Political Theory
Past Comprehensive Exam Questions
(Note: you may see duplicate questions)

January 2008

Ancient
What is the significance of Socrates’ conviction of a capital crime by the city of Athens and his decision to stand trial and accept his punishment rather than to escape? In answering this question you should probably explain why Socrates was accused and convicted of not believing in the gods of the city and of corrupting the young. Why didn’t he simply go to another city? Was the problem Socrates? Or Athens? Or is there a more general and enduring conflict between philosophy and politics? If so, how did Socrates’ student Plato address it?

Cicero appears to write his *De Re Publica* in the light of Plato's *Republic*. Where does one find the common ground in these works and in what ways do they differ? What significance do you find in the differences?

Medieval
Medieval political theorists treated extensively the concept of nature. However, there were significant differences in their treatments of nature. Choose at least two authors from the following four: Aquinas, Alfarabi, Maimonides, Marsilius. Compare and contrast their views on at least three aspects of the relationship of nature to political life. In particular, include what each thought nature dictated as the proper end of political life.

Explicate and critically assess Augustine's critique of the virtue of the ancient Romans in his *City of God*. Then compare and contrast Augustine's arguments on the nature and possibility of human virtue (especially the virtue of justice) and of the best regime with the views of either Alfarabi or Aquinas. Do you see Augustine or Augustinianism as having a significant influence on either of these medieval thinkers? Why or why not?

Early Modern
What are the most important points of convergence and divergence between Machiavelli’s civic republicanism and that of Rousseau?

How does Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) challenge the assumptions of the social contract tradition, particularly the arguments of Locke and Rousseau? How effective is the challenge?

American
Select three aspects or specific provisions of the proposed Constitution of 1787 on which the Federalists and Anti-Federalists differed during the ratification debates. Sketch the argument on each side of each issue, and indicate which side had the better argument and why you believe so.

You are Publius and you have been asked by the editors of the *American Political Science Review* to write a critical review essay of Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, with special attention to what Niebuhr has to say about the character of the political thought of American founding, a subject on which you are presumed to know a great deal.

May 2008

ANCIENT
In the very first paragraph of his *Politics*, Aristotle claims that they are mistaken “who think the statesman, the king,
ruler of an estate, and the head of a household are the same . . . differing in the greater or lesser number ruled but not in kind.” What is at stake here? and why is it important enough to be one of the three issues raised at the very opening of *Politics*? It would also be nice if one were to speculate as to who “they” are who think what Aristotle denies.

Is it legitimate for Cicero to associate himself with Socrates and the Socratic tradition of political philosophy? Discuss fully the reasons for your response, drawing at the least on Cicero's *De Re Publica*, *De Legibus*, and *De Officiis* as appropriate.

**MEDIEVAL**

A central characteristic of western Christian politics of the middle ages was tension between two public authorities: ecclesiastical and temporal. The first major and systematic statements of the principles concerning their relationship were formulated by Pope Gelasius I (AD 496) in letters to the Roman Emperor. The most important of them is often referred to as “Duo sunt” (Ep. xii. 2) in which Gelasius wrote: “Two there are, august Emperor, by which this world is chiefly ruled: the sacred authority of the pontiffs [popes] and the royal power [emperors].” He had earlier written that before Christ, there were some, such as Melchisizedek, who were rightly both kings and priests. But “Christ, mindful of human frailty,” divided the two offices so that emperors needed the pontiffs for matters of eternal life and the pontiffs needed the emperors to care for temporal matters. (Tractatus. ix. 11) Gelasian dualism in one form or another remains one standard for Western church-state relations. From the perspective of political theory write an essay laying out the theoretical and practical importance of that dualism.

In Book 19 of *The City of God*, Augustine proposes peace as the highest goal of political society. In the questions on law (I-I 90-108) in his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas presents the common good as the proper aim of a political community and its law. Write an essay in which you (a) explicate first Augustine's understanding of peace, and then Aquinas's understanding of the common good, with special attention to the relationship of each (peace and the common good) to the other and also to justice. Then (b) explain how and to what extent the political telos, defined as peace or as the common good, can be achieved in this-worldly politics, according to Augustine and Aquinas? Are their views on this last question divergent in any important respect? Finally, (c) briefly explain whose presentation of political life, and its aims and possibilities, you find better overall, Augustine's or Aquinas's, and why.

**Early Modern**

What makes the social contract tradition "modern"? To what extent do these "modern" qualities of the social contract tradition render it suited for theorizing and understanding "modern" politics? Be sure to define “modern” early in your essay. Answer this question with reference to at least 3 of the following thinkers: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant.

Discuss the relationship between will and political legitimacy in Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.

**LATE MODERN**

In what ways is Hannah Arendt's theory of political action Nietzschean in character? In what ways is it in tension with Nietzsche?

Has liberalism established hegemony in late modern political thought?

**American**

How does Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of American democracy compare with the understanding of democracy and its prospect in America that shaped the constitutional construction defended in *The Federalist*?

Reconstruct the main issues in the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists. In the light of American history which side looks to have had the better of the argument?
Sept 2008

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1. In his *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero says that Socrates was the first who called philosophy down from heaven and forced it to make inquiries about life and manners and good and bad things. So described, Socrates sounds like a moral, but not necessarily a political philosopher. What is a "political philosopher"? Was Socrates a, if not the first? Why? How does one explain Socrates' reputation as a political philosopher in light of his admission in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* (and *Republic*) that he never went into the assembly and argued on behalf of justice there?

2. Commenting, at the recent American Political Science meeting, on the relationship of Cicero's *De Re Publica* and *De Legibus* to Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, J.G.F. Powell observed that even in ancient sources Cicero is sometimes seen as a rival of Plato and sometimes as a friend or companion of Plato. Which is Cicero, in your view? Discuss his engagement of Platonic literary forms and political themes, utilizing the relevant texts.

Early Modern

1. How does the concept of justice evolve in the early modern social contract tradition? Answer this question with reference to at least 3 of the following theorists: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.

2. Post Machiavellian early modern political philosophy has sometimes been described as "moralized Machiavellianism". Does Machiavelli need "moralizing"? Are the other early moderns at all Machiavellian—in what way? Do they "moralize" Machiavelli?

Late Modern

1. How does Hegel's political philosophy try to synthesize ancient and modern political thought?

2. Compare Marx's historical methodology to Nietzsche's. How does each theorist approach the problem of history? What are the primary "objects" they are concerned with? What are the implications—theoretical and political—of Marx's endorsement of the Hegelian idea of development, and Nietzsche's rejection of the same idea?

American

1. Herbert Croly presents his Progressive position as a synthesis of Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian political thought. What are the Jeffersonian elements? Hamiltonian elements? Is he justified in presenting himself in this way?

2. Explore the function and interaction of the ideas of popular sovereignty, republican government, separation of powers and federalism in the critical years of the American founding -- from, in other words, the Revolution through the ratification of the Constitution.

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**Philosophy of Law**

1. To what extent and in what ways is John Finnis's natural law theory, as developed in his book *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, a response to H. L. A. Hart's positivist legal theory as developed in his book *The Concept of Law*?

   To what extent does Finnis borrow from or coincide with Aquinas's natural law theory in responding to Hart? How successful is Finnis in arguing that Hart's contemporary positivist theory (including Hart's theory of a "minimum [true] content of Natural Law") is insufficient to fulfill its own stated goal of explaining "the concept of law"?

2. Richard Posner attempts to cut through all the major debates about law that have roiled the intellectual waters since the beginnings of reflections on law in Greece with his pragmatic theory of law. How successful is he at this task? Are there important issues from past thinking that he fails to deal with or deal with adequately?

**January 2009**

**Ancient**

1. Leo Strauss has written that "the guiding question" for classical political philosophy was "the question of the best political order." Illustrate in the major political writings of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero whether and how this is the case. Compare these writings with respect to how the question functions in each of them.

2. In Plato’s *Republic* Socrates famously states that evils in cities will not cease until philosophers become kings. Why not? What do or can philosophers do in politics that no one else can? Did Socrates or Plato make such a contribution? What follows from Socrates’ own admission that philosophers will rarely, if ever rule?

**Medieval**

1. Compare and critically assess any TWO of the following three thinkers on the nature and possibility of a just and virtuous political society: Augustine, Alfarabi, Aquinas.

2. Respond to the following: “The key to understanding medieval thinkers is to penetrate to and clarify the end or purpose of political life, especially the question of a supernatural versus natural end” Discuss at least two of the following authors; Augustine, Aquinas, Alfarabi, Maimonides. For each explain what the end or purpose of politics is in their thought, and how religion fits into it. What differences and similarities are there?
Early Modern

1. In what ways does Rousseau make substantial revisions to the idea of a social contract as compared to his predecessors Hobbes and Locke? Are they good changes? Why or why not?

2. A recurring problem in the study of Machiavelli is the relation between his two main works--the Prince and the Discourses. To many readers they seem very different and raise the puzzle of how Machiavelli could have written both and which he "really" means. How would you account for the relation between them? Are they "really" different? Could the same man have written both at the same time? Do they bespeak a change of mind? If so, from what to what?

Late Modern

1. Explain how Vico explains the enormous differences between legal systems and types of regimes that we find in human history.

2. In what ways are Nietzsche and Mill's doctrines of individualism and perspectivism similar? In what ways are they different? Is there a "Nietzsche for liberals?" If so, would he look like Mill?

Contemporary

1. In what ways does Heidegger's critique of technology and the "will to will" parallel Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason? Where do the critiques diverge? Which critique is more persuasive? Why?

2. Political theory has experienced a revival in the second half of the twentieth century. Among the leading political thinkers who are seen as contributing to this revival are Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. Select two of these thinkers and discuss their work. In your view, what was the contribution each sought to make to contemporary political theory and how successful were they?

American

1. Do The Federalist Papers present a complete and coherent political philosophy? Discuss your response to this question in an essay in which you utilize the relevant concepts and key passages from the text of Publius.

2. Perhaps the two greatest works on the American political order are "The Federalist" and Tocqueville's "Democracy in America." As much as Tocqueville seems to respect the American founders many readers discern substantial disagreements between the two texts. What do you think about this? Are there real disagreements? If so, is this the result of a critique by Tocqueville of the Federalist's political science? If not, what are the elements of Tocqueville's book that might lead to the suspicion of disagreement and why do you think that disagreement more apparent than real?

May 2009

Ancient

1. In the Republic, Laws, and Statesman, Plato has three different philosophers give three somewhat different accounts of the knowledge a king, legislator, and/or statesman needs. What is this knowledge, according to Socrates, the Athenian Stranger, and the Eleatic Stranger? Can the three accounts be reconciled? If not, how do you explain the differences?

2. Compare Cicero's political theory with that of either Plato or Aristotle. As much as possible cite, even if in a general way, the bases for your comparison in the texts studied for this examination.
Early Modern
1. It has been said that modern political philosophy since Machiavelli is well understood as a series of efforts to "moralize" Machiavelli". Taking Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau as your field of relevant thinkers, assess this claim. Do Machiavelli and Machiavellian themes figure enough in these thinkers to consider them as part of a "Machiavellian Tradition"? Do they "moralize" his position?

2. How do women fit or not fit into the modern social contract tradition?

Contemporary
1. What does Rawls mean by an overlapping consensus, and why is it important to his conception of political liberalism?

2. The Walgreen Lecture Series at the University of Chicago gave rise to important mid-twentieth century books by Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. The Series was concerned with the moral foundations of modern democracy. Take any two of these thinkers and explore in a comparative way how they define the crisis of modern democracy and in what direction they point as a way to restore democratic foundations.

Comparative Political Theory
1. There is a controversy among those who study Chinese thought: do the various Chinese intellectual traditions address questions treated in mainstream western traditions (the kind of thing that figures on the rest of this test), but in a different way? Or do Chinese traditions address an entirely different set of questions that do not figure among the issues that have engaged western thinkers? Try to approach this problem by discussing how some western political concepts--specifically: law, authority, legitimacy, justice--might figure in the Confucian tradition. In your answer bring in whenever proper perspectives from non-Confucian Chinese traditions.

2. What is the basic point of comparative political theory (CPT)?

What kind of methodology (or methodologies) is most appropriate for the enterprise of CPT?

There are mainly two general objections to CPT.

First, it is argued that CPT is unnecessary because human beings are all alike and that hence politics is the same everywhere.

Secondly, it is argued that CPT is impossible because theoretical understanding is necessarily conditioned by, or confined to, a given culture or language game, a fact militating against cross-cultural comparison.

How do you evaluate these claims? In the view of some, CPT makes no room for the critique of cultural practices because genuine understanding equals approval. Do you agree? If not, why not?

Finally, in your opinion, what are some of the valuable lessons that practitioners of CPT can derive from the study of Asian traditions of thought, especially Confucianism?

January 2010

I. Ancient:

1. What conception of moral and political knowledge does Socrates advance in the Apology? Plato in the Republic? Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics? How do these diverse conceptions translate into different ideas of moral (or virtuous) political membership for each thinker?
2. Does Cicero as a political theorist develop or set back the tradition of classical political theory of his Greek predecessors? Write an essay in which you defend a position, and indicate in what specific respects he develops or sets back the tradition. Utilize the appropriate texts of Cicero and his predecessors as you make your argument.

II. Medieval:

1. Please explain in detail and then briefly critically assess Augustine’s presentation of the virtue of the ancient Romans in *The City of God*. What are the implications, if any, of Augustine’s understanding and critique of Roman virtue for political theory and practice today?

2. The relationship between religion and political life was an important concern of most medieval political theorists. In particular the question arises as to whether the end of man is wholly determined by revealed religion, or whether there is a political teaching that is independent of revealed religion. For at least two of the following authors, address critically the question of what the role of political life is for that author and what the relationship is of the end of politics and the end of revealed religion: Augustine, Aquinas, Maimondes, Alfarabi, Marsilius of Padua.

III. Early Modern:

1. According to Hannah Arendt and J. G. A. Pocock, Machiavelli was the last of the ancient republican theorists who appreciated the centrality of politics in human life. According to Sheldon Wolin, Leo Strauss, and Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli is one of the founders of modern political science, even though these commentators disagree about what he was trying to do and how. On the basis of your own reading of the *Prince* and *Discourses*, what was Machiavelli trying to do, why, and how?

2. The rise of human rights discourse is a highlight of the Enlightenment. Show how Locke, Rousseau, and Kant or Wollstonecraft contributed to the development of this trend, each in a distinct way from the other. Which of the three theorists you selected is the most significant for modern human rights discourse, and why?

III. Late Modern:

1. What are Marx’s primary critical points *vis a vis* Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*? In what ways do Marx’s criticisms represent an advance over Hegelian political philosophy? In what ways do they represent a regress? Explain and defend your answer on each count.

2. How helpful is it to think of late modern political theory as trying to come to terms with the death of God? Focus your answer on Marx, Mill and Nietzsche.

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IV. Contemporary:

1. The critique of technology and/or technical rationality plays a central role in the thought of Heidegger, Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas, Arendt and Strauss. Choosing two figures from this list (with Adorno and Horkheimer counting as one joint author), write an essay in which you explain their central critical points about technology/technical reason. Why do they see technology/technical reason as the defining characteristic of the modern age (as opposed, for example, to the rise of human rights and equality)? What reasons do they give for thinking that liberalism fits all too well with a “technological” outlook? Are these good reasons? Why or why not?

2. Has liberalism established hegemony in contemporary political thought? Focus your answer on Rawls and his critics.

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IV. American:

1. In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln argues that the Founders—in both the Declaration and the Constitution—intended to put slavery on the road to ultimate extinction. Douglas argues that the Founders did not think the Declaration applied to blacks, and that they intended for slavery to be always and everywhere decided by the states, under the doctrine of popular sovereignty, and that this doctrine should be applied to the territories.

   Briefly sketch Lincoln and Douglas’ respective arguments. Then, drawing upon the thought of the Founding period, assess who makes the better argument—Lincoln or Douglas—concerning the intent of the Founders. What does your answer tell us about how to understand the Founders as political actors?

2. One of the great debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was over the issue of representation. What position did each take? Why did the Anti-Federalists in particular see this as such an important issue?

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Part 1 May, 2010

I. Ancient:

1. How is the account of political conflict found in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* like or unlike Aristotle’s analysis of the foundations and factors that shape political regimes in his *Politics*?

2. In Bk. II of *The Politics*, Aristotle offers critical analyses of several regimes (philosophical and actual) held to be excellent and perhaps even best, beginning with Socrates’ city founded in speech in Plato’s *Republic*.

Write an essay in which you summarize and critically assess Aristotle’s treatment of the Republic and its best regime in Politics II. In your answer you may wish to consider why Aristotle begins his analyses of purported best regimes from the best regime of the *Republic*; which features of Socrates’ regime Aristotle chooses to focus on or at least to mention, and which he passes over; the aim(s), constructive and/or critical, of this discussion of his teacher’s most famous dialogue; the fairness and completeness, or lack thereof, of Aristotle’s critique; and the role of this portion of Bk. II in preparing for Aristotle’s elaboration of his own political philosophy and the best regime in Bk. III of *The Politics* through to its conclusion.

II. Early Modern:

1. There is a great variety of views about the relation between Hobbes and Locke. One scholar thinks Locke is exclusively concerned with Filmer and may not even have read Hobbes. Others think Locke is writing primarily to refute Hobbes. Yet others claim that Locke is essentially a Hobbesian. Can you sort out the relation between Hobbes and Locke and along the way clarify why scholars have disagreed so much about that relation?

2. What are the uses and disadvantages of thinking about modern politics in terms of a social contract? Discuss with reference to at least one early modern social contract thinker and one early modern thinker who doesn’t employ the social contract device.

Part 2 May, 2010

III. Late Modern:

1. Both G. W. F. Hegel and J. S. Mill can be understood to argue in favor of a liberal democratic political order. Compare and contrast their arguments in order to show which give the most satisfactory defense of such an order and why.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” can be read as a serious critique of both Hegel and Marx’s more progressive views of history. What is Nietzsche’s critique? How might Hegel and Marx respond?

IV. American:

1. One scholar has said: “Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were the best of friends and the closest of political allies and yet they disagreed almost entirely about politics.” What do you think of this claim? If it is true, what was the basis for their common political action? If not true, why might some one say such a thing?

2. For the past 50 years, there has been an increasingly strident debate about the relative weight of civic republican vs. liberal elements in the thought of the American founders. Write an essay in which you argue for the predominance of one or the other tradition in the political thought of the Founders.

   Briefly sketch Lincoln and Douglas’ respective arguments. Then, drawing upon the thought of the Founding period, assess who makes the better argument--Lincoln or Douglas--concerning the intent of the Founders. What does your answer tell us about how to understand the Founders as political actors?

2. One of the great debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was over the issue of representation. What position did each take? Why did the Anti-Federalists in particular see this as such an important issue?
May 2010

I. Ancient:

1. How is the account of political conflict found in Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* like or unlike Aristotle’s analysis of the foundations and factors that shape political regimes in his *Politics*?

2. In Bk. II of *The Politics*, Aristotle offers critical analyses of several regimes (philosophical and actual) held to be excellent and perhaps even best, beginning with Socrates’ city founded in speech in Plato’s *Republic*.

Write an essay in which you summarize and critically assess Aristotle’s treatment of the Republic and its best regime in Politics II. In your answer you may wish to consider why Aristotle begins his analyses of purported best regimes from the best regime of the *Republic*; which features of Socrates’ regime Aristotle chooses to focus on or at least to mention, and which he passes over; the aim/s, constructive and/or critical, of this discussion of his teacher’s most famous dialogue; the fairness and completeness, or lack thereof, of Aristotle’s critique; and the role of this portion of Bk. II in preparing for Aristotle’s elaboration of his own political philosophy and the best regime in Bk. III of *The Politics* through to its conclusion.

II. Early Modern:

1. There is a great variety of views about the relation between Hobbes and Locke. One scholar think Locke is exclusively concerned with Filmer and may not even have read Hobbes. Others think Locke is writing primarily to refute Hobbes. Yet others claim that Locke is essentially a Hobbesian. Can you sort out the relation between Hobbes and Locke and along the way clarify why scholars have disagreed so much about that relation?

2. What are the uses and disadvantages of thinking about modern politics in terms of a social contract? Discuss with reference to at least one early modern social contract thinker and one early modern thinker who doesn’t employ the social contract device.

III. Late Modern:

1. Both G. W. F. Hegel and J. S. Mill can be understood to argue in favor of a liberal democratic political order. Compare and contrast their arguments in order to show which give the most satisfactory defense of such an order and why.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche’s essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life” can be read as a serious critique of both Hegel and Marx’s more progressive views of history. What is Nietzsche’s critique? How might Hegel and Marx respond?

IV. American:

1. One scholar has said: “Thomas Jefferson and James Madison were the best of friends and the closest of political allies and yet they disagreed almost entirely about politics.” What do you think of this claim? If it is true, what was the basis for their common political action? If not true, why might some one say such a thing?

2. For the past 50 years, there has been an increasingly strident debate about the relative weight of civic republican vs. liberal elements in the thought of the American founders. Write an essay in which you argue for the predominance of one or the other tradition in the political thought of the Founders.

   Briefly sketch Lincoln and Douglas’ respective arguments. Then, drawing upon the thought of the Founding period, assess who makes the better argument—Lincoln or Douglas—concerning the intent of the Founders. What does your answer tell us about how to understand the Founders as political actors?

2. One of the great debates between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was over the issue of representation. What position did each take? Why did the Anti-Federalists in particular see this as such an important issue?
January 2011

A. Ancient

1. Both Plato and Aristotle suggest that political communities should be concerned, above all, to educate their citizens in virtue. The two ancient philosophers seem to differ somewhat, however, in their understandings of what virtue is and how it can be fostered. What are the differences? And what is the political significance of the differences?

2. Can Cicero as political theorist be seen to develop or to deflect and even to oppose the classical political theories of Plato and Aristotle? Write an essay in which you defend a position; in the essay indicate some specific respects in which Cicero develops or sets back the earlier tradition. Utilize the appropriate texts of Cicero and his predecessors as you make your argument.

B. Medieval

1. Medieval thinkers often disagreed on the status of the various kinds of ends to which one might be devoted. In particular, there was disagreement about the status of political life. Some saw it as a lower yet integral human good, others saw it as only an instrumental good, aiming wholly towards an end outside politics (for example philosophy or salvation). Compare and contrast at least two of the following thinkers, Aquinas, Augustine, Alfarabi, Maimonides, on the question of the purpose and end of political life.

2. What is Augustine’s critique of ancient Rome (republic and empire), and what are the role and significance of this critique in the overall argument of his City of God? Is there anything in Augustine’s critique that you would criticize or contest?

C. Early Modern

1. What is the place of women in early modern political thought?

2. There is a huge debate on the relation of Hobbes and Locke. Some say Locke rejects Hobbes; some say he follows Hobbes; and some say he pays no attention to Hobbes. What do you say? What in Locke's thought might support the other positions?

D. Late Modern

1. What, if anything, does Nietzsche teach us about the political? Explain your answer by comparing and contrasting Nietzsche on this issue with another thinker of your choice from the late modern reading list.

2. What are the basic points of Hegel's critique of Kant's moral philosophy? How does this critique help structure the political theory found in the Philosophy of Right?
Cicero develops or sets back the earlier tradition. Utilize the appropriate texts of Cicero and his predecessors as you make your argument.

B. Medieval

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D. American

1. Discuss the relationship between the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution.

2. Niebuhr classifies the American founders as Children of Light. Does this accurately capture the character of their thought? How useful or not are Niebuhr’s categories of Children of Light and Children of Dark?

January 2012

Ancient

1. The education of citizens is arguably the most important function of a political regime, according to Plato and Aristotle. How is such an education best accomplished, according to Plato? According to Aristotle? Are there significant differences between the two philosophers in this respect?

2. Discuss Cicero’s relation to Plato and Plato’s political writings. In what sense could he be considered a disciple of Plato, in what sense not?

Medieval

1. The phrase “politics is natural” can be understood in at least two ways. Politics is natural because it is a necessary for a higher natural end to be achieved. Or, politics is natural because it is a natural good in and of itself. Compare and contrast at least two of the following authors in the question of whether they think politics is natural, and if so, what they mean by that: Augustine, Alfarabi, Maimonides, Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua, William of Occam.

2. What is Augustine’s critique of ancient Rome (republic and empire), and what are the role and significance of this critique in the overall argument of his City of God? Is there anything in Augustine’s critique that you would criticize or contest?
Early Modern

1. What is the place of the family in the early modern social contract tradition?

2. The leading ideas of early modern political philosophy are natural rights and social contract. In later thinking both ideas came under attack of various sorts. Is there any value to these two ideas for understanding politics or should we consider them of merely historical interest?

Contemporary

1. Many contemporary political theorists situate themselves in relationship to liberalism, be this as advocates or critics. Discuss the relationship to liberalism of three contemporary thinkers from the reading list. If they are advocates, what do they see as liberalism’s strengths? If critics, what do they identify as its weaknesses?

2. What are the strengths, and what are the weaknesses, of Strauss's critique of Max Weber and "social science positivism" more generally?

January 2012

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Late Modern

1. Of the various criticisms of politics mounted by late modern thinkers, whose do you find most effective? Whose do you find least effective? Explain your choices.

2. Critically assess the similarities and differences between Rousseau’s notion of the general will and Hegel’s conception of the "substantial will" of the political community.
May 2012

Ancient
1. How is practical reason (phronesis) related to speculative reason (sophia and episteme) in Aristotle’s NICOMACHEAN ETHICS and POLITICS? Would the rule of the one best man that Aristotle describes at the end of Book 3 of the POLITICS be the equivalent of the philosopher-king in Plato’s REPUBLIC? Why or why not?
2. Some have thought that Cicero represents a distinctive voice in the tradition of classical political philosophy as defined by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Write a commentary on that claim, affirming or denying it in whole or part. In developing your essay, cite the topics or issues and relevant texts that support your position.

Early Modern
1. "Montesquieu is a critic of Locke." "Montesquieu is a follower of Locke." Both views have been put forward by readers of both. Where lies the truth? How so?
2. Are there any valid foundations for rights claims in early modern political thought? If so, what are they and why are they valid?

Late Modern
1. Of the various criticisms of politics mounted by late modern thinkers, whose do you find most effective? Whose do you find least effective? Explain your choices.
2. What are the central concerns of late modern political thought? Defend your answer by discussing three authors from the reading list.

Contemporary
1. Many contemporary political theorists situate themselves in relationship to liberalism, be this as advocates or critics. Discuss the relationship to liberalism of three contemporary thinkers from the reading list. If they are advocates, what do they see as liberalism’s strengths? If critics, what do they identify as its weaknesses?
2. Drawing on three contemporary theorists, answer the following questions: what is the relationship between democracy and liberty? Does democracy promote liberty, and if so, how? Do democracy and liberty ever conflict? If so, under what conditions? Make sure to clarify what is meant by “democracy” and “liberty” in each theorist’s work.

January 2013

I. Ancient
1. Compare and contrast the different views of Athenian democracy presented by Thucydides and Plato. Do either or both have any contemporary relevance? Why or why not?
2. On a number of occasions in the Nicomachean Ethics and the Politics Aristotle emphasizes the importance of habituation as a resource for the development of moral virtue (“by habituating citizens, lawgivers make them good; this is the wish of every lawgiver,” NE 2.1). However, near the end of the Republic’s myth of Er, Socrates reveals the hazards of “practicing virtue by habit without philosophy” (Rep 619 c-d). Does this apparently different assessment of the value of habituation point to a fundamental difference between the evaluative theoretical frameworks of Plato and Aristotle?

II. Early Modern
1. The thinkers of the early modern period sought to reconceptualize the relation between natural rights and state legitimacy. Pick two early modern thinkers and answer the following questions: What are natural rights, and how are they related to human reason and liberty? How do natural rights both justify and limit the legitimacy of the state? Whom do you find more persuasive, and why?
2. Machiavelli and Hobbes are frequently characterized as amoral, if not immoral, theorists of political life, concerned only with power. Explain the reasons why such characterizations or wrong or, at least, seriously flawed and inadequate.
III. Contemporary

1. Many contemporary political theorists situate themselves in relationship to liberalism, be this as advocates or critics. Discuss the relationship to liberalism of three contemporary thinkers from the reading list. If they are advocates, what do they see as liberalism’s strengths? If critics, what do they identify as its weaknesses?

2. Compare and contrast Strauss and Arendt’s respective appropriations of ancient Greek political thought and/or practice.

IV. American

1. To what extent did the Founders’ Constitution establish, to quote Lincoln, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

2. The Federalists and the Anti-Federalists fought hard over ratification of the Constitution. What did they disagree about? How deep did their disagreements go? How valuable are either or both for understanding contemporary politics in America?

January, 2013

I. Medieval

1. William of Ockham is frequently given the credit (or the blame) for introducing the language of rights rather than duties or law into political philosophy. Does he deserve the credit (or blame)? How so or not? What is the difference between these languages of politics?

2. Marsilius of Padua has been said to inhabit a “different world” from Thomas Aquinas. Since they both appear to be Christian Aristotelians this seems an inflated claim. Are there significant differences between them, despite their shared reliance on Aristotle? Please explain.

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III. Late Modern

1. To what extent does the idea of women’s rights shape theoretical conceptions of equality and liberty during the 19th and 20th centuries? Was this an important trend? Why or why not?

2. What are the central concerns of late modern political thought? Defend your answer by discussing three authors from the reading list.

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IV. American

1. To what extent did the Founders’ Constitution establish, to quote Lincoln, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

2. The Federalists and the Anti-Federalists fought hard over ratification of the Constitution. What did they disagree about? How deep did their disagreements go? How valuable are either or both for understanding contemporary politics in America?

January 2014

Ancient:

1. How did Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle describe and evaluate the regimes of the two most powerful Greek cities at their time: Sparta and Athens? Which description and set of evaluative principles seem best to you? Why?

2. In his Politics, Aristotle devotes chapters 1-5 of Book II to a critique of the best regime of Plato’s Republic. In this essay, first briefly recap the main elements of Aristotle’s critique, and then critically assess it. Is the critique fair to Plato’s dialogue and its political-philosophic teaching? What role does the critique of the Republic play in Aristotle’s development of his own political science?

Early Modern:

1. Probably the aspect of early modern political philosophy that has come under sharpest attack has been the doctrine of the state of nature as being unhistorical and contrary to what we can easily observe about human nature. How much merit does this critique have? Does it apply equally to the three classic state of nature theorists—Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau? Just what is(are) the point(s) of these thinkers in positing a state of nature?

2. How does Hobbes use the idiom of social contract to attack civic republicanism and a public-political conception of freedom? How does Rousseau use the same idiom to defend them? Does the methodological individualism of social contract theory lead to substantive political conclusions of a particular kind (authoritarian, liberal, or republican)? Why or why not?
American:

1. To what extent did the Founders’ Constitution establish, to quote Lincoln, “government of the people, by the people, for the people”?

2. According to Lincoln the Declaration of Independence is the center of the American political tradition. Select one thinker from the founding era and one from the twentieth century and explain the role of the Declaration in their political thinking. On the admittedly limited basis of this comparison, assess whether Lincoln’s account of the tradition holds up.

Contemporary:

1. Drawing on three contemporary theorists, answer the following questions: what is the relationship between democracy and liberty? Does democracy promote liberty, and if so, how? Do democracy and liberty ever conflict? If so, under what conditions? Make sure to clarify what is meant by “democracy” and “liberty” in each theorist’s work.

2. What are the key criticisms that have been made of Rawls’s political philosophy? Which are the strongest in terms of textual evidence and philosophical punch? Which are more dubious or rhetorical in character? Explain and defend your answer.

January 2014

Ancient:

3. How did Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle describe and evaluate the regimes of the two most powerful Greek cities at their time: Sparta and Athens? Which description and set of evaluative principles seem best to you? Why?

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Medieval:

1. Compare and contrast the ways in which the Islamic philosopher Alfarabi and the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas selectively adopt and adapt the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle to make them compatible with Scriptural religion.

2. What are the main elements of Augustine’s critical assessment of ancient Rome, and what role does this critique play in the overall argument of his City of God? Is there anything in Augustine’s critique that you would criticize or contest?

Early Modern:

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Contemporary:

Drawing on three contemporary theorists, answer the following questions: what is the relationship between democracy and liberty? Does democracy promote liberty, and if so, how? Do democracy and liberty ever conflict? If so, under what conditions? Make sure to clarify what is meant by “democracy” and “liberty” in each theorist’s work.

What are the key criticisms that have been made of Rawls’s political philosophy? Which are the strongest in terms of textual evidence and philosophical punch? Which are more dubious or rhetorical in character? Explain and defend your answer.

Feminist:

1. There is a lot of disagreement among feminist theorists. Outline what you see as the most important areas of debate over the last sixty years. Notwithstanding the areas of controversy you identify, does there remain any common core to feminist theory?

2. Must feminist political theory be radical political theory? Why or why not? In answering this question, you should explain what you mean by “radical” and discuss two or three key areas of debate among feminist theorists.
January 2014

Ancient:

How did Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle describe and evaluate the regimes of the two most powerful Greek cities at their time: Sparta and Athens? Which description and set of evaluative principles seem best to you? Why?

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Medieval:

Compare and contrast the ways in which the Islamic philosopher Alfarabi and the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas selectively adopt and adapt the political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle to make them compatible with Scriptural religion.

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According to Lincoln the Declaration of Independence is the center of the American political tradition. Select one thinker from the founding era and one from the twentieth century and explain the role of the Declaration in their political thinking. On the admittedly limited basis of this comparison, assess whether Lincoln’s account of the tradition holds up.

January 2015

Ancient

1. In the second book of his *Politics*, Aristotle criticizes several aspects of the “city in speech” of the *Republic*, but he never mentions the most radical “wave” introduced by Socrates: philosopher-kings. After outlining the main points of Aristotle’s critique of the *Republic in Politics* 2.1-5, consider the significance of his silence regarding philosopher-kings: Why does he omit to speak of this important development in the dialogue? What might his silence indicate regarding his
own best regime as compared to Socrates’ city-in-speech? Feel free to formulate and address your own questions concerning the matter.

What is a “polity,” according to Aristotle? Why is it the best regime generally possible? How does it differ from the “regime to be prayed for”? How does it differ from a modern liberal democracy? For better or for worse?

**Early Modern**

1. It has been said, mimicking Voltaire on the Holy Roman Empire, that early modern natural law is neither natural nor law. What can this claim mean? Do you agree with it?

2. Compare and contrast (A) the portrayal of “the state of nature” in the political philosophy of Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu and (B) what role “the state of nature” plays in their respective political philosophies.

**American**

1. Using Aristotle’s classification of regime types, (A) analyze the American Constitution as defended in *The Federalist* and (B) discuss to what extent the American constitutional order has changed regimes types since the founding.

2. According to Louis Hartz, in his 1955 book *The Liberal Tradition in America*, there is only one philosophical tradition in America - liberalism. Was he correct? If not, is/are there (an) identifiable and significant "non-liberal" tradition or traditions in American thought? If he is correct, then are the main debates in the American tradition essentially debates within the liberal horizon? Discuss with reference to select thinkers in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

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**May 2015**

**Ancient:**

1. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that prudence is an intellectual virtue, but that it presupposes and constitutes a summation of all the moral virtues. In order for members of a household to acquire those moral virtues, Aristotle concludes in Book 10, the authority of the father in the household needs to be supported and supplemented by laws. And in Book 3 of the *Politics* he then observes that only those citizens who have an opportunity to rule develop their capacity for prudence. Does this mean that individual ethics are, according to Aristotle, subordinate to politics? And if so, what follows from the priority of politics to ethics?

2. "In contrast to modern political theory, which is aimed at offering something 'useful' for politics, the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle is aimed mainly at revealing the limits of politics and the paramount necessity instead of focusing on the 'art of living.' " Discuss this claim, including whether you agree and disagree, and why, in reference to two works by either Plato or Aristotle.

**Medieval:**

1. It is often said that William Ockham broke fundamentally and radically with the Thomistic doctrine of natural law. To what extent and in what way is this judgment correct?

2. What are the main elements of Augustine’s critical assessment of ancient Rome, and what role does this critique play in the overall argument of his *City of God*? Is there anything in Augustine’s critique that you would criticize or contest?

**Early Modern:**

1. Two views about Locke’s doctrine of property prevail in the literature. According to some, he is the philosopher of capitalism, providing the moral and philosophical foundation for that system of political economy. According to others, his doctrine is strongly anti-capitalist. What in Locke’s texts produce such wildly opposing readings? Which, if either, is the correct view of Locke’s position? Explain.
2. Machiavelli and Hobbes both suggest that human beings are naturally competitive and hence in conflict with one another. Yet the political prescriptions these two early modern political philosophers make on the basis of a similar, if not identical view of human nature seem to be importantly different. What is responsible for the differences? Which philosopher’s response seems better to you?

**Late Modern:**

1. Late modern political theorists explore the implications of the death of God for politics. Discuss.

2. How would Nietzsche respond to Hegel's master/slave dialectic and the normative ideal of mutual recognition? How might Hegel respond to the implicit critique in "On the Genealogy of Morals'? Who has the stronger argument?

**Contemporary:**

1. Drawing on three contemporary theorists, answer the following questions: what is the relationship between democracy and liberty? Does democracy promote liberty, and if so, how? Do democracy and liberty ever conflict? If so, under what conditions? Make sure to clarify what is meant by “democracy” and “liberty” in each theorist’s work.

2. Compare and contrast the approaches to justice of three contemporary political philosophers.

**American:**

1. In *The Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly calls for a “critical reconstruction” of American political ideals. Explain both why Croly contends American ideals need such a “reconstruction” and in what his “reconstruction” consists. To what extent does Croly adopt and/or depart from the political philosophy articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the constitutionalism set forth in *The Federalist Papers*?

2. Is America simply the practical outworking of various expressions in European political philosophy? Is there anything unique or distinctive in the American political tradition that cannot simply trace its origins to figures like Locke, Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel, etc.? Discuss in reference to at least two American thinkers from two different centuries.

**January 2016**

**ANCIENT**

1. Several commentators have noted the difference between the practice of philosophy Plato depicts in Socrates and the prescriptions—education, knowledge, and political responsibilities of philosophers—Plato has Socrates specify in his famous description of a just regime in the *Republic*. How should we account for these discrepancies? What do they tell us about Plato's view of the proper role of the philosopher in politics?

2. In both Plato’s *Republic* and Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, the question of justice is fundamental to understanding the nature of political life. But why is this question so fundamental in each thinker’s case, and how do they differ in their understanding of the place and significance of justice in the theory and practice of politics? Having laid out your answer, then consider the following question: even given their differences, would Plato and Thucydides form a common front against, say, Machiavelli’s understanding of justice, or a more “realist” understanding of the relation between justice and power? If so, why so? If not, why not?

**EARLY MODERN**

1. A debate has arisen over whether early modern political philosophy is grounded in religion, specifically Christianity, or whether it is in its depths atheistic. Which, if either, of these views is correct? Explain why

2. How does Kant appropriate elements of the social contract tradition to develop a theory of human rights?
LATE MODERN

1. Discuss the role that history plays in the work of at least three late modern political thinkers.

2. How does Nietzsche’s genealogical approach to moral values depart from more traditional philosophical approaches (e.g., Kantian, Utilitarian, and Aristotelian)? What, if any, are the political implications of this departure?

CRITICAL THEORY:

1. Does Habermas’s critique of Horkheimer and Adorno’s "Dialectic of Enlightenment" as overly Nietzschean hold up? Why or why not?

2. Is human emancipation possible through reason? Why or why not? In answering this question, pick at least two critical theorists and make sure to explain their respective understandings of reason and emancipation.

May 2016

1. Ancient

a. In Book II of Plato’s Republic, Socrates contrasts a "healthy" city to the "feverish" city induced by Glaucot’s accusation that a merely healthy city is a "city of pigs." What makes the first city "healthy" and why is Socrates so quick to abandon it? Are there aspects of the "healthy" city that nevertheless continue to inspire efforts to cure the pathologies of the "feverish" city, and if so, how are they manifest in the remainder of the Republic?

b. The first word of the first speech in Thucydides’ War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians is “justice” (dikaion), and the first word of the second speech is “necessity” (anankaion). This fact is a small sign of the centrality of the theme of justice and necessity in Thucydides’ treatment of war, politics, and human action. Use at least three of the major speeches of the work to discuss key Athenian arguments regarding the role of necessity (or compulsion) in the establishment and growth of their empire and in human action generally. Discuss also how these arguments bear on the Athenian understanding of justice and nobility in their rule over others, including important differences of opinion about these questions among the Athenians themselves.

2. Medieval

a. What are the main elements of Augustine’s critical assessment of ancient Rome, and what role does this critique play in the overall argument of his City of God? Is there anything in Augustine’s critique that you would criticize or contest?

b. Marsilius of Padua is sometimes seen as a forerunner of modern democratic and contractarian theories of politics. What basis is there in Marsilius’ work to justify such claims? Are these claims on the whole justified?

3. Early modern

a. Compare and contrast the role of nature in the political thought in at least three of the following thinkers: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant.

b. Compare and contrast the role of religion in the political thought of three of the following thinkers: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau.

4. Late modern

a. In what ways does the death of God manifest itself in later modern political theory?

b. Nietzsche and Heidegger are both famous for their anti-Platonism. How does this negative view of Plato make itself felt in their respective philosophies? Whose anti-Platonism is more persuasive? Why?

5. Contemporary
a. To what extent have contemporary political theorists replaced the old quest for justice with an attempt to secure liberty? Choose three authors from the list to discuss.

b. In the shadow of the Holocaust and twentieth century totalitarianism, some scholars have argued that the Enlightenment promise of human freedom through reason is no longer tenable. Others, however, contend that reason remains the foundation of freedom. Pick two to three contemporary thinkers and describe their understanding of reason, its connection to human freedom, and explain which thinker – if any of them – you find persuasive and why.

January 2017

Ancient

1. In his *Clouds* Aristophanes accuses a philosopher named Socrates of undermining not only the laws of the city but also the authority of the fathers in their families with his atheistic teachings. To what extent and how effectively can Plato's dialogues be seen as a response to Aristophanes' charges?

2. One of the most famous statements of Thucydides’ *War of the Peloponnesians and Athenians* is the claim by the Athenians at Melos that “when it comes to human reasoning, the just things are judged from the standpoint of equal compulsion, and the strong do what they can and the weak yield” (5.89). Or as it is more colloquially put, justice exists only between those of equal power, and the strong do what they wish while the weak do what they must. After laying out precisely what the Athenians mean by this claim in the context of the Melian dialogue, discuss whether Thucydides himself holds this same view.

Early Modern

1. What is Mary Wollstonecraft’s conception of a happy marriage? Why does it represent a philosophical milestone with respect to early modern theories of marriage, such as by Locke and Rousseau? Despite these advances, does Wollstonecraft’s conception of marriage have moral limitations or pose political problems? If so, what are they—and if not, why?

2. An issue that remains controversial in the study of early modern political philosophy is the relation between the theories of Hobbes and Locke. Can you settle the question once and for all by presenting an in depth account of their positions on natural right and natural law, bringing out what is alike and different about them? While you are at it can you settle which (if either) is sound or sounder? We are counting on you.

American

1. In *The Promise of American Life*, Herbert Croly calls for a “critical reconstruction” of American political ideals. Explain both why Croly contends American ideals need such a “reconstruction” and in what his “reconstruction” consists. To what extent does Croly adopt and/or depart from the political philosophy articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the constitutionalism set forth in *The Federalist Papers*?

2. While some draw a stark contrast between the political philosophies of the Founding fathers and thinkers of the Progressive era, both are also nevertheless widely regarded as expressions of liberalism. Discuss what differentiates their respective positions using the thought of at least one founder and one Progressive thinker (e.g., John Dewey or Herbert Croly), as well as what constitutes their continuities as liberal thinkers.

Contemporary

1. Freedom is an important theme running through the texts assigned for the contemporary political theory section. Compare and contrast the ways in which freedom can be conceptualized in the works of any three of these thinkers.

2. Contemporary political theory scholars have attempted to rethink the nature of political violence. Drawing on at least three thinkers, answer the following questions: Are violence and politics fundamentally intertwined, or can they be
separated from one another? Can violence be used for legitimate political ends, and if so, under what conditions? Which (if any) thinker do you find persuasive, and why?

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**Medieval**

1. Hobbes defines natural laws as “dictates of reason” that are “conclusions or theorems” that human beings draw “concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves.” How does this definition and conception of natural law compare to the understanding(s) of natural law embodied in medieval philosophy? In your answer, make sure to focus on medieval views.

2. Write an essay that could serve as the basis for an introductory lecture on the political thought of Augustine, as expressed in his *City of God*, using as your starting point ONE of these two passages:

"Most glorious is the city of God, whether in this passing age, where she dwells by faith as a pilgrim..., or in the security of that eternal home which she now patiently awaits until 'righteousness shall return unto judgment' (Psalm 94:15), but which she will then possess perfectly in final victory and perfect peace... I know, however, what efforts are needed to persuade the proud how great is that virtue of humility which...raises us above all the earthly pinnacles which sway in this inconstant age" (*City of God* I.Preface).

"Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt of God, and the heavenly by love of God extending to contempt of self. The one...glories in itself, the other in the Lord... In the earthly city, princes are as much mastered by the lust for mastery as the nations which they subdue are by them; in the heavenly, all serve one another in charity, rulers by their counsel, and subjects by their obedience" (*City of God* XIV.28)

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End