Political Theory
Comprehensive Examination
Spring 2010

PART I (Morning)

Discuss one (1) of the following questions. You will have approximately three hours to write your answer. Your essay should be comprehensive and detailed, but also well-focused and addressed to the question at hand.

1. Much of the contemporary literature on distributive justice focuses on the attempt to balance two moral imperatives: (i) life chances should not be determined by endowments of qualities distributed in a manner that is arbitrary from the moral point of view; and (ii) persons should only be compensated for inequalities in fortune for which it is not reasonable to hold them responsible. Various balances between these concerns have been urged. Rawls, for example, argues that the principles of justice that regulate the basic structure of society must be designed to mitigate or neutralize arbitrary influences on life chances; Dworkin argues that persons should be compensated for the effects of bad brute luck, but not of bad option luck; and Arneson argues that persons should not be compensated for inequalities in fortune that result from choices made after a person has been guaranteed equal opportunity for welfare. In a contrasting vein, Nozick argues that neither of these concerns should be central to an account of distributive justice. Discuss three or more thinkers who, in your opinion, best develop the case for or against the centrality of these concerns for an account of distributive justice. Examine the balance of considerations that each theorist cites to justify his/her approach. Which approach provides the firmest foundation for a conception of distributive justice?

2. One of the more important recent developments in political theory has been the articulation of several accounts of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy emerged primarily as a response to aggregative conceptions of democracy. Aggregative theories of democracy, along with agonistic theories of democracy, are its chief rivals. What characterizes aggregative conceptions of democracy? What characterizes agonistic theories of democracy? What characterizes deliberative theories of democracy (Rawlsian or Habermasian)? What are some strengths and weaknesses of each approach? Which approach provides the firmest foundation for a conception of democratic legitimacy?

Political Theory
Comprehensive Examination
Spring 2010

Part II (Afternoon)

Answer any two (2) of the following questions.

1. In *A Theory of Justice*, and more explicitly in *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls employs a constructivist approach to develop his account of distributive justice. Explain and evaluate Rawls's constructivist methodology. In particular, how do the respective aspects of the original position represent intuitions regarding justice (e.g. the intuitions that: (i) each person possesses an inviolability based on justice; (ii) justice must be impartial; (iii) a just distribution of goods cannot be justified on the basis of considerations that are arbitrary from the moral point of view; and (iv) rational and reasonable participants in the project of constructing a theory of justice regard each other as free and equal)? Has Rawls chosen the right set of intuitions and represented them in an adequate manner? How does the character of the original position structure the incentives of the parties choosing principles of justice? Are the veil of ignorance's informational constraints appropriate or excessive? Discuss the role of the veil of ignorance in ensuring that the choice of principles will be impartial.

2. Social contract theories are often held to provide clear limits on political authority given the priority of natural liberty. Yet one of the foremost contract theorists – Thomas Hobbes – seems to provide only the most minimal limitations on political authority. His contemporary, John Locke, provides much more extensive limitations. Hobbes, however, would likely argue that Locke's account is simply incoherent. How do Hobbes and Locke understand natural liberty, contract, and the limitations on political authority? Why might Hobbes argue that Locke's account is incoherent? Is Hobbes himself subject to the charge of incoherence?

3. Rousseau argues that citizens alienate their rights to the sovereign without reservation. Yet he also argues that the powers of the government must be limited according to law. How does Rousseau's distinction between the sovereign and the government make total alienation of rights to the sovereign consistent with a theory of limited government? What kind of criticism of the social contract theories of Hobbes and Locke is implicit in this distinction? How does this distinction help Rousseau to respond to Hobbes's argument for the absolute power of the prince? Why must the alienation of rights to the sovereign (in Rousseau) be unreserved? Is Rousseau's theory therefore undemocratic; or does his account of the sovereign make an important contribution to democratic theory?

4. Max Weber, in his work *Economy and Society*, discussed three different conceptions of legitimate authority: authority based in tradition, authority based on a leader's charisma, and authority based on formal-legal procedures. Given that virtually every modern nation-state relies on the third conception of legitimacy, which kind of meta-ethical theory – deontological or consequentialist – provides a better account of formal-

legal legitimacy? Does virtue ethics provide a viable alternative to either deontology or consequentialism when it comes to political legitimacy?

5. Should the currency of egalitarian justice be homogeneous or heterogeneous? Contributors to the current egalitarian literature disagree regarding this question. Amartya Sen argues that a homogeneous currency would exclude information that is essential to the egalitarian analysis of the justice of distributions. G. A. Cohen concedes that heterogeneity may be necessary to reflect essential information, but worries that the employment of a heterogeneous account of fundamental egalitarian concerns may generate problems of decidability and intelligibility. Martha Nussbaum argues that egalitarian theory can organize heterogeneous information or principles around a concern with realizing the "architectonic" faculty of practical reason. Ronald Dworkin rejects the argument that a heterogeneous currency is necessary to reflect essential information. In your view, is heterogeneity essential or detrimental to the effort to specify an account of fundamental egalitarian concerns? Are certain forms of heterogeneity (e.g. informational pluralism) less problematic than other forms? Are all of these theorists talking about the same kind of heterogeneity? Discuss this question with reference to at least two political theorists or philosophers.

6. In explaining what makes political rule legitimate, leading thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began from the idea of a covenant or contract. Write an essay in which you discuss the development of social contract theory. Where do contract theorists (e.g., Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) agree, and where do they differ? What main objections might be made to contract theory as a way of determining the basis for legitimate rule? In the final analysis, do you regard contract theory as the best way to settle the question of who should rule? Explain.