

## PHILOSOPHY COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

### Goal of Comps

All majors are required to take a comprehensive examination in the Winter term of their Senior year, usually in the first half of March. One goal is for majors to demonstrate their ability to **critically interpret and assess a short philosophical text**: that includes being able to identify and understand the key ideas in the text, to examine issues of meaning and logic in it, to locate its issues and ideas in wider philosophical contexts, and to offer a careful assessment of the text. A second goal is for majors to exhibit their ability to **intelligently relate issues and ideas from three courses**: that includes being able to identify a major issue or idea which arises in all three courses and to build the connection between the courses around this issue.

### Procedures

At the end of this document you will find examples of texts and bridging issues. In the Seminar there will be a variety of activities to help you prepare for comps. In addition, you should be preparing for both tasks (the textual analysis and the bridging essay) as you proceed in your major studies; comps are meant to be a somewhat intensified and extemporaneous example of what you have been doing all along. So, be sure that some of the writing you do for your major courses focuses on rigorous textual analysis and criticism. And begin early to look for good examples of issues that arise in more than one class, and make sure that some of your writing focuses on these issues.

Before the end of the Fall term of your Senior year, you must submit to the Seminar instructor for that term at least two sample bridging issues (see the examples at the end of this document) and information about the three classes you intend to link in dealing with those issues. (What are the classes? When did you take them? Who was the instructor?)

#### A. Critical Reading Task.

All majors will be given the same set of short texts (two or three options) from which they will choose any one to work on. Among the criteria used to evaluate student essays will be the following:

1. Does it show a good understanding of the main issue/idea in the text?
2. Does it show a careful analysis of the logical features of the text (e.g., issues of meaning, consistency, argumentation)?
3. Does it show awareness of how the text relates to a wider philosophical context (historical, topical)?
4. Does it demonstrate an ability to provide a thoughtful critical response to the text?

**B. Bridging Issue Task**

Each major will be given a specially designed pair of bridging questions from which to choose. These will be based on the information the major has provided by the end of Fall term (see above). Among the criteria used to evaluate student essays will be the following:

1. How well does it formulate the issue, beyond the simple formulation provided in the exam? So, the essay should start with an expanded discussion of exactly what is at issue, including any clarification of key concepts and contextual information.
2. How well does it explore why the issue has an important place in two or more courses? So, why is it clearly a 'bridging' issue?
3. How well does the student do in dealing with the issue itself, i.e., showing how it might best be resolved or why it can't be.

**Who Prepares and Evaluates Comps?**

The current Seminar instructor coordinates Comps, but the entire philosophy faculty participates in both preparing the content and grading the Comps. Normally, Comps are done in a three hour period in a computer lab.

**Sample Texts**

A.. In Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the character named Cleanthes says,

"I shall begin with observing that there is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any argument a priori. Nothing is demonstrable unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing that is distinctly conceivable implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose existence is demonstrable. I propose this argument as entirely decisive, and am willing to rest the whole controversy upon it."

B. In the *Meditations*, Descartes argues as follows.

"Then, examining attentively what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place where I was; but that I could not pretend in the same way that I did not exist; and that, to the contrary, just because I was thinking to doubt the truth of other things, it followed quite obviously and quite certainly that I did exist. . . . I knew from this that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature was only to think, and thus had no need for any place to exist and did not depend on any material thing; so that this 'I,' which is to say my mind, through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from my body, and even that it is easier to know than my body, and further that even if my body did not exist at all, my mind would not cease to be all that it is."

**Sample Bridging Issues/Ideas**

These examples are very abbreviated descriptions of issues; they represent the minimum of information you must provide. You are encouraged to provide a more substantial account of the issues you want to consider, and even to propose specific questions that might be included on your comps. The faculty will use this information to formulate questions which are specific to your interests and course work. You will be given two questions from which to choose.

A. Bridging Classical Greek Philosophy, Philosophy of Mind & Philosophy of Religion:

1. Concepts of personal identity and the possibility of personal survival of death
2. Reasons for doubting dualistic metaphysical systems.

B. Bridging Ethics, Contemporary Political Thought, and Philosophy of Woman

1. Reasons for critiquing Kantian ethics based on implicit gender bias
2. How an 'ethics of caring' critiques some traditional ethical theories