**Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor**

**September 2012**

**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**

I.1. In his *Social Theory of International Politics*,Alexander Wendt differentiates “Hobbesian” “Lockean,” and “Kantian” “cultures of anarchy.” This is but one example of the recurring appeal to canonical thinkers within international relations theory. What are the pros and/or cons of this practice? Explicate your general position on this practice with concrete reference to at least two canonical thinkers and their interpretation by at least one IR theorist.

I.2. The US Constitution states that “the United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government.” What are key institutions and ideals of a “republican” form of government and how do these relate to “democratic” institutions and ideals? Discuss with regard to three thinkers, at least one of whom wrote *after* the American and French revolutions sought to inaugurate republican government on a large scale in the modern world.

I.3. The liberal tradition might be viewed as an ever-evolving interpretation of the nature of rights or it might be depicted as a principled adherence to individual rights. Philosophers such as Will Kymlicka and Susan Okin have challenged the abstract individualism embedded in certain interpretations of liberal theory. What are the most powerful arguments developed against individual rights theory? Do resources exist within classical liberal theory – Locke and/or Mill – to address such arguments? Should liberalism adhere to a principled commitment to individual right?

**Section II – Comparison**

II.1. Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* critique post-war American democracy with an eye towards its improvement. Rawls believes that contemporary democratic societies suffer from a deficit of justice, which can be corrected through a fair distribution of social goods. Arendt, by contrast, believes that the post-war democracies suffer from an excess of apolitical consumerism centered around an over-valuation of private life. She calls for a renewal of public life, pluralism, and individual freedom to stave off the encroachment of economic affairs upon political life. Is Arendt more persuasive, or Rawls? Discuss their respective critiques and prescriptions, noting that their perspectives on political life are largely antithetical and incongruent.

II.2. A graduate student colleague of yours would like to be introduced to “ancient” Greek political philosophy, but she only has time to read one author. Do you point her to Plato or to Aristotle? Considering matters of *both* substance and style, explain your advice by noting and examining relevant differences between these two figures. If you consider it relevant, you may specify that the student’s major field is American politics, or comparative politics, or international relations.

III.3. Paul Ricoeur famously lumped together Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as philosophers “of suspicion” in that they taught us to look behind the surface meaning of consciousness and experience to find the deeper forces at work. Taking two of them, discuss and compare their theories of the formation of human consciousness. Which has left the most powerful legacy in contemporary political theory (even if you do not yourself wholly endorse the legacy)? Defend your judgment with reference to specific theoretical descendents.

**Section III – Single Author**

III.1. Plato’s *Republic* is quite likely the most disputed text within the canon of political philosophy. It is often read as a blueprint for an authoritarian or “closed” society, while it is just as frequently interpreted as an anti-utopian warning to radical thinkers to forgo total solutions to politics. Which of these readings is correct? Does Plato mean for his radical proposals to be taken seriously? Why or why not?

III.2. There are textbooks available for modern political thought courses that collect together readings from a wide range of thinkers. If they include a selection from Montesquieu, such texts usually include only the first half of Book 11 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, which contains his comments on the meaning of liberty and the English Constitution. In what ways might reading such a small selection (less than 2% by page-length of *Spirit of the Laws*) skew students’ view of Montesquieu? Given that length constraints of a textbook collection of readings would make it impossible to include more than 10% of *Spirit of the Laws*, would it better not to include any reading selection from Montesquieu?

III.3. Machiavelli presents a study in contrasts: he is typically studied as the founder of modern political thought, yet, he is also deeply embedded in the intellectual context of Renaissance humanism. Most notably, he appears to develop radically different approaches to foundations of political “reality” and political knowledge in *The* *Prince* and *The Discourses*. How significant are these divergent tendencies in undermining a coherent theoretical legacy?