

General Exam in Political Theory (major field: day one)

Fall 2007

Please respond at length to one of the questions in part one, and more briefly to the question in part two. Part one is intended to test depth and breadth of knowledge in a particular field of political theory; part two is intended to test specific knowledge of particular texts. There is not a specific expectation for length (so long as you answer the questions adequately), but we expect that the response to part one will be roughly twice as long as the response to part two. Be sure to take time to think through your answers, plan what you will write, and read over what you have written. Quality is more important than quantity. Good luck!

PART ONE: History of Political Thought

- (1) One of the perennial aspirations of political thought has been to ensure that the practice of politics obeys the dictates of reason. Discuss at least three different ways in which the appeal to reason has been used to evaluate political practices and institutions, giving particular attention to the way(s) in which reason (and politics) are defined in each. Illustrate each approach with specific reference to at least two canonical texts. Is one of these conceptions of reason more compelling than the others? Can politics itself be made “reasonable”?
- (2) One of the perennial ends of political action has been the pursuit and enjoyment of freedom. Discuss at least three different ways in which the appeal to freedom has been used to evaluate political practices and institutions, giving particular attention to the way(s) in which freedom (and politics) are defined in each. Illustrate each approach with specific reference to at least two canonical texts. Is one of these conceptions of freedom more compelling than the others? To what extent are these conceptions of freedom compatible with one another?

PART TWO: Meta-theory

“If there is good reason to insist that we can only study an idea by seeing the nature of all the occasions and activities — the language games — within which it might appear, then there must be correspondingly good reason to insist that the project of studying histories of ‘ideas,’ *tout court*, must rest on a fundamental philosophical mistake....To demand from the history of thought a solution to our own immediate problems is thus to commit not merely a methodological fallacy, but something like a moral error. But to learn from the past — and we cannot otherwise learn it at all — the distinction between what is necessary and what is the product merely of our own contingent arrangements, is to learn the key to self-awareness itself.” (Quentin Skinner)

Discuss the implications of this methodological statement of purpose. How does Skinner think that the history of political thought should be studied? What “philosophical mistake” does he impute to those who approach it otherwise? What “moral error” do they commit? What, on Skinner’s view, is the relationship between the study of the history of political thought and the practice of political theory? Can these activities be detached from one another?

General Exam in Political Theory (major field: day two)

Fall 2007

Please respond at length to one of the questions in part three, and more briefly to the question in part four. Part three is intended to test depth and breadth of knowledge in a particular field of political theory; part four is intended to test specific knowledge of particular texts. There is not a specific expectation for length (so long as you answer the questions adequately), but we expect that the response to part three will be roughly twice as long as the response to part four. Be sure to take time to think through your answers, plan what you will write, and read over what you have written. Quality is more important than quantity. Good luck!

PART THREE: Political Power and Popular Rule

- (1) Choose at least one normatively “ambitious” theory of democracy and at least one “realistic” theory, and compare and contrast them. What role do empirical claims about the functioning of mass democracy play in adjudicating the dispute between these positions? What role should such claims play?

- (2) The relationship between reason and power was one of the central pre-occupations of twentieth-century political thought. Discuss at least two leading approaches to understanding this relationship, and compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of each.

PART FOUR: Liberalism and Its Critics

Are liberalism and feminism compatible? Compare and contrast Okin’s and Young’s positions on this question.