

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

**A. An Overview of the Examination**

1. This year, the examination will be held from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday–Tuesday, March 4-5. The location of the examination will be announced when it is available.
2. Students must enroll in PHIL 498 through “Cardinal Station,” in order to be eligible to sit for the examination.
3. On the days of the examination, students are excused from classes in philosophy.
4. Each of the two 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.
5. Students are to complete only three essays per day.
6. Questions are solicited from 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. Students should use no other identifying marks (e.g. names, student ID numbers, etc.) in their essays or on their blue books.
8. *Each of the 6 questions is to be answered in a separate blue book (or books). Students are not to write their names anywhere on the blue book. On the cover of each blue book they are to write:*

*(1 or 2 digits; **not** the Student ID number)*

NAME	Student #__	
DATE	Day # 1, 2020	
SUBJECT	Question #__	<i>(whichever of the seven questions)</i>

*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. Students will receive six grades for each day, two for each of three questions. If more than 50% of individual grades on any given day are F, then the student fails that day. In other words, if a student earns four or more F grades (4/6) on a given day, the student fails that day. Students will fail the exam if they receive a total of 8 or more F grades (combined across both days), or if they receive two or more FF scores on any single day. Every other combination is passing.
12. Students will be awarded honors for the exam if they receive a total of at least 5 H's across both days, and do not score an FF on any essay.
13. Students are informed by email of their overall grade.
14. The overall grade will be recorded as pass, fail or honors on the student's transcript.
15. Students who fail the exam will have to retake it. If students fail the exam but pass one of the two days, they will only have to retake the day that they failed. In this case, when calculating the grade for the retake exam (in accordance with the rules set out in #11), the student will retain the grades from the day that he/she passed in the first round, and these grades will be combined with the grades from the re-take day in order to determine the final grade for the exam as a whole.
16. The completed examination shall remain in the possession of the School of Philosophy for one year. 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. A sample of previous examinations will be available to students as a basis for preparation.
18. *Systematic questions are not to be answered by a mere exposition of historical positions, but one may answer systematic questions by drawing on positions or schools of thought that one has learned about in studying the history of philosophy. The key difference between answers to historical and systematic questions is that answers to systematic questions should present a particular philosophical position, adopting it as one's own and defending it as true, rather than simply explaining and analyzing the view of a*

*particular thinker. In other words, students should consider the historical essays to be primarily expository, and the systematic essays to be argumentative.*

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).

While your essays should include an accurate summary of each philosopher's position on the topic, essays that merely summarize the different positions without comparing and contrasting them will be unsatisfactory. To compare and contrast means to state and analyze similarities and differences. To what extent do the philosophers discussed take a similar approach to the issue in question? Are the terms and arguments the same, or different, and to what extent? Do their conclusions agree or differ? What differences in presuppositions or approach account for the differences in positions?

While each question sets the general scope of the essay's topic, you must delimit the general question in more precise terms. How the question is delimited is up to you. This will also be part

of how each essay is evaluated; essays that are not further delimited will not be satisfactory. Any claims made in the essay must relate to that more focused and 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). You could, however, defend a Hegelian view of the relationship between truth and history, or 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 consider and address 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 pros and cons of the *issue*. It is fine to refer to the particular philosopher or philosophical tradition that you are drawing on. The difference between historical and systematic essays is not the presence or absence of references to particular philosophers or traditions, but that systematic essays present and defend a philosophical position on a particular issue, adopting that position as one’s own. 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.

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