

Guidelines for the Practical Portion of the PhD Comprehensive Examination in Philosophy

The purpose of the PhD comprehensive examination in philosophy is to evaluate the student's overall understanding of, and ability to contribute to, the discipline of philosophy. The PhD comprehensive examination in philosophy involves two areas: theoretical philosophy and practical philosophy. The specific schedule for these examinations will be announced each year by the Graduate Coordinator. The student is expected to take the examination in one of these areas in May at the end of their second year in the program, and an examination in the other area in August before beginning their third year. If a student fails the examination on the area taken in May, it must be re-taken along with the examination on the second area in August before the beginning of their third year. If the student fails the examination on the area first taken in August, it must be re-taken in January of their third year. The comprehensive examination in both the theoretical and practical areas must have been passed by the student's sixth semester in the program. (Students may petition the faculty to extend the deadline for passing their comprehensive examination. Such petitions will be considered on a case-by-case basis and will be granted only in exceptional circumstances, e.g., medical leave, family emergency.)

The Practical portion of the PhD Comprehensive Examination requires two essays written in response to questions announced two weeks before the essays are due, and a half-hour oral defense of the essays. Questions are announced in three areas: core ethical theory, contemporary ethical theory, and social and political philosophy. Reading lists and topics with which the questions deal are posted in May of each year and are effective through May of the following year. The student must write an essay on the core ethical theory question, and a second essay on either the social-political question or contemporary ethical theory question.

The essays should be approximately 15 double spaced pages in length and are evaluated first of all with regard to clarity of expression and accuracy of exposition. However, the papers are expected to be primarily critical rather than expository, showing an awareness of relationships among the ideas discussed, and exhibiting evidence of philosophical understanding of the issues raised by the questions. Finally, it is expected that the papers will incorporate the student's own arguments, appraisals, and conclusions about issues raised by the questions.

The oral defense of the essays will be scheduled approximately one week after the essays are submitted. Student will be expected to further clarify, explain, and defend the arguments and conclusions developed in their essays. At the conclusion of the oral defense, depending on the judgment of the committee regarding the success of the student in writing and defending the essay according to the foregoing criteria, one of the following grades will be assigned to the examination: Pass with Distinction, Pass, Revise and Resubmit, or Fail. If a grade of Revise and Resubmit is assigned, the student will be given an additional week to revise and resubmit the essay. Although the Committee will inform the student of the central deficiencies of the exam following the oral, the Committee members cannot jointly or individually commit to consultation on essay revisions; neither are they barred from doing so. The committee may or may not require an additional oral defense of the resubmitted essay. The resubmitted essay will be given a Pass or Fail grade.