

Political Theory Comprehensive Exam  
Spring 2011

**Study Guide Questions**

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 three or more thinkers who, in your opinion, best develop the case for or against the centrality of this concern for an account of egalitarian justice.
2. The rationality of political leaders and ordinary political actors has been an important theme and underlying assumption in much of western political philosophy. By the same token, the rationality assumption has hardly been without its critics. With reference to the work of at least two political philosophers or theorists, describe and critically examine the role of the rationality assumption in their work. With reference to the work of at least two political philosophers or theorists, describe and critically examine the role in their work that a critique of the rationality assumption plays, or the positive role in their work that the assumption that political actors are not rational plays.
3. 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  
Jon Elster

**One scholar from Group C: Rhetorical Theorists**

Bryan Garsten  
Danielle Allen

4. The emergence of the democratic nation-state in Western Europe was the probable cause and probable effect of the growth of modern political theory. Identify the key contributions to political thought which became necessary for the justification for the modern democratic nation-state (authors you MIGHT consider include Machiavelli, Bodin, Althusius, Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Marx, and Nietzsche, among others). Begin by setting out the theoretical requirements of the modern democratic nation-state, then relate the contribution(s) of each of the theorists you choose to examine toward the rationale for a democratic state. You must examine at least four.
5. Social contract theory provides the most influential modern account of political legitimacy. Discuss the development of social contract theory. Where do contract theorists (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) agree, and where do they differ? In particular, what assumptions does each theorist (discuss at least two) make regarding: (i) human nature; (ii) conditions in the state of nature; (iii) the status of consent; and (iv) the status of presocial rights? How and to what extent do these assumptions determine the nature of each theory? What objections might be made to contract theory as a way of determining the basis of legitimate rule? Assess the persuasiveness of the contractarian account of political legitimacy.