *How* you delimit the question is up to you. Any generalization should follow from and grow out of a specific analysis.

Second Day: Systematic

You will be asked to discuss one and only one issue, controversy, or difficulty in any given essay. Once again it will be necessary to delimit the question; and again it will be up to you to

determine how you do so. For example, you have chosen the question “what is the relation between time and knowledge?” and you write *not* on “the transcendental nature of knowledge” (a theme much too broad to be discussed in the time allotted), and *not* on “truth and history according to Hegel” (this day’s questions are concerned with problems, not with historical exposition). Rather, you might write about the possibility of attaining certain knowledge of the past, or about the temporal structure of a judgment, or about the truth of future contingents. In formulating your answer, you should provide some awareness of possible counter arguments to your position.

While you are not simply to repeat the position of a given philosopher on the specific issue, controversy, or difficulty you have chosen for your essay, you certainly may and probably will draw on your knowledge of the history of philosophy in order to formulate the pro’s and con’s of the *issue*. In this part of the examination your sense of philosophical questions and processes of analysis, criticism, and defense is much more important than your assertion of unanalyzed and unargued positions.

Third Day: Analysis of Texts

The work of this portion of the examination is *not* to decide who wrote a given passage: by identifying the author of the passage, or its precise origin, you will not thereby improve your grade. Still less is it part of the task of this day, therefore, to provide a summary of the author’s philosophy as a whole, or even of his philosophy as relevant to the passage. It *may* happen that you will recognize the author of a given passage, and such recognition *may* assist you in gaining some initial purchase upon the passage in question. Nevertheless, the analysis of the passage you are to provide in no way requires that you be able to identify its author by name.

On the other hand, the text should not be treated merely as an occasion for you to address the same philosophical issues it raises on your own terms. Rather, you are to restrict your essay to careful analysis of the passage as a piece of philosophical *writing*. What issue or problem or question does the passage raise, clarify, or obscure? What *kind(s)* of terms and arguments does it use (or what sort(s) of terms does it avoid, but that one might reasonably have expected to be used in such a context) ? What sort(s) of metaphors is (are) employed? What decisions have been made before the passage goes to work, so to speak? What work does the passage accomplish before your eyes, so to speak? If the passage argues toward a conclusion, on what basis does it do so? Are you aware of counter arguments? Can you think of different (or even conflicting) interpretations of the passage? Does the passage indicate anything about the role or character of the speaker, or about the role or character of his reader or readers? Does the author make any unusual demands upon his reader or readers? How important is the context of the

passage (before *and* after), a context that is not available to you, for understanding the passage?
How self-sufficient does the meaning of the passage seem to be?

Begin with and return to the letter of the text.

Revised 11/18/2019