

**Wesleyan University College of Letters  
Junior Comprehensive Examination: Spring 2008**

**2008 Guidelines for the Junior Comprehensive Examination:**

1. The written examination will take place this year on Tuesday, April 22, Wednesday April 23, and Thursday April 24. The oral examinations will be held on Monday May 12, Tuesday May 13, and Wednesday, May 14.

Students should pick up the questions for each day in the COL office at 9 a.m. and must submit completed answers by 9 a.m. on the following day (e.g., Tuesday's examination paper will be submitted at 9 a.m. on Wednesday).

2. The written examinations are open book examinations.

3. Written answers will not exceed 3600 words, which is approximately twelve typewritten double-spaced pages for each day's question or questions. When answering two questions, which is the most common format, students will write no more than 1800 words on each question. Examiners are not obliged to read past the word limit.

4. Students will not discuss the exams during the three-day period.

5. Mechanics:

- a. Use white paper
- b. Spacing: double
- c. Font: Times New Roman
- d. Size: 12
- e. Place page number and surname on each page.
- f. Identify the day and the number of the question that you are answering.
- g. Do not make title pages.
- h. Do not staple pages.

6. Students must write the honor pledge—NO AID, NO VIOLATIONS—on the front page of each day's essays, and sign it.

Wesleyan University

College of Letters

Junior Comprehensive Examination, Spring Term, 2008

Examiners:

Christopher S. Celenza, German and Romance Languages and History, Johns Hopkins University

Carol Gould, Philosophy, Florida Atlantic University

Over three days you will have the chance to think and write about the texts you have read dealing with ancient, medieval, and twentieth-century culture. Please pick **two** of each of the questions listed for each day. Please think both analytically and creatively in your answers, and feel free to use examples that range across the various periods you have studied. The more detailed you can be in your responses when it comes to historical specifics such as names, dates, and places, the better; yet each of your answers should have an overall, coherent argument.

Feel free to consult the specific texts as you write up your responses.

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### **I. Examination Day One: Creation, Leadership, Motivation**

1. Historians, philosophers, and poets across time and culture explore the nature of leadership. Ideally, we think of a leader as one who can motivate people under her authority to become better individuals, to act virtuously for the collective good and their own good. The *Iliad* presents 3 competing paradigms embodied in the characters of Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, none of which is adequate. Discuss Homer's portrayal of these three characters as leaders. What is the basis for their authority over others? How do they differ in their conceptions of the human good? What view of the human condition does Homer convey in his depiction of these characters? Contrast Homer's views of leadership and human nature with those of another writer in antiquity such as Virgil, Aeschylus, or the author of Exodus or of the Gospel of Mark.

2. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes that the chief concern of ethics is to establish what the highest good is for human beings and how to find it. He says that almost everyone agrees as to the *name* of the highest good (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095a17ff.): “happiness.” In Greek, the word translated here as “happiness” is *eudaimonia*. This word can mean many different things, from “prosperity” to “good fortune” to “human flourishing” to “fulfillment.” Different philosophers have wrestled with the notion of what is “good” for humanity in different ways. Please explore this notion, focusing on at least three of the writers whose work you have encountered.

3. Creation. The problem of creation is a difficult one: how did the phenomenological world (the world as we experience it) come to be? If out of nothing, how does “something” arise out of “nothing”? If it was simply shaped from a pre-existing “prime matter,” then where does the chain of causation end? *Genesis* in the Hebrew Bible, Plato in his *Timaeus*, Aristotle in his *Physics*, and Thomas Aquinas in different places dealt with problems of creation and causation. Modern authors too, have dealt with the issue of creation and the ways in which personal, artistic creation has effects on the world. Here one might think of the character Lily, in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, for whom artistic creation represented a bulwark against a chaotic world, seemingly always in flux, in which “nothing stays, all changes; but not words, not paint.” Please address the problem of creation in its diverse manifestations, touching on at least three examples from among the works you have read.

4. Cannibalism. Genocide. Cruelty: What makes these wrong? To what or whom can we appeal to validate our moral judgment? Aeschylus, in the *Oresteia*, tells us that Athena invested the court of Athens with the ultimate authority to determine moral imperatives. The Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the work of Boethius, Augustine, and Aquinas, all express the divine command theory, according to which God is the ultimate moral authority. On this view, we glean God’s moral intentions through meditation, prayer, or by following a divinely appointed leader. Plato, in the *Euthyphro*, argues that God cannot be the source of moral values because then these values would be arbitrary – and he argues they are not. Instead, for Plato, moral imperatives are grounded in the rational order of reality, which is higher than God. In each case, values are universal, and guide us in our moral choices. Elaborate on two of these theories and contrast them with the view we find in either Sartre, de Beauvoir, or Foucault.

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## II. Examination Day Two: Love, Gender, and Art

1. In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf weaves the narrative of Lily Briscoe into the Ramsay family drama. As an artist, Lily struggles to articulate her vision of life by means of a non-logical, aesthetic expression. In what sense does Lily's art refer to the novel itself? That is, in what ways does the form of Woolf's then-experimental novel reflect the philosophical meaning of the work? Discuss this and compare it to one other work in which the form of writing reflects the author's meaning, as in for example, Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, Plato's *Euthyphro* or *Phaedrus*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, or Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

2. Heroism, masculinity, and violence are often linked in the pre-modern world in a way that can seem foreign today. In pre-modern face-to-face societies one way to gain perceived status was justly, and violently, to vanquish an enemy. One thinks of the very end of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in book 12, where Aeneas, after uttering a vengeful statement to his enemy Turnus, "in burning rage buried his sword to the hilt in Turnus's breast" ("ferrum adverso sub pectore condit / fervidus") There are other instances of this sort of individually violent conduct in pre-modern texts you have read, such as in the *Iliad* or in *Beowulf*. Please reflect, using specific examples, on pre-modern violence and the constitution of personal, male identity, and on how this warrior-mentality has changed over time.

3. Sons and Lovers. A key motif in Western religion, literature, philosophy and history is the parent/child relationship. In the *Oresteia*, each turn of the mythic plot involves a violation of this relationship. The trilogy explores the foundation of the mother/child bond. Plato carries this theme further in his *Euthyphro*, which requires us to consider Euthyphro's obligations to his father. Also pursuing this theme, St. Augustine presents his conversion in his *Confessions* (in part) as a surrender to his mother's love and rejection of his own partner and their child. In contrast, Kafka, in his *Metamorphosis* depicts Gregor's father as a nefarious, authoritarian figure and his mother as a weak collaborator. Kafka, like Aeschylus, sees the father as embodying the power of law, the mother as the power of empathy; but unlike Aeschylus, he sees his father's power as arbitrary and life-negating and his mother's power as ineffective. What accounts for this difference? Explain how the modern exploration of the parent/child bond reflects changes in the structure of and attitudes towards the polis in post-Enlightenment society.

4. What sort of personal motivation does love provide? Different sorts of answers and different ways of posing the question of love's various functions can be found in authors as diverse as Plato, Chrétien de Troyes, Dante, and even Petrarch. Please comment on the various ways love has been theorized and employed in at least three of the thinkers whose work you have read.

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### III. Examination Day Three: Good and Evil, Self and Society

1. Hannah Arendt argues for the “banality of evil.” Eichmann’s inhumanity, she claims, was rooted in his ordinariness, his desire “to do his job.” Compare this notion to Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of bad faith. Do you think that Arendt and Sartre are moral relativists? Respond to each from the standpoint of Socrates.

2. Conversion. From Paul’s trip to Damascus onward, one can observe a persistent concern for personal conversion in western literature. In Paul’s case, “something like scales” fell from his eyes (*Acts*, 9:18), as he realized the seeming majesty of Christ. Others, such as St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, present a conversion model that, while possessing its own key epiphanies, reflects a longer process of self-realization. Please consider the connection between conversion and ongoing personal development as reflected in at least three examples chosen from your reading.

3. Cultivation of the soul. In his *Philosophical Investigations* (sec. 124), Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that philosophy “leaves everything the way it is” (“Sie läßt alles wie es ist”), arguing that philosophy could not serve as a foundation for language; rather, it could only describe things the way they are. He reflects a turn in philosophy toward the examination of the particularities of language. This move had a long history, and by the early twentieth century it left some, like him, frustrated at the corner into which philosophy seemed to have painted itself. Yet in the pre-modern world there was another tradition of philosophy that could be found, which suggested that “philosophy” or the “love of wisdom” had as much to do with one’s style of life as it did with mental agility. The cultivation of the whole human person, rather than the training of a presumably disembodied mind, seemed a valid goal at which “philosophy” might aim. Examine this notion, with special attention to Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic ancient schools of thought, including Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonism.

4. Knowledge and institutionalization. In Abelard’s day, universities (i.e., medieval *studia generalia*) had yet to be formalized as institutions. By the time of Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274, there was a close alliance in universities between a certain style of studying Aristotelian philosophy along with, and as a support for, Christian theology. Now here is a statistic: in the year 1300, we know of eighteen European universities; by the year 1500, there were roughly sixty of them. (See J. Verger, “Patterns,” in H. De Ridder-Symoens, *A History of the University in Europe*, 2 vols. to date [Cambridge, 1992-96] 1: 35-67, at 45, 47, and 57). The years 1300 to 1500, in short, were years of great expansion in the enterprise and scope of European universities. Simultaneously, new styles of pursuing knowledge developed outside the walls of universities, some associated with the humanist movement. In this period two emblematic thinkers are Petrarch and Vives. Using them as a point of departure (you may also include other thinkers you have read), please comment on the ways in which the production of knowledge can be conditioned by association with institutions of higher learning.