

# Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor

August 2025

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. Can social contract theory provide a satisfactory account of the family? Answer with regard to any three authors.
2. For the last two hundred years, political thought has often been arranged around specific “questions” or “problems”—e.g., the “class question,” “the Jewish question,” the “problem of the color line,” and the “colonial problem.” Is this a helpful way of understanding politics? Answer with regard to any three authors.
3. In contemporary debates in American politics, a key source of contention is whether citizens and non-citizens should be afforded the same set of rights and duties within a society. Using one ancient, one early modern, and one more recent thinker, explain what political philosophers might mean by the use of the term “citizen” and why they believe citizens are special (or not) and therefore afforded (or not afforded) different rights and responsibilities than non-citizens.

## Section II: Comparison

1. Is Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative liberty tenable? Answer with regard to Berlin and at least one other author.
2. Often, different thinkers’ prescriptions for how to organize a political community are informed by their respective accounts of human flourishing. Pick two of the following thinkers who you believe have different understandings of human flourishing: Plato, Aristotle, JS Mill, Kant, Arendt. Do the differences in their understandings of human flourishing translate into differences in their views on how political communities should be organized? If so, how?
3. The idea of the “social contract” plays a role in both Hobbes’ and Locke’s political philosophies, but they understand the nature and implications of the social contract differently. How is each thinker’s understanding of the proper limits of sovereign power informed by his understanding of the social contract?

## Section III: Single Author

1. Schmitt defines the political as the “friend-enemy distinction.” For Schmitt, writing in the 1930s, it was essential to draw the friend-enemy distinction between national communities. However,

arguably this distinction may also be drawn within a single community. This question asks you to draw on Schmitt to reflect on how the friend-enemy distinction might operate in the present-day US. First, what is the friend-enemy distinction as Schmitt understands it, and why, in his view, is it fundamental to politics? Second, what dangers are associated with employing the friend-enemy distinction in domestic instead of international politics? Third, is present-day domestic US politics organized around a Schmittian friend-enemy distinction—and if so, what are the observable signs of where the line between friends and enemies is being drawn?

2. Why does Rawls focus his attention on justice considered as a virtue of social institutions rather than justice considered as a virtue of individual persons or interpersonal interactions? What does this focus illuminate? What does it obscure?
3. J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* both treat the topic of freedom. Taken together, do these two works present a coherent, unified theory of freedom, or are there tensions or contradictions between how Mill understands freedom in the different works? What are some specific points of consistency or inconsistency across these works? If there are tensions, does Mill make any attempts to mitigate them? Is he successful in doing so?