

Philosophy MA Comprehensive Exam
Gonzaga University
(Revised, November 2021)

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 (see the list later in this document). The exam includes a written component and an oral component. The written part is conducted in four two-hour blocks scheduled within a 14-day period: the first week (Mon/Fri) covers the ancient and medieval periods, and the second week (Mon/Fri) modern and contemporary philosophy. In each of the four historical periods, students select two from a pool of five available questions to answer, for a total of eight essays on the entire exam. In order to pass the written 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 or if the banking system is utilized students must pass seven out of eight essays. (Please see program guidelines for a detailed discussion of the banking system)

After passing the written exam, the student will have a one-hour oral examination before a panel of three philosophy faculty members. The oral exam typically begins by following up on weak points on the written exam essays, but also can cover any of the topics and issues in the exam reading list texts, and broader conversation about the student's philosophical outlook.

The comprehensive exam is normally offered three times a year: in the middle of the Fall semester normally end of October or beginning of November, at the end of Spring semester in March or April, and sometime in the summer when it is convenient for the majority of students who wish to take the comps in the summer. Schedule exceptions (and location changes) are allowed for demonstrated student need. Students are expected to make their first attempt of the Comprehensive Exam in the spring of their first year, and will normally be expected to repeat it each time it is offered as necessary to pass. Failure to pass the written exam successfully on the fifth attempt or the oral exam on the second attempt will automatically result in dismissal from the Philosophy MA program.

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. Demonstration of critical reflection can take a number of forms, such as 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 test, the comprehensive exam 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 (included at the end of this document).

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. By contrast, students are not expected to exhibit the sort of scholarship found in advanced-level philosophical journal articles or monographs. 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, Plato's conception of education and character formation, and Platonic ethics and political theory.

It is wise for students to begin working with texts in the reading list and studying for the comprehensive exam as soon as possible upon entering the program. Students are strongly encouraged to work with other students to prepare for and practice taking the exam. Students may wish to select courses that will aid in their preparation for the comprehensive exam, but should not expect course work alone to be sufficient preparation for passing the exam. While philosophy program faculty are available to answer specific questions about texts and figures on the reading list, students cannot expect faculty to provide tutoring to prepare for the exam.

MA Comprehensive Reading List

Ancient

Plato: *Republic*

Plato: *Phaedo*

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aristotle: *Metaphysics* (Books I, VII & XII)

Medieval

Aquinas: *Summa Contra Gentiles* Book I

Anselm: *Proslogion*

Augustine: *Free Choice of Will*

Averroes: *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*
(Hyman & Walsh, pp. 324-37)

Modern

Descartes: *Meditations*

Hume: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

Kant: *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysic*

Kant: *Foundations of Metaphysics of Morals*

Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*

Mill: *Utilitarianism*

Choose ONE of the following areas in which to concentrate:

Social/Political Philosophy

Rawls: *A Theory of Justice* (1, 2, 11 & 24)

Arendt: *The Human Condition* Chap. 1

Arendt: *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Chap. 8

Singer: "Famine, Affluence and Morality"

Nussbaum: *Women and Human Development*
Chap. 1 (76 pp.)

Beauchamp/Childress: "Nature of Applied Ethics"

Leopold, "The Land Ethic." (14)

Michael Monahan: "The Conservation of Authenticity: Political Commitment and Racial Reality" (13)

Continental

Husserl: "Phenomenology" in *Encycl. Britannica*

Heidegger: *Being & Time* Division I: Sections 1-8;
14-16; 35-38; Division II: 72-
76

Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* Introduction

Butler: *Gender Trouble* Introduction & Chap. 1
Sartre: *Existentialism Is a Humanism*
Foucault: “The Subject and Power”

Analytic & American

Frege: “On Sense and Reference”
Austin: “*How to do Things with Words*” 1-3
James: *Pragmatism* Lectures 1-3 & 6 (70 pp.)
West: *American Evasion of Philosophy* Chap. 6
Whitehead: *Modes of Thought* Section III Ch. 7-8
(53 pp.)
Peirce: *Fixation of Belief*
Peirce: *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*
Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations* para.
243-71 (6 pp.)

Sample Questions

These sample questions are part of a question bank from which the M.A. Program Director will select questions when composing the comprehensive exams. There is no guarantee that any of these particular questions will appear on any comprehensive exam.

Ancient

1. In *Republic* Book II, Glaucon and Adeimantus offer a version of social contract theory to reconsider the argument of Thrasymachus. The central challenge of this argument is the idea that justice is good only for its consequences, not for its own sake. How well does Socrates’ argument answer this challenge by the end of the *Republic*?

Medieval

1. Thomas Aquinas criticizes Anselm’s argument for the existence of God by pointing out that, even if one understood God to be that than which nothing greater can exist, this would not convince him that God exists, because one would still have to admit that this greatest possible being exists in reality and not just in the mind. Can Anselm’s argument be defended from this criticism? How or how not?

Modern

1. What is the purpose of Descartes “wax experiment” in Meditation II? Why does the experiment follow the argument for the existence of the thinking self at the beginning of Meditation II? What does Descartes think the experiment shows him about his knowledge of substances? In this objective, is the experiment successful? Why or why not?

2. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes, “The True is the whole.” Argue for the advantages and disadvantages of this as a leading idea for a philosophical system.

Contemporary

1. Describe Heidegger’s understanding of *inauthentic existence* by explaining what he means by “idle talk” (*Gerede*) “curiosity” (*Neugier*) and “falling” (*verfallen*). Explain why the analysis of authentic and inauthentic existence is significant for the task Heidegger has undertaken in Division I of *Being and Time*.
2. Explain why Russell thinks that the following sentence poses a problem for Frege’s account of language: “If the present king of France is bald, then the present king of France has no hair on his head.” How does Russell’s distinction between a claim of existence and a claim of uniqueness offer a solution to that problem? Are you satisfied with Russell’s solution? Explain why or why not.

**Comprehensive Exam Grading Form
Gonzaga University Philosophy MA Program**

1. Does the essay successfully address the subject matter of the question with clear writing, coherent organization, and cogent argumentation?

Yes No

Comments:

2. Does the essay accurately and thoroughly identify, explicate, and interpret the philosophical issues raised in the question?

Yes No

Comments:

3. Does the essay exhibit some appropriate measure of critical reflection and analysis of the relevant philosophical issues, such as 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?

Yes No

Comments:

In the judgment of the examiner, the overall grade for the essay is

PASS NOT PASS