

Philosophy Comprehensive Exams for the Class of 2010

Philosophy Department, Hanover College

August 2008

Goal of Comps

All majors are required to take a Comprehensive Exam in the Winter Term of their Senior year, usually in the first half of March. One primary goal is for majors to demonstrate the breadth of their understanding of the discipline of philosophy by answering questions selected from philosophy's three main branches – metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. Another goal is for majors to demonstrate their capacity for critically evaluating ideas and theories and defending their own answers to questions.

Procedures

During the Philosophy Seminar, Juniors will receive a list of possible questions under the headings of 'Metaphysics,' 'Ethics,' and 'Epistemology.' These questions represent a range of topics, concepts, and theories important in these areas of philosophy. During the Senior year, 2 questions under each heading will be selected by the department faculty, and these questions will appear on the Comprehensive Exam on the arranged date. Students will not have prior knowledge of which questions will appear on the exam, so it is best to prepare for all of the questions. You will then be allowed to select one (1) question under each heading to answer, for a total of three (3) questions.

Evaluation

Each answer will be evaluated on how well it demonstrates knowledge of key concepts, theories and issues that pertain to the question. Special attention will be paid to how well the answer defends the position(s) it takes. Moreover, each exam will be evaluated on the overall strength and cogency of all three answers. Students must score at least a C on their Comprehensive Exam to pass.

General guidelines for answers

It is important to understand that there is more than meets the eye with the questions listed below. When you are asked to explain a specific theory, or to provide your own position on an issue, a good essay will demonstrate a certain depth and breadth of knowledge. To be more precise, we can say that a good answer will

- (i) identify a specific instance of the theory in question (where appropriate),
- (ii) give a clear statement of it,
- (iii) illustrate it by applying it to examples (where appropriate),
- (iv) identify at least one of its major figures,
- (v) sketch its main supporting reasons, and
- (vi) contrast it with at least one alternative theory.

Thus, for the question “What is utilitarianism?,” a good answer will include (i)-(vi) above as they pertain to utilitarianism.

2009-2010 Questions

Metaphysics

1. What is the nature of ultimate reality? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.
2. Is there a God? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.
3. Do humans ever act freely? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.
4. What is the relation between our mental and physical nature? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.

Ethics

1. Are there any objective moral principles? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.
2. What is deontology? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.
3. What is utilitarianism? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.
4. What is virtue ethics? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.

Epistemology

1. How is knowledge of the world and its workings possible? Give a detailed explanation of your answer and defend it against at least one strong objection.
2. What is empiricism? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.
3. What is rationalism? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.
4. What is skepticism? Critically evaluate its strengths and weaknesses.