

Tufts University, Department of Philosophy

## **Guidelines for Students Taking the M.A. Comprehensive Exams in Philosophy**

The comprehensive exams are designed to test not only your knowledge of an area of philosophy but also your ability to do philosophy. Therefore, when you take an exam it's crucial for you to:

1. Answer the questions. Don't just exploit a question as a way of reviewing some tangentially relevant literature or twist it to fit some issue you feel more comfortable discussing. Certainly, you may well have to interpret the question — to make a judgment about what, essentially, is at stake. But such interpreting is different from changing (or avoiding) the subject.
2. Critically engage with the topic. Do not make the mistake of simply reviewing other people's views on the subject you are discussing. You should also evaluate those views and provide reasons for endorsing or rejecting them. If you don't critically engage with the topic, then you're not doing genuine philosophy. However, it's very difficult to limn your own view without placing it within a range of other possible approaches to the topic. Therefore, it's important both to display knowledge of that range and to make clear where your own view fits in it.

### **Frequently asked questions**

#### ***How do the comps work?***

You must take three comprehensive exams. Two of those exams must be chosen from among the three core areas of Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Ethics. The third exam may either be in the third core area or be chosen from a list of other possible areas, including Philosophy of Mind, Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Law, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and more.

Students can take comps at specified times in January, May, and August. Some weeks beforehand, all M.A. candidates will be reminded to sign up to take one or more comps, if they so desire. At this time, students can ask to take their third exam on a special topic. The special-topics exams are not offered during the summer exam period. Forty-eight hours before the exam, you will be given a list of 12 questions, nine of which will appear on the exam, in three categories of three questions each. At the exam start time, you will have three hours in which to answer one question from each category.

#### ***What is the point of the comps?***

Preparing for the comps is an excellent way to get a solid foundation in the central areas of analytic philosophy. The comps play a key role in the department's reputation for producing students who can do serious original work in philosophy at top-flight Ph.D. programs. Preparing for the comps teaches students how to gain control of a philosophical question in a very short period of time — a skill that is invaluable for potential doctoral students.

#### ***How do I know if I'm ready to take a comp?***

Only you can decide when you're ready. But there are some things you can and should do to help you make this decision:

1. For the three core exams, it's wise to take the three related departmental core courses in Epistemology, Ethical Theory, and Metaphysics. Although simply having taken one of these courses will not of course guarantee success on a comprehensive exam, it will give you a very good sense of the sorts of philosophical issues at stake in the relevant discipline.

2. Think about not taking a comp immediately after you've taken the related course. Sometimes, it is helpful to let the material sink in and to spend some time reading in and thinking about areas that were not covered in the course.

3. Talk to your teachers and advisor about whether you're ready to take an exam. Ask them to help you identify gaps in your command of a philosophical area and to devise a strategy for filling them.

***Besides taking the relevant classes, what else can I do to prepare for the comps?***

It's a very good idea to look at old versions of exams, both to get a sense of the sorts of questions asked and to practice composing answers. You are welcome to discuss old tests with both your fellow graduate students and your professors. Many graduate students have found it invaluable to work with their peers to prepare for the exams. (Please note that you must not consult with anyone —

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teachers or peers — after you receive the initial set of test questions for the exam you are taking.)

You can also use the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or other general books to get a sense of what sorts of issues are at the heart of a given sub-specialty in philosophy. *The Philosopher's Index*, a journal that indexes all articles in the discipline, is another excellent resource.

***Is it a good idea to take more than one comp at a time?***

It's not a good idea to take more than one comp the first time around. After that, you and your advisors may decide that you're ready to take two or more exams during a single examination period.

***Once I get the list of potential questions, but before I take the exam, can I ask a professor about how to interpret the questions?***

No. Not only should you refrain from asking professors questions, but also you are on your honor not to consult with your peers as you prepare to take the exam.

***How should I pitch my answers?***

Don't forget that your task, as outlined in the first section of this handout is to answer the questions in a critically engaged way. This means that you must present and argue for your answer to a question. Here are some guidelines on how to get that task done:

1. Show why your answer is superior to alternative answers to the question.

2. Explicitly consider pressing objections to your view.

3. Be cautious when using jargon: err on the side of explaining it.

What's tricky about taking a comp is that you must use your limited time both to answer the question and to provide enough context for your answer to ensure that your reader understands the view you are discussing. In general, what's most

important is that you show the reader that you understand what's philosophically at stake in the question and provide a philosophical response to it.