

Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor

August 2021

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. One enduring theme in political theory is the relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live. Some thinkers emphasize the ways in which institutions and social structures shape the development of individuals' characters, frame individuals' choices, or even determine individuals' behavior. Others emphasize the ways in which individuals, by exercising their freedom or autonomy, determine the course of their own lives and character development. Many thinkers combine these elements. With reference to at least three thinkers, defend your own view about the way(s) in which societal conditions determine or constrain individuals' behavior and/or character traits, or how individuals can escape this determinism.
2. When (if ever) is violent revolution morally justified? Draw on at least three theorists to support your answer.
3. How should we understand "happiness" and what role should happiness play in the well-lived life? Answer with reference to one ancient, one modern, and one contemporary thinker.

Section II: Comparison

1. Political theorists often craft hypothetical or ideal worlds or engage in thought experiments when discussing theories of justice. With reference to two political theorists, draw out what role these play in the construction of theories of justice. What are some potential benefits and potential problems that arise from using these worlds or experiments as starting points of inquiry rather than a realistic assessment of the world in which we actually live?
2. Consider the question of what role reasoning based on experience (i.e., a posteriori reasoning) should play in moral theorizing. Compare and contrast Kant's and J.S. Mill's

views on this question. Do their different views about the role of a posteriori reasoning translate into different views on what morality requires? If so, how? If not, why not?

3. Compare Arendt's understanding of the political function and value of "power" with Fanon's understanding of the political function and value of violence. Discuss whether you think power (as Arendt understands it) or violence, or some combination, represents the more promising foundation for political change. Alternatively, discuss in which contexts you think power represents the more promising foundation for political change and in which contexts violence does.

Section III: Single Author

1. Throughout his *Ethics*, Aristotle maintains that human wholeness (eudaimonia) consists in the activities of both practical virtue and intellectual virtue over a complete life. Drawing intellectual inspiration from Aristotle's *Ethics*, how can one, in your view, still be whole (or not), if one falls deficient in intellectual virtue?
2. Throughout his dialogues, Plato draws a sharp distinction between the human soul, the immortal, and the human body, the mortal. Because of such dualism, the soul is imprisoned, or trapped, in the body, which only serves as its vehicle. Can one still argue in favor of the immortality of the soul if the body continually corrodes and corrupts it?
3. The grave danger of any democracy would be to remain complacent about individualism, where, as Tocqueville argues, 'each citizen [tends] to isolate himself from the mass of those like him,' and, as a result, a form of despotism emerges that is milder but more extensive than its predecessors, which would 'degrade men rather than torment them.' Using Tocqueville's thought, in your view, can we offer a solution to the problem of individualism, if any, or do we in fact raise deeper skepticism about the future of democracy?