

Fall 2010
PhD Comprehensive Examination in Political Theory
Study Guide

Below are five questions. Two of these will appear on the actual exam. Of those two, you will need to write a response to one.

1. Recent political theory, philosophy, and classics scholarship coheres around the view that Plato was a critic of Athenian democracy. Less clear is what kind of critic Plato was. Was Plato a friendly critic of Athenian democracy, seeking to address and remedy weaknesses of the regime? Or was Plato a radical critic of Athenian democracy, seeking to replace it with something else entirely? In your answer, you should draw on Plato's *Apology*, *Crito*, and the *Republic*. In addition, you should draw on one of the following works: *Laws*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*, *Protagoras*.

2. The political theorists listed below are representative of the great political thinkers in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Western European political thought and in American Political Thought. From each of a, b, c, and d, select ONE theorist. Describe the basic components and structure of the political theory of each. Compare and contrast these FOUR selections, identifying the similarities and differences in their theories.

- a) Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas
- b) Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume
- c) Burke, Bentham, J. S. Mill, Marx, Nietzsche
- d) Madison, John Adams, T. Jefferson, John Calhoun, H. D. Thoreau

3. Hobbes argues throughout his major works (*De Cive*, *Elements of Law*, *Leviathan*) that political authority, no matter what form it takes, must be absolute. He admits that it is possible that absolutist regimes could be democracies or aristocracies, just as they can be monarchies. Yet Hobbes is an avowed defender of absolute monarchy. Why does Hobbes argue that monarchy is superior to even absolute democracy and aristocracy? To what extent should we understand this opposition as a function of the social and political context in which Hobbes was writing?

4. Nozick argues that the use of an original position procedure for assigning grades would predictably fail to assign grades to the persons meriting those grades. This example, Nozick claims, illustrates the fallibility of an approach to justice that fails to ground its account of just distribution in historical entitlements. Evaluate Nozick's claim. How does Rawls justify the claim that the original position is a fair procedure for choosing principles of justice? Would this argument justify employing an original position procedure to assign grades? What would a Rawlsian response to Nozick reveal about the structure of justification in Rawls' theory?

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 a theory incorporating a heterogeneous account of fundamental egalitarian concerns faces problems of decidability and intelligibility. Martha Nussbaum argues that egalitarian theory can organize heterogeneous information or principles around an "architectonic" concern with realizing the human 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? Discuss this question with reference to at least two political theorists or philosophers.