

Guidelines for the Qualifying/Comprehensive Examination in Classical Philosophy

I. Nature of the Examination

The PhD Qualifying/MA Comprehensive Examination in Classical Philosophy (henceforth, the Classical Exam), is a four hour examination administered in a classroom (e.g., a computer lab). PhD students must sit for this exam prior to sitting for their Comprehensive Exams. They must pass the exam by January of their second year in residence. (PhD students may petition the faculty to extend the deadline for passing their Classical Exam. 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.) MA students may sit for the exam whenever they feel prepared to do so. The examination topic along with a specific list of primary and secondary source readings is published every year on the department website in late May. The exam is offered toward the end of May and August, and in early January of every year. The topic stays the same until the May sitting, the day after which a new topic is announced. The exam presents five questions from which the student must choose two in response to which he/she will compose his/her essays. Typically, students will be required to answer questions on both Plato and Aristotle, but normally students have a choice between writing essays on either Pre-Socratic or Hellenistic period philosophers.

II. Purpose of the Examination

In a diverse department, history is our shared, common language. It is what can be presupposed in discussion and for pedagogical purposes in courses. Thus, it is desirable that students become articulate in this common language as early as possible. It is expected that in preparation for exams students will be reading, more or less on their own, at least some new, difficult material. Having in mind specific issues or topics helps one focus one's reading. The purpose of an exam in Classical Philosophy in particular is to encourage students to develop a command of basic information about the history of ancient philosophy. Acquiring command of this material is important for both PhD students and MA students. It is so for several reasons, but two of the most important are as follows. First, a solid understanding of the history of ancient philosophy provides a graduate student with knowledge useful for more advanced study and research. Nearly all the problems of philosophy, including those that involve investigations in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of science, etc. were first raised and discussed during the ancient period. Understanding these discussions helps a student acquire a more complete grasp of the nature of these philosophical problems and the ways in which they have been addressed. It also helps the student better to understand and appreciate the current debates about these problems by bringing him/her to grasp the place of those debates in the continuum of philosophical inquiry. Second, acquiring a command of the history of ancient philosophy is useful for preparing students to teach at the undergraduate level. Many introductory courses, including our own 1101, include readings in the history of ancient philosophy. So committing ancient philosophical doctrines and arguments to memory will greatly enhance a graduate student's ability to teach his/her own introductory classes, and perhaps, with some further study, even a course in the history of ancient philosophy.

III. What the Ancient Examination Committee Is Looking For

The committee looks for clearly written and well-organized essays that answer the questions posed in a complete and accurate manner. But merely accurately reporting philosophical doctrines is not sufficient for receiving a passing grade on the exam. The committee expects to see a philosophical essay. By this we mean that the essay presents good philosophical discussions. It can do so in different ways. One way is for the student to offer persuasive critical discussions of the arguments which the ancient philosophers give for the positions they defend. Another way is for the student to provide arguments of his/her own for one or another interpretation of an ancient philosophical doctrine. Of course, these ways of creating a philosophical essay can also be combined, and there are certainly other ways in which a student might exhibit his/her philosophical ability in the essay. The main point is that we expect to see some good philosophical work in the essay. We expect that a PhD student should be able to compose an essay that satisfies these criteria to a greater extent than an MA student.

IV. The Assessment of the Examination

The exam committee reads and discusses each examination. It then strives to reach a decision about whether or not the exam falls into one of the following categories: Pass with Distinction at the PhD level, Pass at the PhD level, Pass at the MA level but not at the PhD level, Fail at both the PhD and MA levels. These evaluations are all based on the extent to which the essay meets or fails to meet the criteria outlined in the previous section. The examination committee does not expect the student to have a command of material that would be appropriate for a student specializing in ancient philosophy. If the student demonstrates a solid understanding of the fundamental doctrines and arguments of the ancient philosophers (i.e., the doctrines and arguments relevant to the topic of the examination), that should be sufficient for a passing grade. Knowledge of idiosyncratic discussions in the secondary literature is neither expected nor desired for this examination.

If the committee cannot reach a unanimous decision about the evaluation of an exam, it brings its report before the rest of the faculty and the faculty as a whole will render a decision about the exam after discussing the committee's report.