

**Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor
May 2011**

Answer one question from each of the three sections below. No theorist should be discussed in detail more than once in answering the questions.

Section I – Overview

1. Grand narratives of the history of Western political thought often include a turning point after which their predominant theme becomes decline or loss. Identify at least two alternative contenders for such a turning point and the specific thinkers each highlights. Which of these alternatives do you consider more productive and for what purpose?
2. Liberty has been a recurrent theme in Western political thought, if not the definitive theme. But there are multiple 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 within Western political thought, comparing and contrasting at least three major thinkers along the way.
3. Scholars of international relations sometimes portray contemporary positions in their field as extending traditions that reach back across the centuries to canonized figures of Western political thought. Evaluate the pros and/or cons of this interpretive activity, and support your arguments about this general practice with specific examples of the way IR scholars have interpreted one ancient thinker (Thucydides or St. Augustine) and at least one early-modern or modern thinker.

Section II - Comparison

1. Plato and Aristotle are sometimes interpreted as fountainheads of alternative traditions in Western political thought and sometimes as variations on a single tradition of classical political philosophy. Which interpretation do you find more compelling and why?
2. Both Carl Schmitt and Max Weber gave close attention to the concept of “the state.” Compare their arguments and comment on their relative value for scholars today, given contemporary challenges to the notion of a sovereign state in the context of globalization.
3. Leo Strauss famously interpreted Hobbes as Machiavelli’s successor, claiming that Machiavelli “discovered the continent on which Hobbes could erect his thought.” Assess the insights or oversights of relating the two thinkers in this manner.

Section III – Single author

1. Should political theorists in the 21st century continue to read and teach Marx? Why or why not?
2. Nietzsche's theory of perspectivism had a profound influence on subsequent social theory, influencing modern thinkers like Freud and Foucault. Explain what is meant by Nietzsche's perspectivism. What are the effects of perspectivism for the enterprise of political theory as a worldly one best thought of as transformational or critical?
3. For Rawls, the original position (with the veil of ignorance) models conditions of fairness, conditions under which the decisions made about principles of justice will not be biased by "arbitrary" social facts like race, gender, class, etc. But Rawls also advocates the process of reflective equilibrium, to result in principles that fit with our intuitions or considered convictions about justice. So which is it? Is Rawls looking to design a fair procedure (the original position) that will reveal the truth about justice? Or is he looking for a procedure that will reaffirm/refine notions about justice that we imbibe from our political culture? If the former, why would we believe the resulting principles to be true? If the latter, how can we use the resulting principles to critique our political culture?