

Political Theory Comprehensive Exam September 23, 2015

Answer just one question in each section. You have 5 hours to complete the exam.

I. Approaches

1. Answers to the questions “What is political theory?” and “What should political theory accomplish?” depend crucially on answers to the question “What is politics?” or, alternatively, “What is the political?” Discuss the relationship between political theory and “the political” with reference to at least three political thinkers.
2. What place should political theory have within political science? In particular, what is the proper relationship (if any) between normative and/or critical political thought and empirical political science? Discuss, with reference to at least three political thinkers.
3. Carl Schmitt declares, “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political.” Then he goes on to elaborate a distinctive state-centered view of the political. Discuss the strengths and limits of Schmitt’s approach in relation to the alternative views of at least two other thinkers.

II. Thinker: Aristotle

1. Concerned with the place of reflection under the constraints of politics, many strains of contemporary political theory now advocate “practical philosophy,” “practical wisdom,” or sometimes simply “judgment.” Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* is the earliest statement of this ethos within political theory, and continues to inspire. Discuss Aristotle’s conception of *phronesis* in light of these more contemporary views of the place of political thought within political life. Include at least three of Aristotle’s interlocutors in your discussion.
2. It is often claimed that there are two Aristotles relevant to political theory: The Aristotle of the *Politics*, and the Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Taking into consideration problems of political judgment—especially, its sources and authority—explain the important differences between these works. Are they reconcilable? Include at least three of Aristotle’s interlocutors in your discussion.
3. Aristotle’s political theory has had a deep, ongoing influence within the field of political theory. Yet it also poses important challenges with respect to the extent to which his ideas and insights are limited by their connection to arguably oppressive social and political relationships, such as slavery, empire, and the exclusion of women from the polis. With reference to at least three of Aristotle’s interpreters, discuss the extent to which his core ideas are limited by or transcend the way that they are implicated in an oppressive social-political order.

III. Thinker: Rawls

1. A number of commentators on Rawls's work have insisted that his focus on an "ideal theory" of justice has significant limitations for addressing the quite non-ideal, often tortuous, world of actually existing social and political relationships, including relations of domination involving enduring histories of colonialism, racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Assess the extent to which Rawls's theory can stand up to these concerns with reference to at least three of Rawls's interlocutors
2. Rawls often stands accused of constructing a liberalism that depoliticizes and possibly legitimizes suppression of political conflict. Explain these criticisms and assess their validity. Include at least three of Rawls's interlocutors in your discussion.
3. Is Rawls' liberalism inherently *democratic*? Or does his method of constructing a political liberalism suggest or require limitations to democracy? In your answer, distinguish between liberalism and democracy (if you find distinctions), and explain what is gained and what is lost, if anything, by approaching democracy through political liberalism. Include at least three of Rawls's interlocutors in your discussion.

IV. Theme: Judging Compromises in Democracies

1. Because one of the political functions of democratic political systems is to manage pluralism and conflict in ways that are collectively productive, democracies surely require compromise. When is compromise a virtue within politics? Are there conditions under which compromises are likely to be desirable or undesirable from a democratic perspective? Discuss this question. Include in your discussion at least three political thinkers who have considered the place and nature of compromise within politics.
2. What are the key features that mark fundamentally *democratic* political compromises? In other words, what are the most promising ways to differentiate compromises that are democratically acceptable or legitimate from those that simply sustain the interests of more powerful groups in political processes? Discuss this question with reference to at least three political thinkers who have considered the place and nature of compromise within politics.
3. Perhaps surprisingly given the politics involves conflict, there are few well-developed theories of compromise within political theory. Indeed, when political theorists do discuss compromise, they tend to regard it with suspicion, if not outright hostility. One reason, possibly, is that most view archetypical compromises as situations in which moral goods bend before power. What would a normative case for compromise look like? Discuss this question. Include in your discussion at least three political thinkers who have considered the place and nature of compromise within politics.