Philosophy MA Comprehensive Exam  
Gonzaga University  
(October 3, 2011)

The Comprehensive Exam is intended to test basic mastery of the key figures, texts, and topics in the history of philosophy as encapsulated in a specified reading list. The Exam is conducted in two three-hour blocks scheduled within a 7-day period: the first covers the ancient and medieval periods, and the second modern and contemporary philosophy. In each of the four historical periods, students select two of five available questions to answer, for a total of eight essays on the entire exam. In order to pass the exam, a student must pass at least one question in each of the four historical periods and must pass at least six of the eight essays.

The exam is normally offered twice a year: at the end of Spring semester in April, and at the beginning of the Fall semester in September. Exceptions to the normal schedule are allowed only in cases of demonstrated student need. Students are allowed three attempts to pass the Exam. Any attempt, whether complete or not, counts as one of the three attempts.

There are several interrelated expectations for the Exam: students successfully completing the exam will demonstrate understanding of the major philosophical issues in the specified texts, ability to identify the main philosophical themes of each philosophical author, and capacity for some measure of philosophically informed critical reflection on those themes, whether through skillful interpretation that highlights the philosophical significance of the arguments and themes, placement of the ideas and themes into a historical context, conceptual analysis, or evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. As a written exam, it also assesses argumentative writing, with attention paid to organization, development, and cogency. The Exam will be evaluated by means of the Comprehensive Exam Evaluation Form.

Comprehensive exams are understandably stressful and they require a student to perform under less than optimal conditions. However, a career in academic life includes a number of stressful evaluation processes—defending a dissertation, interviewing for jobs, preparing for and facing a classroom of sometimes hostile students, submitting papers for publication, and so on. Learning to perform under stress is a necessary skill to develop as an academic, and the Exam provides an excellent opportunity to develop that skill.

The Exam has several functions in the MA Philosophy program. The MA degree provides a credential to teach philosophy. The Exam supports this credential by testing basic competency of the history of philosophy at a level sufficient for successful teaching. The MA degree also indicates advanced grasp of philosophy suitable as a basis for further studies at the PhD level or in a related career field. The Exam is a concrete demonstration of philosophical understanding. Finally, the Exam implicitly certifies that a student has sufficient general understanding of philosophy to provide a basis for the more narrow focused research appropriate for the Thesis.

The level of understanding expected of students in the Exam is analogous to that found in a respectable encyclopedia of philosophy (such as the classic Paul Edwards encyclopedia, the
Routledge, or the Stanford) or a standard history of philosophy, not to an advanced level philosophical journal article. The focus is mastery of basic topics and arguments, not original scholarship. Students should be conversant with the stock or standard interpretations and criticisms of central philosophical ideas, and should be able to explore and elaborate on them. To prepare for the exam students should focus on the major philosophical problems and themes of the philosophers and texts in the reading list. For example, likely subjects of Plato questions, given the reading list, would be on Socratic mission and method, Socratic ignorance, the theory of forms, Meno’s paradox, Platonic idealism, the tripartite and immortal soul, and Plato’s conception of education and character formation, and Platonic ethics and political theory.
MA Reading List

Ancient
Presocratics: *A Presocratics Reader* by Richard McKirahan
Plato: *Crito, Meno, Phaedo, Republic*
Aristotle: *Metaphysics, Nicomachean Ethics*

Medieval
Augustine: *On Free Choice of the Will*
Anselm: *Proslogion*
Aquinas: *Summa Contra Gentiles* Book One

Modern
Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy*
Leibniz: *The Monadology*
Locke: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged by Baird and Kaufmann
Hume: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals*
Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*
Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*: Preface, Introduction, and the selections on Consciousness, Self-Consciousness, Religion, and Absolute Knowledge
Mill: *Utilitarianism*
Kierkegaard: *Sickness Unto Death* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Book II, Part II, Ch. 2
Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*; “The Madman” from *The Gay Science*

Contemporary
James: *Pragmatism*
Husserl: *The Idea of Phenomenology*
Sartre: *Existentialism and Humanism*
Heidegger: *Being and Time*: Division I: Sections 1-8; 14-16; 20; 25-27; 35-38; Division II: 45-53; 72-76
Frege: “On Sense and Reference”
Russell: “On Denoting”
Ryle: “Systematically Misleading Expressions”
Quine: “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”
Rawls: “Justice as Fairness” (article from 1958)
Lonergan: *Insight*: Preface; Introduction; Ch. I; Ch. II, #1-3; Ch. VI-VII and IX; Ch. X, #1-6; Ch. XI, #1-9; Ch. XII, #1-6; and Ch. XIII
Sample Questions

Ancient

Plato

Crito

1. Some commentators argue that the Speech of the Laws of Athens articulates a contractarian theory of right. Explain and critically assess this interpretation.

Meno

1. What is the paradox of inquiry (often referred to as Meno’s paradox) introduced in the middle of the dialogue? In what ways are the paradox and the solution that Socrates proposes relevant to the development of the argument of the dialogue as a whole?

2. After the interlude with the slave boy, Meno persuades Socrates to take up the original question about the teachability of virtue. What argument does Socrates advance about the nature of virtue, the requirements of teachability, and the transmission of virtue in Greek society? What do you think Socrates’ argument is intended to accomplish, and why?

Phaedo

1. Why is purification of the soul the key to human good? What role is played by philosophizing and apprehension of the forms in this purification? (Consider especially the arguments based on recollection and likeness, and the closing myth, in your discussion.)

2. At 96a, Socrates turns to consideration of the causes of generation and destruction. Why does he think that even those pre-Socratic thinkers aware of the issue of causation have failed to provide a serious account? How does he appeal to the forms as causal principles to offer a last proof for the immortality of the soul?

Republic

1. Critically explicate the analogy of the cave, using the related images from the analogies of the sun and the line to clarify the details of Plato’s theories of knowledge and reality.

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1 These sample questions are part of a question bank from which the M.A. Program Director will select when putting together comprehensive exams. There is no guarantee that one or more of these sample questions will appear on any comprehensive exam.
2. What analogy does Socrates suggest holds between the classes of the integrated state and the parts of virtuous individual soul? Explain and evaluate Socrates’ use of the analogy to articulate the virtuous and diseased forms of individual character.

**Aristotle**

*Metaphysics*

1. Aristotle identifies the objective of “first philosophy” (the term he uses for the subject matter of *Metaphysics*) as investigation of first principles. How does Aristotle see this investigation emerging from the work of his predecessors? How does this project culminate in the study of substance? On what first principles does he focus?

2. Why is theology an appropriate subject for the *Metaphysics*? What, according to Aristotle, is the nature of the divine being, and what role does it play in Aristotle’s investigation of first principles? Why are the concepts of form and actuality critical here?

*Nicomachean Ethics*

1. According to Aristotle’s definition, virtue is “a habit, disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent man would define it. It is a mean between two vices...” Explain the components of this definition, and give examples of how Aristotle would apply it.

2. Some interpreters find a tension between the practical account of human happiness focusing on action and character that occupies the bulk of the *Ethics* and the turn to happiness as contemplation in Book X. Sketch out these two accounts of happiness, show how they both spring from Aristotle’s theory of human nature and function, and critically reflect on whether or not Aristotle’s account is consistent.

**Medieval**

*Anselm*

*Proslogion*

1. In his argument for the existence of God, Anselm begins with the Augustinian axiom that nothing greater than God can be thought. What is the meaning of the term “greater” in this axiom, how is it independent of extension in space, and what is the role this concept plays in the argument?

2. Kant criticized “ontological” arguments for God’s existence, such as Anselm’s, by claiming that existence cannot make an object more perfect because it is not a predicate. Had Anselm really overlooked the contrast between the logical and the real in this way?
Aquinas

Summa Contra Gentiles

1. Many modern commentators (such as Anthony Kenny) interpret Thomas’ Unmoved First Mover argument as an attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of an infinite series of efficient causes. Is this what the argument is intended to show, and is Thomas successful in showing what he intends?

2. At the beginning of his discussion of what can be known about God, Thomas cites Aristotle with approval where the ancient philosopher says that what is proper to the educated man is to “seek certitude in each thing as the nature of that thing allows.” How can Thomas consider it possible for humans to know the nature of God when all of human knowledge begins with sense perception?

Modern

Descartes

Meditations

1. Critically consider Descartes’ views on the basis of human knowledge: universal doubt, the certainty of the cogito, and the existence of the external world and of God.

2. Critically discuss Descartes’ treatment of the existence of material things, their nature, and their sensible qualities.

Hume

Human Understanding


2. Critically consider Hume’s treatment of causal connections, in light of his distinction between knowledge and belief.
**Hume** (cont.)

*Principles of Morals*

1. Critically discuss Hume’s argument that moral distinctions are derived from sentiment rather than from reason.

2. Critically consider Hume’s analysis of the virtue of justice as merely relative to public utility.

**Kant**

*Prolegomena*

1. According to Kant, how is human knowledge possible, and what are its limits?

2. Critically analyze Kant’s distinction between phenomena (appearances of things) and noumena (ideas of things-in-themselves).

*Foundations*

1. Critically consider whether Kant’s emphasis on matters of “pure practical reason” (e.g., “a good will,” “the concept of duty,” “universal law,” and “respect for the law” in general), as opposed to any empirical considerations (e.g. personality, inclinations, circumstances, consequences” rules out the practical applicability of his ethics to concrete moral problems in particular human situations.

2. Critically discuss the relationship between Kant’s categorical imperative and his notion of the autonomy and dignity of human persons.

**Hegel**

*Phenomenology of Spirit*

1. Critically discuss Hegel’s criticism of the view of human knowing as an instrument or a medium. At whom is it directed?

2. Explain how the stages of master and slave, stoicism, scepticism, and unhappy consciousness are dialectically developed.

**Mill**
Utilitarianism

1. Discuss the concept of the general happiness and its relation to personal happiness and to the internal and external sanctions.

2. Critically consider Mill’s concept of justice in relation to utilitarianism.

Contemporary

Bergson

An Introduction to Metaphysics

1. Explain the meaning and importance of the concept of “intuition.”

2. What exactly does he mean by “duration”?

James

Pragmatism

1. Explain how James’ pragmatic method of determining meaning allegedly solves the old “dilemma in philosophy” between “tough-minded” and “tender-minded” theories.

2. Critically analyze James’ pragmatic theory of truth in relation to religious ideals.

Husserl

The Idea of Phenomenology

1. What does Husserl mean by the “Epoche” (i.e., phenomenological reduction)?

2. What does Husserl mean by “immanence” and “transcendence”?

Whitehead
Science and the Modern World

1. What does Whitehead mean by referring to his philosophy as one of organism?

2. What is a prehension, and how does this process explain permanence in Whitehead’s metaphysics?

Sartre

Existentialism and Humanism

1. Why does Sartre’s atheism play an important role in his humanism?

2. Critically analyze Sartre’s view that man is “condemned to be free.”

Heidegger

An Introduction to Metaphysics

1. What is the difference between Being and Dasein?

2. What are the limitations of Being, and how do they unconceal the essence of Being?

Quine

“Two Dogmas of Empiricism”

1. Discuss Quine’s objection to the two dogmas of empiricism, their relation to one another, and the consequences of their rejection.

Wittgenstein

The Blue and Brown Books

1. Discuss in detail what Wittgenstein means by language games and how this notion determines his philosophical methodology.

2. Develop a critique of his approach to philosophy, pointing out what you think are its strengths and weaknesses and giving reasons for your views.

Rawls

“Justice as Fairness”
1. Critically discuss Rawls’ interpretation of the social contract and his two principles of justice in relation to utilitarianism.

Lonergan

Insight

1. Critically consider the interrelationship of the levels of experiencing, of insight(s), and of judging.

2. Why does Lonergan say that the judgment as the grasp of a virtually unconditioned adds no new content to, but has “borrowed content” from, the insight?

Gadamer

“The Problem of Historical Consciousness”

1. Gadamer claims, “Modern consciousness—precisely as historical consciousness—takes a reflexive position concerning all that is handed down by tradition...This reflexive posture towards tradition is called interpretation.” Explain both the meaning and the significance of this claim for his project of philosophical hermeneutics.