Addendum to renewal of CLAS 365E for Gen-Ed recognition

The learning goals stated are two:

1. Correctly apply the basic concepts and forms of reasoning from the tradition or professional practice they studied to ethical issues that arise within those traditions or practices.

2. Analyze and critically evaluate the basic concepts and forms of reasoning from the tradition or professional practice they studied.

Broadly speaking, ethical action proceeds from bases that are either rational or character-based. Since "ethics" is named from the latter, and primarily concerns it, the sample paper-topics and exam question under VI on the current form are designed to illustrate this aspect. Thus:

(1) The written assignment quoted on the form under VI based on a study of Aesop exemplifies a way of assessing a student's grasp of the first, as does also the sample exam question framed in terms of "likelihood". This concept recurs throughout the course, surfacing in such authors as Hesiod, Plato, and Cicero (where it appears as decorum). By having to write an Aesopian fable on principles set out in the Progymnasmata of Aphonius and Hermogenes (who also explain how the formation of a likely fable enables the fable itself to "form the character" of the young), students experience what it is to frame a moral tale in terms of likelihood, or probability, i.e. to "apply" this concept from the tradition. When the instructor reads the paper or exam-response, he is able, by the application of experienced judgment, to "assess" how well the student grasped and applied this concept.

Some people think of ethics in mainly terms of rationally-justified behavior. This is especially true of those working in modern philosophy departments, who also tend reflexively to assert a proprietary interest in the field of "ethics". For this reason, it may be useful to add an example illustrative of the second aspect mentioned.

(2) The founder of moral philosophy is by all accounts Socrates, who is still today known mainly for having voluntarily died for the sake of his moral commitment to justice. Plato’s Apology of Socrates purports to be his defense speech when on trial for his life (in Greek, “apologia” just means “defense”). According to Plato’s account, the ground Socrates offered for his willingness to die was that it could not harm him to die, while it would harm him to compromise his ethical commitment to justice. His reasoning was that the Athenians could not harm him so long as he remained a just man, since it is impossible for anyone harm a just man. The argument for the minor premise is that, since harming something is making it worse in respect of virtue, killing someone cannot be harming him, since killing him is not making him worse in respect of virtue. Socrates' reasoning is a valid syllogism in the second figure (specifically Cesare). Or, for those who prefer modern dress, it may be symbolized as follows:

\[ H \rightarrow W \]
\[ \sim (K \rightarrow W) \]
therefore \[ \sim (K \rightarrow H) \]

By studying Plato’s Apology of Socrates in CLAS365E, a student should learn, inter alia, that maintaining an ethical position – even one coming at the cost of one’s own life -- need not be a matter of dogmatic faith or well-designed rhetoric, but can have rationally arguable grounds. This instance is not only well known, but remains the classic case of such a moral commitment, position, and articulation. A paper assignment challenging a student to explain the argument as it occurs in the Platonic text (or an exam question asking him to discuss its form) provides something written on the basis of which to judge how well the student "analyzes and . . . evaluates" moral reasoning.