

Fall 2015
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. Gerald Cohen argues that egalitarian justice requires compensation for inequalities in well-being for which it is not reasonable to hold the person responsible. Elizabeth Anderson argues that Cohen's central focus on responsibility for disadvantage distorts fundamental egalitarian intuitions. Should responsibility for disadvantage be a central concern of egalitarian thought? What are the principal arguments for and against this claim?
2. 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 structural elements of the original position represent intuitions regarding justice (e.g. justice must be impartial)? How does the character of the original position structure the incentives of the parties choosing principles of justice?
3. Explain Pettit's neo-republican conception of freedom, as it is set forth in *On the People's Terms*. What is its connection, if any, with democracy?
4. Are neo-republican conceptions of liberty examples of "positive" or "negative" conceptions of liberty, or neither, according to the typology Berlin introduced?
5. 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. Ronald Dworkin, for example, 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 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?