

Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor
May 2009

Answer one question from each of the three sections below. You will have SIX hours to do so. No theorist should be discussed in detail more than once in answering the questions.

Section I – Overview

1. Modern and contemporary political theory has queried the foundations of the modern sovereign state. The state has been conceptualized as a primarily functional organization of power and as an embodiment of the collective normative capacities of a people. Discuss at least two major conceptualizations of the state and comment on the comparative value of these approaches, given contemporary challenges to the notion of a sovereign state in the context of globalization.
2. Liberty has been a recurrent theme in Western Political Thought, if not the definitive theme. But there are many different conceptions of liberty, and even thinkers who share a love for liberty disagree about the true object of their affection. Define at least two different conceptions of liberty, and trace their rise and/or fall over the course of Western political thought, comparing and contrasting at least three major thinkers along the way.
3. Imagine a graduate student colleague of yours has never read any work in the canon of Western political thought, but wants to do so in her spare time this summer. What three works do you recommend and why? Explain both what she could get out of each work individually and what additionally from reading the three alongside one another. If it helps to focus your answer, you may decide and specify what major subfield (American, comparative, or IR) the student is studying.

Section II - Comparison

1. How did Christianity affect the character of Western political thought? Answer by comparing one major Christian thinker and one classical Greek philosopher. As viewed through the lens of the comparison you select, make and defend an argument regarding the extent to which Christianity involves decisive breaks from earlier political philosophy versus just extending existing views?
2. Will Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* be remembered 100 years from now as the definitive work of 20th Century Anglo-American political thought? Or will one of his critics, or one of his later books, be remembered as defining the age? Answer with reference to *TJ*, and to one other work on the question of justice.

3. Both J.S. Mill and Marx were Enlightenment figures who upheld the forward progress of history. Following are two passages exemplifying their positions. Discuss their theories of development/change.

Marx (*Communist Manifesto*, 1848): “All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority.....What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

Mill (*On Liberty*, 1859): “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement.”

Section III – Single author

1. Is the man who wrote *The Prince* the same man who wrote *The Discourses*? Is there any way to reconcile these two political works, one aimed at advising autocracy and the other promoting a republican form of government? Did Machiavelli simply change his mind between the composition of these two works, or is there some commonality we can identify that makes both of them the product of one consistent political thinker?
2. Rousseau’s reconstruction of the origins of the self in his *Discourse on Inequality* provides a brilliant analysis and indictment of potential pathologies in complex social orders. He proceeds to retrieve social order through politics in *The Social Contract*. Discuss Rousseau’s diagnosis and solution (“cure”?) through these two works.
3. It might be argued that modern German political thinkers found an answer to the turmoil of modernity in a fantasy of ancient Greek political life. If Nietzsche's early work crystallizes one stage of this idealization of antiquity, Arendt and Strauss place it firmly in the mainstream of twentieth-century political theory (under the influence of their Nietzschean teacher, Heidegger). Choose one late nineteenth or twentieth century German political theorist and discuss and evaluate the merits and demerits of this thinker's turn to antiquity to solve the problems of modernity.