

## **Guidelines for the Qualifying/Comprehensive Examination in Modern Philosophy**

### **I. Nature of the Examination**

The PhD Qualifying/MA Comprehensive Examination in Modern Philosophy (henceforth, the Modern 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 Modern Qualifying 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. Unlike other Qualifying Exams or Comprehensive Exams, the examination topic and reading list does not change. The topic is always *Knowledge and Reality* and the reading list is attached below. The exam presents one question, usually allowing some choice of figures from the reading list. Typically, students are required to show familiarity with major figures in the Rationalist tradition, major figures in the Empiricist tradition, and Kant. They will be expected to compare the positions of these figures with each other, and understand the extent to which these positions have been developed as a response to other positions on the same or related topics. The exam is offered toward the end of May and August, and in early January of every year. The January sitting in a PhD student's second year of residence is normally reserved only for re-takes of a previously failed Modern Exam.

### **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. The purpose of an exam in Modern Philosophy in particular is to encourage students to develop an understanding of the development of and relationships among the most important positions in the history of modern 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 modern philosophy provides a graduate student with knowledge useful for more advanced study and research in modern philosophy and in subsequent periods, including contemporary philosophy. This background helps the students better to understand and appreciate the current debates on related positions by bringing them to grasp the place of those debates in the continuum of philosophical inquiry. Second, acquiring a command of the history of modern philosophy is important for preparing students to teach at the undergraduate level. Many introductory and intermediary courses, include readings in and reference to the history of modern philosophy.

### **III. What the Modern Examination Committee Is Looking For**

The committee looks for clearly written and well-organized essays that answer the question posed in a comprehensive and precise manner. Merely summarizing the conclusions of a position in the history of modern philosophy, however, is not sufficient. The committee expects a philosophical essay that engages the issues involved in the position and the rationale given for the position, so that the essay embodies a mature philosophical discussion. It should include critical discussion of the content of and the arguments for a position held by a thinker of the modern period; it should also include an exposition of the relationship of this content and this argumentation with that of other thinkers of the modern period, and with their predecessors and successors as well. 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 modern philosophy. If the student demonstrates a solid understanding of the fundamental doctrines and arguments of the modern philosophers, and the relationships among them, 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.