

FORM E-1-A FOR BOSTON COLLEGE CORE CURRICULUM

Department: Philosophy

Course: Philosophy of the Person

- 1) **Have formal learning outcomes for the department's Core courses been developed? What are they?**

Yes. By introducing students to the great philosophical questions, philosophy offers a perspective which makes possible an integrated vision of physical, human and spiritual reality; it weighs propositions fundamental to personal identity, dignity, religious belief, and social responsibility, and examines moral issues facing individuals and communities. The Philosophy core teaches analytical and interpretive skills so that students develop an intellectual and moral framework for considering questions of ultimate value and significance, challenging them to translate philosophical principles into guides for life. Thus, the philosophy core reflects the Jesuit commitment to the advancement of knowledge in ways that evince a concern for the whole person.

Students completing the Philosophy core will be able to:

- 1) Understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground, and are questioned, in contemporary culture
 - 2) Reflect on their individual, social, and religious identities and relationships
 - 3) Examine their values in light of their reflection on philosophical views
 - 4) Develop the ability to analyze arguments in order to create a moral framework for considering questions of ultimate value
 - 5) Consider the nature of notions like reason, evidence, belief, and certainty such that they are able to think critically about the kinds of claims made in different disciplines from the natural sciences to theology
 - 6) Critically engage with contemporary problems and questions using the tools of philosophical reflection and argument
- 2) **Where are these learning outcomes published? Be specific.** (Where are the department's expected learning outcomes for its Core courses accessible: on the web, in the catalog, or in your department handouts?)

Expected learning outcomes for Core courses in Philosophy are published on the 'Philosophy Core' section of our departmental website: <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/mcas/departments/philosophy/undergraduate/core-in-philosophy.html>

They are also included on faculty syllabi for Core courses.

- 3) **Other than GPA, what data/evidence is used to determine whether students have achieved the stated outcomes for the Core requirement?** (What evidence and analytical approaches do you use to assess which of the student learning outcomes have been achieved more or less well?)

In school year 2021-2022, our department began a new, multi-year initiative to assess the success of the Philosophy of the Person program. The members of our undergraduate committee decided to begin by focusing on the first learning goal: "Students completing the Philosophy core will be able to understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground, and are questioned, in contemporary culture." Our plan is to focus on each of the additional learning goals in the coming years. (NB: Philosophy of the Person is a sequential, two-semester sequence. The vast majority of students in Phil Person take Phil Person I in the fall, and Phil Person II in the spring, and have the same instructor for both semesters).

To assess the program's degree of success in meeting the first learning goal, we did two things. First, we added two questions to the student evaluations for the spring semesters. Students were asked to select their degree of agreement (scale of 1-5) with the following two statements:

- (1) This course helped me to understand how people in earlier eras thought about moral values and principles.

Average Response: 4.59

- (2) This course showed me that studying the ideas of past thinkers is a helpful way to understand our own moral values and principles.

Average Response: 4.57

Second, we asked all instructors teaching Phil Person II in Spring 2022 to turn in three completed submissions (randomly selected and anonymized) from any assignment that, in the judgment of the instructor, spoke to the first learning goal. Here are the directions we sent out to instructors:

As part of our department's ongoing assessment of the Philosophy of the Person program, we are asking each of you to submit 3 student submissions for one of your assignments, together with the prompt for that assignment. This semester we are considering the following learning goal: "Students completing the Philosophy core will be able to *understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground and are questioned in contemporary culture.*" So please submit a prompt and submissions that *in your judgment* speaks to that learning goal. This could be a paper, exam, or some other type of assignment. If you have no assignments that speak to that learning goal, then please send a short reply saying so (for the purposes of assessment, which is the point here, that too is a valuable bit of information!).

We would like the selections to be both random and anonymous. To make it random (enough), please submit an assignment from the 5th, 10th, and 20th student on your roster as listed alphabetically on Canvas. If you could anonymize these documents before submitting them to us, that would be very helpful. Especially important is that you remove *your own* name from the assignment prompt and the student submissions. The goal of this project is to assess the *program*, not any individual instructors. So we prefer to have all this material anonymous. The instructors who will be looking at the prompts and assignments will *not* know who the instructors or students are.

The assignments we received were then read and evaluated by a group of four part-time instructors, each of whom has extensive experience teaching the Philosophy of the Person. The evaluators were: Margarita Fenn, Stephen Mendelsohn, James Oldfield, and Paul Van Rooy.

At the end of this document, we have attached (a) the three-question rubric that we asked these evaluators to use for each of the submitted assignments, and (b) the results of the evaluation. In addition to assigning numerical values, each of the four evaluators wrote several paragraphs providing their thoughts on the submissions, the assessment process, and possible improvements to both the course and the assessment process.

- 4) **Who interprets the evidence? What is the process?** (Who in the department is responsible for interpreting the data and making recommendations for curriculum or assignment changes if appropriate? When does this occur?)

This evidence was reviewed by the DUS and undergraduate committee. Our current DUS is on parental leave in fall 2022, so the evaluation process has been slowed, but will resume in earnest in spring 2023.

- 5) **What were the assessment results and what changes have been made as a result of using this data/evidence?** (What were the major assessment findings? Have there been any recent changes to your curriculum or program? How did the assessment data contribute to those changes?)

See below for further results. Our department has not yet made any concrete changes on the basis of these results: discussions are ongoing about how to improve both the Philosophy of the Person course and our assessment of that course.

- 6) **Date of the most recent program review.** (Your latest comprehensive departmental self-study and external review.)

External review in 2009-2010

**Boston College: Philosophy of the Person
Student Assignment Assessment
Boston College Spring/Summer 2022**

This project is part of a multi-year assessment of the Philosophy of the Person course at Boston College. Philosophy of the Person is taught as a two-semester sequence. Taking both semesters is one way to satisfy the Philosophy Core at BC.

The Philosophy Department has articulated [six learning goals](#) for the Phil Core. The focus of this project is the first learning goal listed on the Phil Core webpage:

Students completing the Philosophy Core will be able to understand the historical origins of values and principles that ground, and are questioned in, contemporary culture.

For each of the assignments you read, please select an answer for each of the following:

(1) The work shows an understanding of one or more values or principles that are examined in the history of philosophy.

- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Somewhat poorly
- Poorly
- Not applicable to this assignment

(2) The work shows an ability to make intelligent connections between the history of philosophy and ideas or issues that are discussed and debated in contemporary culture.

- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Somewhat poorly
- Poorly
- Not applicable to this assignment

(3) Overall, this assignment suggests that the first learning goal has been achieved for this student to a significant degree.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable / Cannot say

Data Overview and Summary of Results:

(written by Margarita Fenn, Stephen Mendelsohn, James Oldfield, and Paul Van Rooy.)

We evaluated 68 assessments that were provided by 17 instructors who appear to represent 23 sections of PHIL 1071: Philosophy of the Person II from Spring 2022 (the six instructors who submitted more than 3 assessments are assumed to have taught 2 sections each).

A full account of our evaluations can be found on this spreadsheet which is available to anyone with access to the shared GoogleDrive Folder “Philosophy of the Person Assessment”:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1MmLy95VklxfWHG95cQEpoVp-he8LM9J/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=107103903481325727651&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Each assessment was evaluated using the three criteria found on the rubric provided to us by Micah Lott. We decided to code the evaluations using a numeric scale to make conclusions easier to draw. Each assessment was assigned a value of 1 - 5 in each dimension, where the values stand for:

- 1 = Not Applicable | Cannot Say
- 2 = Poorly | Strongly Disagree
- 3 = Somewhat Poorly | Somewhat Disagree
- 4 = Somewhat Well | Somewhat Agree
- 5 = Very well | Strongly Agree

Numerical Results

1) The work shows an understanding of one or more values or principles that are examined in the history of philosophy.

Mean: 3.6

Median: 4

2) The work shows an ability to make intelligent connections between the history of philosophy and ideas or issues that are discussed and debated in contemporary culture.

Mean: 3.47

Median: 3

3) Overall, this assignment suggests that the first learning goal has been achieved for this student to a significant degree.

Mean: 3.65

Median: 4

Evaluators' Comments:

Paul

On my interpretation, a student will have achieved this learning objective if he or she can provide a reasonable summary of the primary texts, AND use the principles or conclusions to solve a problem or answer a question found in contemporary culture.

I had trouble drawing general conclusions about the group of assessments I scored since some of the assessment prompts did not seem designed to measure what I take to be the second

part of this particular learning objective. Specifically, two of the prompts ask students to summarize portions of the course texts, but did not explicitly ask them to draw connections between the texts and “contemporary culture”. On the other hand, several prompts asked students to apply principles found in the texts to specific contemporary events or problems. These prompts seemed more clearly aligned with both components of the learning objective.

Ultimately, I found it hard to compare the work of students who were asked, for example, to apply Mill’s utilitarianism to a contemporary problem (and perhaps misstated the basics of the theory) with those who were merely asked to summarize, or produce an abstract evaluation of, some element of Mill’s argument and nothing more. In my opinion, neither work provides evidence that the student achieved the learning objective, though in the case of the second, this is because the assessment itself wasn’t designed to measure both elements of the objective.

One thing I did notice across the group were problems of basic misunderstanding that I also find among my students. For example, using consequentialist reasoning to apply the categorical imperative, overlooking/not grasping the technical (sometimes narrow & counter-intuitive) definitions given to key terms, like “freedom”, in the texts, and/or describing Mill’s utilitarianism in act-utilitarian terms (whether he can maintain that position consistently is a scholarly question, but the text IMO pretty clearly expresses a rule-utilitarian view). I can’t say whether these misunderstandings are noticed by all other instructors. However, if these (and other misunderstanding) are recognized by many instructors teaching these texts, I wonder whether it would be helpful to catalog some of them (at least for the core texts in the course), and make a collective effort to develop shared resources or opportunities for instructors of Philosophy of the Person to improve basic understanding of the course texts.

Stephen

I concur both with Paul’s interpretation of the learning objective and the general difficulty in applying a general standard of assessment across the assignments that I reviewed. Some of the assignments were very specifically aligned with the breakdown of the learning objective, according to the three questions that we have been tasked to respond to. That is, on the one hand, some of the assignments prompted students to BOTH explain a general theory or idea from a given philosopher or set of philosophers and to apply those theories or ideas to a relevant contemporary issue – which students were able to do with varying degrees of success. On the other hand, some of the assignments that I reviewed were based on prompts that asked students to simply explain a general theory or idea, to break down the arguments that are used in the text to support that theory or idea, and in some cases to provide a critical evaluation – from the student’s point of view – of that theory/idea or the reasoning/arguments used to justify it. In such cases it was difficult to provide a clear evaluation with respect to the overall learning objective – especially in terms of questions two and three. We have no clear way of knowing if the learning objective is being met in some other way in the class (class discussions, student presentations, other assignments, etc....). So, a question that I have as a matter of practice is whether or not instructors should be tailoring written assignments with this learning objective in mind, or is it satisfactory to the department if the learning objective is met in some other way in the broader context of the class? Furthermore, if so, how can the meeting (or not) of the learning objective be evaluated?

With regard to the second and third assessment questions, I would like to note that some of the assignments that were explicitly geared toward this portion of the learning objective were defined in advance by the instructor. For example, in one assignment (from Instructor #3), students were asked to apply both Bentham and Mill to the problem surrounding the moral justification (or lack thereof) of torture. Other instructors left the contemporary application portion of their assignments open – allowing the students themselves to connect the ideas they were working with to

something they believe is relevant. Both strategies seem to yield the similar degrees of success with respect to the learning objective – provided that sufficient guidance and instruction is provided by the instructor via the prompt.

In addition to the general misunderstandings that Paul mentions in his assessment, which I find are sometimes common in my classes as well, I did notice another pattern across many of the assignments – especially as it relates to the first question we were to respond to in our assessments. That is, I found that under a charitable reading of many of the assignments, general understanding of the historical concepts and ideas involved does indeed *seem* to be present (often times beneath or between the lines of what actually makes it onto the written page); however, in many cases there appears to be some difficulty in clearly expressing that understanding in writing in a complete and coherent manner. So, some of my lower scores for the first question did not so much result from a lack of understanding *per se*, but rather from what seemed to be a difficulty in presenting that understanding effectively. A related difficulty that I noticed in reviewing these assignments, which is consistent with experience of my own students' writing – especially early on in a given year or semester, is a struggle to effectively integrate the text in question effectively and consistently via citation and quotation. This tends to disrupt students' ability to demonstrate in writing whatever understanding of the historical idea they may or may not have. This is a consideration that I kept in mind while assignment scores for the first question.

James

My interpretation of the learning goal that we have been assessing is twofold. First, the student should show awareness of the historical origins of a significant value-related philosophical concept. Second, the student should demonstrate a lively understanding of the *meaning* of that concept by recognizing its application to a contemporary issue or problem. Both of these dimensions contribute to the larger goal of fostering in students an awareness of the historicity of their culture and of their own thinking. In the best case scenario, moreover, both of these dimensions should *complement* each other: one should see at work that the details of the historic conversation make a genuine contribution to the way the concept is applied.

My primary impression is that the assignments I read demonstrated quite varied levels of success with respect to each of the two dimensions, but that it was rare for them to shine in the last mentioned respect (complementarity). In some cases, the student had discussed and made effective use of a readily identifiable concept (for example, the Thomistic idea of law). In many of those cases, however, the student generally remained in an expository mode, perhaps mentioning contemporary *examples*, but without extending that to *application* of the idea to a contemporary debate. In other cases, there was extensive discussion of a contemporary debate (for example, the value of the idea of a “model minority”), but the philosophical concept employed was sufficiently vague that it was not possible even to identify a particular author (or historical text or moment) as its origin (for example, “the relationship between Self and Other”).

In the former cases, it was easy to observe the kind of historical awareness and scholarly understanding that Philosophy of the Person seeks to engender. But there was no opportunity to see that understanding at work in the student's engagement with value-related controversies in the present. In the latter cases, however, it was a challenge to assess the student's level of historical awareness. In some of *these* cases, furthermore, it was largely a matter of conjecture to me how exactly the concept in question was informing the contemporary discussion. For example, one paper says interesting things about the experiences of various racial minorities, and those things bear some resemblance to what any number of historically significant philosophers might say about the subject. But one could equally have written such a paper with no contribution at all from the history of

philosophy beyond the fact that some philosophers (or their English translators, as the case may be) capitalize the words Self and Other.

In both sorts of cases, it was difficult to discern just how far the student's historical awareness (to the extent that such awareness was visible) was contributing to their understanding of the contemporary discussions with which they engaged (if they did indeed engage with such discussions). It was rare, therefore, to see the learning goal achieved to a high level. My first reflection on this conclusion is the (perhaps unhelpful) thought that achieving the sort of complementarity I have been focusing on here is rather difficult to do at the introductory level, and that even modest success in this regard is still very worthwhile for students. My second reflection is that individual instructors both conceive of success in this area in quite different ways and prioritize it to different extents. In addition, they are probably dynamic in this regard – I think that a developing sense of these things is part of growing as a teacher. My third and final reflection is that the department should do what it can to bring that ongoing debate about what counts as success from the intrapersonal level to the communal level. Currently that conversation is limited to the teaching seminar, informal chats in the hallways, and once-a-decade debates about required texts. Philosophy of the Person touches more students than most other activities of the department. What we are trying to do with it should matter a lot to all of us.

Margarita

Based on my understanding of the goal of the project and the evaluation form, I evaluated the students' work using two criteria:

- 1) The student displays a careful reading of the primary texts and an understanding of one or more central ideas of the philosopher(s) and meets the requirements stated in the prompt.
- 2) The student can make correct use of the philosophical ideas, compare or contrast them, or criticize or support them through logical reasoning, and can discuss them in relation to current problems or questions.

In the set of submissions I read, a few students submitted work that met the objectives of the prompt from their instructor (ex. prompt 14, paper 3). Several of the submissions satisfied the objective in the first question of the evaluation form but satisfied less the ones in question two (ex. prompt 15, paper D) or three. Overall, most of the students showed through their writing that they understood the central philosophical idea or claim being made by the philosopher(s). I did not evaluate the format, citations, and other scholarly mechanics of their written work though in my classes, those elements would affect the final grades. For example, there were a few submissions that did not include any direct quotes, but the student clearly expressed an understanding of an idea of Thomas Aquinas or Nietzsche. For the purpose of this assessment, I did not lower the student's score for not making direct references to the philosopher's text.

Uneven Field: A) Evaluating three or six student papers written for the same prompt was relatively easy and enjoyable. The evaluation of the students' thinking and written work, as a whole group, was difficult. When the prompts were different, different skills and tasks were expected from the students. For example, one assignment did not require students to apply their thinking to current problems or issues, and instead asked students to show their understanding of ideas in the primary text(s) and both to criticize and defend them. Another prompt called on students to discuss an idea or claim made by the philosopher(s), then to use their theoretical work to discuss a current problem or question. Such work could more fully meet the objectives of the project as described on the

evaluation form. **B)** A second disparity in the group of assignments was that some assignments seemed to be longer final papers and others were shorter written exercises. What a student can display and produce in a two-page exercise written in a day most likely will be different qualitatively from what she produces in a month in a final six-page paper.

Suggestions: A) If the faculty and staff in the department were to do an assessment in the future, it may help to give instructors or faculty more information in advance about the goal and parameters of the project, to help them decide which assignments or materials to submit. In this way, the “field” may be made more level next time. Though, perhaps part of the data the department was seeking through this assessment project called for an uneven field? **B)** It was helpful to me as a teacher, to see many different assignments made by other teachers. In reading all of the students’ submissions and the prompts, I learned a lot, some of which will improve the assignments I create for my students this year. Perhaps the department has already set up an online site for assignments and other materials that would be helpful to all who teach Philosophy of the Person. If not, I would suggest it as a resource, especially for the doctoral students who are just starting to teach philosophy classes.