Political Theory
Comprehensive Examination
Spring 2011

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 egalitarian literature focuses on the question of whether responsibility for disadvantage should constitute a matter of fundamental concern for egalitarians. An important strand of contemporary egalitarian thought, a strand that Elizabeth Anderson calls 'luck equality', argues that responsibility for disadvantage should constitute a *decisive* concern for any acceptable egalitarian theory. Leading egalitarians have developed a number of contrasting approaches to incorporating this concern in their theories. Ronald Dworkin argues that persons should be compensated for the effects of bad brute luck, but not of bad option luck; Richard Arneson argues that persons should not be compensated for inequalities in fortune that result from choices made after the person has been provided with equal opportunity for welfare; and Gerald Cohen argues that persons should not be compensated for welfare deficits in cases in which the disadvantage is so intrinsically connected to the individual's constitutive commitments that the individual would not choose to be without it. In a contrasting vein, Elizabeth Anderson and Matt Matravers argue that responsibility for disadvantage constitutes an inappropriate focus for egalitarian theory. Discuss <u>three or more</u> thinkers who, in your opinion, best develop the case for or against the centrality of this concern for an account of egalitarian justice.

2. Throughout much of the history of western political thought, the distinction between philosophy and rhetoric has been clear. Yet the last 30 years have seen increased attention to the ways in which persuasion is central to political legitimacy. This has created greater scholarly interest in rhetoric, and its place in political philosophy. Why has persuasion been – whether it is termed deliberation, justification, or rhetoric – of such importance to recent democratic theory? What approaches to democracy do these approaches seek to displace? In spite of their interest in persuasion, do Habermasian or Rawlsian approaches recreate the philosophy-rhetoric binary?

In answering your question, you should discuss:

One scholar from Group A: Non-Deliberative Theorists
Robert Dahl
Joseph Schumpeter
Anthony Downs

Two scholars from Group B: Deliberative Theorists
John Rawls
Jurgen Habermas
Josh Cohen
Seyla Benhabib

One scholar from Group C: Rhetorical Theorists
Bryan Garsten
Danielle Allen

PART II (Afternoon)

Discuss any two (2) of the following questions.

1. In some theories of justice, the actual economic and political history of a society is crucial in determining whether that society is just. In other theories, that history is irrelevant. Analyze the relevant arguments of one modern political philosopher who can be identified with the first position and the arguments of one modern political philosopher who can be identified with the other position (modern here means 20th or 21st century). Who has the stronger argument in this particular respect and why?

2. Does Rousseau's *On the Social Contract* solve the problem with which he ends the *Second Discourse*? If so, how? If not, why not? Or are his projects in the two texts not even commensurable?

3. A standard textbook view of Hobbes and Rousseau represents two starkly opposed approaches to the understanding of the modern state. In recent years, however, several scholars have challenged this view. Do the affinities between Hobbes and Rousseau outweigh their differences? Refer to specific clauses as you justify your response.

4. Rawls argues that an adequate theory of justice must aim to ensure that the distribution of social goods and opportunities is not determined by the distribution of natural endowments (such as talents and interests) or social endowments (such as wealth and social position). These endowments should not determine a person's life chances, Rawls argues, because they are distributed through a morally arbitrary natural lottery. Discuss and evaluate this argument. Does Rawls mean to suggest that the distribution of natural goods, such as talents, is itself unjust? If not, where is the injustice located? In Chapter 2, Rawls discusses three different interpretations of the very general principles of justice that he sets out earlier in the chapter. Discuss the way in which each of these interpretations (natural liberty, liberal equality, democratic equality) attempts to neutralize morally arbitrary influences on life chances.

5. Explain and evaluate Nozick's notion of a fundamental explanation. Does a fundamental explanation justify, or merely describe, the establishment of the institution it explains? Why might we be willing to accept a fundamental explanation as a justification? What is the most serious objection to the use of fundamental explanation as a complete and final justification for a social institution? How does Nozick use fundamental explanation: (i) to support his claim that the minimal state is justified; (ii) to justify his claim that Locke was wrong to think that legitimate political power must be grounded in express consent?

6. Explain and evaluate Rawls's use of the social contract method to construct and justify his theory. What considered judgments about justice does the social contract embody? How do different features of the original position embody different values? Has Rawls chosen the appropriate set of values and represented them in an adequate way? How much does the character/structure of the original position limit the kinds of principles that may be chosen (discuss the effects of informational constraints on the motivation of the choosers; do not discuss the maximin argument)? Is the veil of ignorance's limitations on the information available to the parties appropriate or excessive?