

Program Assessment Report 2017-2018

Program Name: Philosophy

Program Learning **Goal I, Outcome (i):** *Students will read and critically assess the work of central thinkers in the history of philosophy.*

1. Identify the artifact(s) (i.e. student work or outputs) that you used to assess the PLO.
[Projects, papers, presentations, portfolios, exam questions, specific assignments, capstone work]

Artifacts used:

Student term papers submitted by Philosophy majors enrolled in *Phil 312: Modern III: Nineteenth Century European Philosophy* (Dr. W. Rowe, Spring 2018).

2. Identify the instruments (e.g. rubrics, surveys, spreadsheets, statistical software) used to assess the artifact(s) (i.e. the way in which student output are analyzed).

Instrument used to assess the artifact:

The instructor's editorial analysis/evaluation of term papers, submitted by Philosophy majors enrolled in the above spring 2018 course, in order to assess students' engagement with texts of three 19th century European philosophers (Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche).

3. Describe program collaboration to plan, implement and use the results of assessment.

The Department of Philosophy will conduct a review of its entire program next academic year (2018-2019). Program review will include both the manner of program assessment in use since our last program review as well as the way the results of assessment have been used in emending our program.

Assessment activities.

Essay Assignment: "Compose a 7-10-page thesis-driven essay in which you expound on a theme in one or more of our philosophers (Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche) that we have discussed or debated in class."

Results:

Student A used the polarity between the 'strange' and the 'familiar' to compare and contrast the philosophies of Hegel and Nietzsche. The essay revealed not only the centrality of these themes in each thinker. It revealed what its author concluded was an essential trait of philosophical thinking. "Here lies the greatness of philosophy. What, on the surface, may seem like a minor variation has profound consequences."

Student B concluded an essay on the meaning of 'nihilism' in Nietzsche with a philosophical judgment that connected this philosophical theme in a difficult philosopher with a contemporary feature of our culture that threatens the richness of

everyday life. "Many willingly choose to remain immune to the wonder within them and the world around them. This would be to the dismay of Socrates who felt that the unexamined life was not worth living."

Conclusion: Our program shows real success in creating a philosophical form of 'exegetical literacy' in its majors. But it is time to become more focused and more deliberate in achieving this student learning outcome.

4. Where applicable, outline the steps you will take to make improvements to the program based on the results of assessment activities identified in #3.

The assessment results listed in #3 above will be used in our 2018-2019 program review to measure success in building *exegetical literacy*. Exegetical literacy, a principal trait of the educated mind, refers not merely to the experience of encountering philosophy in written form but indicates success in *distinguishing* the details of a passage of written discourse and *judging* its logic, including its implications. Three specific steps are needed to ensure success in building exegetical literacy in our majors: 1) to confront students with 'reading problems', ie, exegetical/interpretive puzzles that require a new kind of attention to subtleties in written discourse, 2) to show by example in lecture and discussion how the art of exegetical literacy functions in detail, and 3) to offer appropriate exercises in graded assignments, whether written or oral, that require students to display the skills required of exegetical literacy in their academic work.

Program Assessment Report 2017-2018

Program Name: Philosophy

Program Learning Outcome: 1b).Students will explore and understand the historical development of major philosophical ideas.

5. Identify the artifact(s) (i.e. student work or outputs) that you used to assess the PLO.
[Projects, papers, presentations, portfolios, exam questions, specific assignments, capstone work]

Artifacts: **Exam Questions**

Other artifact(s)

The artifact used to assess this PLO was the final exam for the Fall 2017 course PHIL 229 *Philosophy of Religion*. The final exam consisted of two essay questions selected by the instructor from a set of six essay questions distributed to the class one week prior to the exam. The students were required to answer each of the two selected questions.

6. Identify the instruments (e.g. rubrics, surveys, spreadsheets, statistical software) used to assess the artifact(s) (i.e. the way in which student output are analyzed).

Instruments: **Rubrics**

Other instruments Used

The set of essay questions, as a set, were formulated so as to lead students through a comprehensive review of the course material, while the final exam would give them the opportunity to show their degree of mastery of some particular parts of the course content. In this way the essay questions were objective in nature. The two questions selected from the set of six were the following: (1) *Present the Kalam Cosmological Argument, then present the Atemporal Cosmological Argument . Finally, explain why some find these arguments to be complementary*; (2) *How might one use Irenaeus and John Hick to explain why an omnipotent and perfectly good Supreme Being would allow both moral and natural evil to exist?*

The students' essays were assessed according to a standard set of expectations for this kind of writing: clarity and precision of expression, coherence, facility with relevant concepts and terminology, and mastery of the depth, nuances, and logic of the relevant argument(s). Two assignments from earlier in the semester—an in-class essay exam and a paper—were graded according to these same expectations. These two assignments, each containing feedback relative to these expectations, had been returned to the students prior to the final exam.

Among the students enrolled in this course were two Philosophy majors, each a first-semester senior. The exams of these two students (*Student A* and *Student B*) were selected for assessment here.

7. Describe program collaboration to plan, implement and use the results of assessment.

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Explain the results of the assessment activities.

Question 1: *Present the Kalam Cosmological Argument, then present the Atemporal Cosmological Argument . Finally, explain why some find these arguments to be complementary*

Student A: This essay moved rather quickly, although all of the relevant, crucial philosophical principles were present (e.g. contingent vs. non-contingent existence, and the Principle of Sufficient Reason). The student manifested an awareness of the importance of a complete causal explanation not only for each individual contingent being, but also for the existence of a set of contingent beings. Still, there was a somewhat "rushed" character to the essay. The aforementioned points could have been more fully developed, with examples to illustrate crucial points. The final part of this student's answer to the question (regarding the complementarity of the two arguments in play) was very underdeveloped. Student A correctly identified the sense in which the two arguments were complementary, but this aspect of the arguments' relationship with each other was more asserted than carefully explained. In this way the student hit the mark, but left a number of "elaboration" points unearned.

Student B: This student seemed less than well-prepared for this particular question, offering an essay that contained some errors and some significant lacunae in reasoning. Consider the following. The Kalam Cosmological Argument, while philosophically rich, is nevertheless somewhat simple in its standard formulation. Student B, however, made some errors in the formulation of the argument, identifying as the conclusion a proposition that is one of the premises (namely, "The universe came into existence."). Later, this student asserted (correctly) that the Atemporal Cosmological Argument reasons from the existence of contingent beings to the existence of a necessary being, yet did not explain carefully just how this argument moves from that data to that conclusion. Finally, this student seemed to confuse the concept "complementary" with "similar", pointing to an authentic similarity between these two arguments as evidence of their complementarity.

Question 2: *How might one use Irenaeus and John Hick to explain why an omnipotent and perfectly good Supreme Being would allow both moral and natural evil to exist?*

Student A: This student offered a careful, developed answer which contained all of the relevant, crucial philosophical principles and distinctions (e.g. the difference between natural evil and moral evil; the philosophical problem that evil presents for classical theism; the distinction between physical and moral development; the necessity of free-will for the existence of a certain kind of creature). The essay showed clearly and in an appropriately elaborated way how John Hick presents a

contemporary Theodicy along the lines laid out by Irenaeus some eighteen centuries earlier.

Student B: Student B also offered an answer which contained all of the relevant, crucial philosophical principles and distinctions (e.g. the difference between natural evil and moral evil; the philosophical problem that evil presents for classical theism; the distinction between physical and moral development; the necessity of free-will for the existence of a certain kind of creature). This essay, however, moved somewhat quickly from point to point and would have benefitted from a more elaborate explanation and defense of the central points. It seemed rather rushed, despite "checking all the boxes".

Overall:

These essays indicate that these two students explored and understood the historical development of major philosophical ideas.

Question 1 from the exam asked about two arguments. The *Kalam Cosmological* argument is a contemporary version of an argument the elements of which can be traced back through medieval Islamic and Christian thinkers to the thought of Aristotle (namely, his argument for the existence of an unmoved mover). The *Atemporal Cosmological argument* for the existence of a necessary being has its roots in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century (and perhaps even deeper into the past than this) and is still defended by many thinkers today. Although each of the students could have improved her essay by elaborating more on both the principles and the conceptual connections (entailments) between the various moments (premises) in the arguments, they nevertheless presented in contemporary form and language these two important historical arguments. In doing so they presented the reasoning of each argument as independent of, rather than tied to, some particular historical moment or anachronistic world-view. In this way they manifested the perennial relevance of the principles and reasoning found in these arguments, and saw that contemporary "scientific" data may be "plugged in" to these arguments in meaningful ways.

Question 2 had to do with the thought of St. Irenaeus (2nd century) and John Hick (20th century). Here the students explained well the conceptual connections between two historically remote but conceptually related arguments. In particular, their common use of John Hick's 20th century examples to illustrate and defend a philosophically important argument offered initially by Irenaeus eighteen centuries earlier makes clear that these students were realizing this particular SLO.

Improvements:

One change that might lead to an improvement in question 1 would be to have the students explicitly identify relevant scientific beliefs/discoveries from various moments in the history of these longstanding philosophical arguments, and then carefully indicate how those particular beliefs/discoveries might have undermined and/or supported the philosophical arguments in question. Doing so would perhaps

emphasize the persistent relevance of these arguments in a world of changing scientific understanding, while also inviting the students to see connections between these philosophical arguments and ongoing investigations in the fields of physics and cosmology.

Overall, the students' performances on each of these two questions is good evidence that they have both explored and understood the historical development of major philosophical ideas. The historical scope of the ideas in play in this course (and in these two exam questions) ranges from the fourth century BC (Aristotle) through the 21st century AD (Hick). The deficiencies in each of the two exams examined here seem to me to be due not to a failure to explore and understand these ideas, but rather to a failure to prepare adequately for a particular question and/or to a rush to get the exam done. (I favor the latter as the primary reason for the shortcomings in the essays, since what was written did manifest a familiarity and facility with the relevant course content.)

8. Where applicable, outline the steps you will take to make improvements to the program based on the results of assessment activities identified in #3.

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Program Assessment Report 2017-2018

Program Name: Philosophy

Program Learning Outcome: 1c). Students will develop a critical understanding of various key concepts in philosophy such as truth, meaning, reality, mind, the good, beauty, and political authority.

9. Identify the artifact(s) (i.e. student work or outputs) that you used to assess the PLO. [Projects, papers, presentations, portfolios, exam questions, specific assignments, capstone work]

Artifacts: Oral Exam Questions from philosophy majors in PHIL 413J: The End of Philosophy..

Other artifact(s)

Discussion board posts and 5-7 page paper (as they will arise within the context of the oral examination).

10. Identify the instruments (e.g. rubrics, surveys, spreadsheets, statistical software) used to assess the artifact(s) (i.e. the way in which student output are analyzed).

Instruments: Essay and Exam Rubrics.

Other instruments Used

In order to assess whether students have developed a critical understanding of the key concepts in philosophy such as meaning, truth, reality, etc., the method of assessment chosen was primarily oral examination. Oral examination allows in particular the ability to judge whether a “critical understanding” is present, that is, an understanding that can itself assess the veracity and applicability of concepts vis-à-vis context of the history of the philosophical tradition, modernity, and the mission of the University. The concept of “truth” as it pertains to meaning, reality (being), and goodness, was of particular focus.

11. Describe program collaboration to plan, implement and use the results of assessment.

These particular assessment results will be used to further the Philosophy Department’s discussion concerning the restricting of the philosophy major. More specifically, the department has been considered whether to change, in particular, the methods of assessments required of the major. It will be my contention that oral examinations are just as (if not more) effective than papers and exams at assessing students’ critical understanding of various philosophical concepts.

Explain the results of the assessment activities.

Question prompt: What is truth? That is, what is truth according to the philosophical tradition from Plato forward? What is Nietzsche’s response? What is Heidegger’s?

Results:

Student A: Presented Heidegger and Nietzsche's correct interpretation of truth (as illumination and resentment, respectively), but failed to fully (critically) realize their connection to the history of the philosophical tradition (which understands truth as correspondence). The student was however able to apply the problem of truth as it connects to meaning and reality to modernity, in particular modern science and technology.

Student B: Presented Heidegger and Nietzsche's conceptions of truth within the context of the Platonic-metaphysical tradition that has dominated the history of philosophy. Moreover, the concept of truth was applied to modernity, modern science, and technology, and even to theological concerns that accord with our mission at the university.

Student C: Presented similar to student B, but with more of a critical emphasis on truth as it pertains to theological concerns. That is, the student viewed the problem of truth (and thus goodness, meaning, reality, etc.) primarily through the lens of the question of the existence/non-existence of God.

Conclusion of Results: Need more emphasis on mission/faith/theological matters as they pertain to the history of philosophy.

12. Where applicable, outline the steps you will take to make improvements to the program based on the results of assessment activities identified in #3.

As noted above, these particular assessment results will be used to further the Philosophy Department's discussion concerning the restricting of the philosophy major. More specifically, the department has been considered whether to change, in particular, the methods of assessments required of the major. It will be my contention that oral examinations are just as (if not more) effective than papers and exams at assessing students' critical understanding of various philosophical concepts.

Furthermore, my sense after this assessment activity is that the department ought to make more explicit, in form and content, the various philosophical concepts as they connect and pertain to the mission of the University, in particular questions of faith and the existence/non-existence of God. Students were eager to make this connection themselves, as it appears to have helped better frame the discussion of key philosophical concepts.

As noted above, Students in my course were eager to make these connections, and thus I will place a greater emphasis upon *explicitly* discussing faith and God in my course, which means, specifically, adding more faith-themed content to the course. The obvious way to do this, with regards to my specific course, would be to add more Kierkegaard.