

## **PhD Comprehensive Examination in Philosophy Theoretical Exam Guidelines**

### **I. Role and Purpose of the Theoretical Examination**

The hallmark of the PhD program at the University of Memphis since its inception in 1990 has been what the Department calls “pluralism.” By “pluralism” we have meant primarily the fruitful interaction of philosophers and philosophy from the analytic and continental philosophical traditions, based on a sound appreciation of the common background of the two traditions—the pre-twentieth century history of philosophy.

The PhD Theoretical Comprehensive Examination is arguably the capstone to our aim of pluralism in graduate philosophical education. It comes at the end of two years of coursework devoted largely to the pluralistic mission of the department, and near the beginning of the student’s more specialized research leading to a dissertation—which may or may not cross or integrate traditions.

The broad goal of the examination is *to induce students to think philosophically about a traditional issue in theoretical philosophy*, drawing on skills they have acquired from study of philosophers from both the continental and the analytic traditions. Typically, this involves drawing from the methods, arguments, and positions of several philosophers from each tradition; necessarily, it involves drawing from some philosophers from each tradition. Ideally, the outcome is a philosopher who can embark on significant research—i.e., a dissertation project—and who can motivate and explain that project even to mature philosophers who are conversant only with one of the two traditions.

More specifically, the exam has three goals. The first goal is for the student *to gain an ability to study a sub-field of or problem in philosophy independently*. The second goal is for the student *to achieve a basic understanding of the topic or problem to be examined*. The third goal is for the student *to articulate this knowledge in a written examination paper and in face-to-face oral questioning* of his or her own views on the material of the examination.

### **II. Nature of the Theoretical Examination**

The Theoretical Comprehensive Examination will have the same basic timetable, structure, and evaluative categories as the Practical Comprehensive Examination, but it differs from the Practical Comprehensive Examination in some important ways. It consists of one take-home essay and an oral examination. Students will be required to submit one essay of approximately 4,500 words, or 15 double-spaced pages, presenting a philosophical account of a problem in theoretical philosophy that draws on, and discusses, relevant contemporary analytic and continental approaches to that problem. As with the Practical Comprehensive Examination, there will be a required reading list. The Committee will post exam questions on the website two weeks prior to the essay submission deadline. The thirty-minute oral examination will consist of a discussion between committee members and the student.

### **III. General Comprehensive Examination Schedule**

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 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 retaken 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 retaken 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).

#### **Exam Periods and Submission Deadlines**

There are three exam periods, scheduled by the Graduate Coordinator: one in January, one in May, and one in August. Exam periods and essay submission deadlines are set and announced by the Graduate Coordinator. The main exam periods are May and August. The January period is reserved for special cases by permission only.

### **IV. Theoretical Examination Specifications**

#### **Examination Format**

The theoretical exam consists of two parts: one written essay and (at least) one thirty-minute oral examination. (See below, "Expectations for the Oral Defense" about the possible case of two oral examinations.)

#### **Examination Requirements**

**(1) Essay:** The essay written in response to the examination question posed is to be written over the course of two weeks and should run to approximately 4500 words, or 15 double-spaced pages, including footnotes and excluding the bibliography.

**(2) Oral Defense of the Essay:** The oral defense of the essays will be scheduled for approximately one week after the essays are submitted.

#### **Examination Topics**

There is one topic for the theoretical examination per academic year (e.g., "world," "intentionality"), announced each May.

#### **Examination Questions**

Twice per year, the committee announces a single specific question on the posted annual topic: once, two weeks prior to the May essay submission deadline, and again two weeks prior to the August essay submission deadline. Multiple questions on the annual topic are posed over the course of the year, but only one question is posed per examination period.

## **Examination Reading List**

The annual exam topic and its reading list of analytic and continental texts are posted in May of each year and are effective through May of the following year. No reading guide or thematic overview accompanies the reading list.

## **V. Expectations for the Theoretical Examination**

### **Expectations for the Essay**

The essay should present a single line of argument in answer to the particular question. It should not primarily be a work of exegesis. Exegetical work should be limited by the requirement that it contribute directly to the line of argument being advanced. The essay should approximate a seminar paper both in developing and defending a single line of argument and in drawing on original and secondary resources only when in the service of developing the essay's argument. Potted book reports of the work of individual figures and bland compare-and-contrast essays will be grounds for a grade of Fail (not Revise and Resubmit). While the Committee expects that both analytic and continental philosophical traditions be represented in the essay, there is no expectation that the representation of these traditions be perfectly balanced. Further, although the Committee expects some element of comparison and/or contrast concerning the work representative of these traditions, there is no expectation that these comparisons/contrasts be direct point-by-point catalogues. What *is* expected is that the line of argumentation advanced is original to the student and, of course, that *the argument is addressed to the examination question*.

Essays are also evaluated 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 that are raised by the question posed. Essays must incorporate the student's own arguments, appraisals and conclusions about issues raised by the examination question addressed.

### **Expectations for the Oral Defense**

Students will be called to clarify, explain, and defend the argument developed in their essays. Examiners will raise objections, seek deeper explanations, and explore alternative theories in the oral portion of the exam. Students' performance will be evaluated in terms of their ability to think on their feet, willingness to take and explore a point, and their ability to explain their arguments across analytic-continental lines.

The oral examination is also the occasion to test the student's broader familiarity and facility with texts on the reading list not highlighted in the submitted essay. While a deep understanding of each and every text on the reading list is not required, a deep understanding of some and a passing fluency with all is expected. In the case of essays that draw disproportionately from either tradition, the Committee may wish to probe the student's facility with texts from the other tradition.

## **VI. Assessment of the Theoretical Examination**

### **Examination Grading**

Prior to the oral examination, Committee members evaluate and score the written 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 above criteria, one of the following grades will be assigned to the examination as a whole:

Pass with Distinction

Pass

Revise and Resubmit (Essay Resubmission Required)

Fail

### **Grade of Revise and Resubmit**

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.

## **VII. Additional Information Sources for Examination Preparation**

There are two new informal options for further specifications on the Committee's expectations.

- a. The Committee's announcement of the theoretical examination topic each May will be followed by a meeting with the entire Committee and all students planning to take the theoretical exam that year (and other interested students). This meeting provides students with their primary opportunity to ask individualized questions about the exam's format, the Committee's expectations, etc.
- b. The Committee will add a "FAQs" page to the department website, on which to post and answer common questions regarding the theoretical exam.