

Comprehensive Exam: Political Theory Minor
August 2019

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. The central theme or problem of political theory may well be the discovery of the proper “order” of political life. Choose three thinkers from different periods and explain their approach to the perennial problem of order in political life. From our contemporary vantage point, which approach do you find most persuasive? Why?

I.2. Some scholars argue that modernity is indissolubly linked to a notion of "progress." To what extent does your reading of the history of political thought support, or rebut, this claim? Discuss with reference to three political thinkers.

I.3. Is the domain of “the political” justifiably designated as a distinct realm or form of existence, or is this assumption a conceit of political scientists and theorists? Using the work of three writers (from at least two different time periods), discuss whether and how this conceptualization advances understanding of human collective life.

Section II – Comparison

II.1. Hobbes’s “refounding” of political philosophy upon non-Aristotelian premises is undoubtedly among his greatest accomplishments. Explain—as comprehensibly as possible—the character and extent of Hobbes’s break with Aristotle and with Aristotelian thought as a whole.

II.2. Compare Marx's claim to have analyzed modern society through the prism of the factory with Foucault's claim to have done so through the prison. Which theory is better able to come to grips with the fundamental structures of contemporary existence outside of these particular institutions and why? In what ways, if any, are they deficient?

II.3. The ideal of individual freedom (liberty) stands as the foundation of liberal political theory. Using two of the following, compare their arguments for this characteristically “western” value: Locke, Mill, or Isaiah Berlin. How do these ideas hold up in the face of today’s identity politics?

Section III – Single Author

III.1. Although Nietzsche’s political thought is sometimes placed in the liberal camp thanks to its valorization of the individual, a close reading of his genealogy of Western morality gives us good reason to doubt the accuracy of such an interpretation of his political views. In what ways are Nietzsche’s political views better understood as anti-liberal?

III.2. Foucault contends that political theorists "need to cut off the king's head;" they should stop thinking about politics in terms of the model of a central repository of power and sovereignty. Unpack this claim and indicate whether you agree or disagree with Foucault and explain why.

III.3. In both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, Arendt singles out the necessity of protecting a "private" sphere separate from the public. Why is this so important to her theory of the flourishing of human life and how does it contribute to sustaining the political world, in her view?