

# Graduate Study in Political Theory

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## **Introduction**

We consider it important for students electing political theory as a field to be broadly knowledgeable about the history of political thought, deeply knowledgeable about certain theorists, and broadly or deeply knowledgeable about contemporary debates in the field. We also expect that students will be able to make use of what they have learned from the arguments of past and present theorists, in order to help them think independently about important issues of political theory and political practice. Vanderbilt's graduate training in political theory therefore aims to educate students and to develop their independence in researching and teaching in the following areas and ways of thinking.

### *I. History of Western Political Thought*

Students are expected to read and think about the major works from the tradition of western political thought (see the author names listed in the field exam). Those for whom theory is the primary field are expected to have a more comprehensive knowledge than those for whom political theory is a second field.

Students should keep in mind such important questions as: What is political theory? Does it have a distinctive subject-matter and/or methodology or how have these changed through history? They should know about the important political issues of each period, and of the distinctive ways these issues were addressed. They should be able to compare and contrast the ideas and arguments of theorists from different historical periods, remaining aware of certain continuities regarding questions about justice, authority, et al., but without lapsing into ahistoricity.

They should be aware of different approaches to the study of these texts, e.g., Straussian, critical, feminist, deconstructionist, post-colonial, and so forth. Making use of arguments of the major theorists in the tradition, students should be able both to criticize them and to develop and defend their own ideas.

This knowledge is essential for framing your scholarship in the field.

### *II. Understanding Particular Authors*

Students are expected to read and think in depth about a small number of theorists. By reading all or most of the works of an author, students gain an understanding of the author's oeuvre over time, across issues, through changes or lack of changes in methodology and questions of interest.

This knowledge and skill is essential for your scholarship to be able to offer a unique contribution to the field.

### *III. Contemporary Issues and Debates*

In order to have a solid basis for theorizing about contemporary political questions, students are expected to have knowledge of important works of contemporary political thought. This aspect of the field will be to some extent tailored to teach student's concerns and other major interests in political science. However, students will be expected to have read and thought about a number (not all) of the following: concepts of freedom, and potential conflicts between freedom and equality; theories of justice, including left and communitarian critiques of liberal and/or individualist theories; global theories of justice; the politics of distribution, multiculturalism, recognition, toleration, and/or identity; dominant 20<sup>th</sup> century political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, conservatism, communism, fascism; theories of rights, including human rights, liberty rights, and welfare rights; disputes about property and its justification, including those about connections between market systems and forms of government; conceptions of 'public' and 'private' and the influence of feminist thought on them; theories of revolution, including debates about reform versus revolution; distinctions between authority and power. Students should also be familiar with epistemological concerns relevant to the study of politics; and have a general and thoughtful knowledge of issues in philosophy of sciences.

This knowledge is essential for integrating your scholarship into the contemporary field.

## **Preparation**

There are four components to graduate training in political theory. Depending on course of study and research, reading fluency may be required in one or more relevant languages

### *I. Courses*

Students should use course offerings to enable them to feel confident in the three areas described above. Students may seek out professors and other students with whom to design an independent study in a field of their interest and to cover material not offered in listed course offerings. Each student should complete at least one course or independent study with a research paper that demonstrates her ability to do sustained research and to articulate a cohesive argument.

### *II. Preliminary Examination*

The preliminary exam, described in detail below, provides an opportunity for the student to demonstrate her progress toward developing skills and knowledge in the three areas described above.

First and second field theorists are encouraged to work with the theory committee to develop reading lists to aid in preparation for the exam. These reading lists may or may not include material from courses offered in the department or elsewhere, but they *will*

include a substantial number of texts beyond those assigned in course material. The theory committee will also help the student develop reading lists appropriate for their anticipated dissertation topic.

The only difference between taking the theory exam as a first or second field student is that the second field student may opt to write questions in only 2 of the 3 areas. If a student later switches her field, her committee may examine her during the oral defense of her dissertation proposal on material that the committee and she deem necessary in order for her to succeed with the dissertation and in the field.

### *III. Dissertation*

The dissertation proposal should define a question that 1) will enable the student to make a unique contribution to the field, 2) is researchable by the student, and 3) has an audience in political theory. The proposal should be brief, address the above three concerns, and include a bibliography of both read and unread material. The student does not need to answer the question in the proposal. The oral defense of the dissertation gives the student the opportunity to clarify for herself and her committee the key challenges of the dissertation. The defense is also the opportunity for each member of the committee to clarify her role in supporting the student's research project.

The committee should be composed of five, including a chair who is a political theorist and at least one professor from outside the political science department. The student and the chair are responsible for maintaining regular contact about the student's progress. The student is responsible for soliciting necessary advice from other committee members.

The final defense of the dissertation should be scheduled with enough time for each committee member to read the dissertation in its entirety prior to the defense. In addition, students with an eye toward a specific graduation date should allow enough time to revise the dissertation prior to filing. Contact the Graduate School Registrar to know the deadlines for filing.

### *IV. Teaching development*

Teaching, like research, is hard work and hard work pays off. No one – even someone who is a “gifted teacher” – is a good teacher without working at it. The Political Theory teaching development plan is designed to help you develop your skills as a teacher. This plan gives the student the opportunity to develop teaching expertise.

In their first two years, students TA courses in political theory, including PSCI 103 – the Introduction. Additionally, students observe faculty in political theory and other fields. Following such observations, the student and faculty meet to discuss the pedagogical goals and strategies of what the student observed. Additionally, the faculty member mentors the student in identifying what goals the student might have for a class and how he or she might achieve those same goals. Through multiple observations of multiple faculty, students are encouraged not to mimic another's teaching expertise, but to develop his or her own.

Finally, after advancing to candidacy, that is, after the exams and proposal defense, the student teaches PCI 103 during a summer session (subject to department scheduling).

## **Five year plan to a Political Theory PhD**

Year 1 Course work in primary and secondary fields.

As offerings allow, do your best to supplement your existing theory knowledge in order to be able to complete your theory preparation, focus initially on filling in your gaps in the areas 1 and 2 and exploring possible interest for area 3.

Plan your first two years' course work so that you take courses with each of the theorists. Supplement course work with teaching experience in political theory as possible.

Student – faculty teaching observation.

In either the first or second year, students should TA 103, subject to the constraints of the department.

Apply for A&S summer money to study a question related to a possible dissertation idea.

Year 2 Course work in primary and third field

As offerings allow, continue to supplement your existing theory knowledge in order to be able to complete your theory preparation, continue to fill in your gaps in the areas 1 and 2, emphasize exploration of possible interest for area 3.

Supplement coursework with independent studies as necessary to prepare for your qualifying exam.

Supplement coursework with teaching experience in political theory as possible. Teaching political theory helps strengthen your preparation for the qualifying exam.

Student – faculty teaching observation.

Apply for A&S summer money to study a question related to a possible dissertation idea.

Year 3 Fall, take qualifying exams in two fields.

Begin drafting dissertation proposal.

Apply for A&S summer money to study a question related to a possible dissertation idea.

If student has defends the dissertation proposal by the end of the spring term, based on teaching experience and advisor approval, teach Introduction to Political Theory in one of the summer sessions. (This may be in year 4.)

Year 4 Fall, defend dissertation proposal in September.

Seek grants for following year. (Deadlines are usually in November and December)

Write dissertation.

Year 5 Write dissertation.

Seek grants for following year. (Deadlines are usually in November and December)

Circulate draft in January.

Defend dissertation in March.

File dissertation in April; Graduate in May.

## **Five year plan to an academic job in Political Theory**

Year 1 Course work in primary and secondary fields.

Year 2 Course work in primary and third field.

Year 3 Qualifying exams.

Turn one course paper into a conference-worthy paper. Attend appropriate conference; ideally present a paper on dissertation topic. Ideally submit publishable paper, but only if doing so prepares you for writing your dissertation proposal.

Year 4 Defend dissertation proposal in September.

Seek grants for following year. (Deadlines are usually in November and December).

Write dissertation. Cancel subscriptions to periodicals.

Teach PSCI 103 during the summer sessions.

Year 5 Write dissertation.

Seek grants for following year. (Deadlines are usually in November and December)

Circulate draft in January.

Defend dissertation in March.

File dissertation in April

Graduate in May.

## Getting started

- 1) Settle the basics. Make sure you have a comfortable work environment that suits you, transportation and housing that are not going to take up too much of your time, and the capacity to make ends meet so that you don't have to be distracted by financial concerns. (Note, there are library carrels available for graduate students and a waiting list. If this strikes you as a good work environment, get on that list.)
- 2) It is possible to get through without owning your own computer, but consider getting a laptop to enhance your productivity and flexibility.
- 3) Learn the basics of ergonomics and arrange your workspace so that your body is not taxed by your work space.
- 4) Get the EndNote bibliography software. Learn how to use common Political Theory (philosophy, Political Science, Sociology) search engines to find documents.
- 5) Start building your bibliography and your author notes from day one. You should generate an abstract for everything you read. All of your abstracts should be searchable. So, if you avoid advice #4, at least use MS Word to have typed abstracts so that Windows can search by text. Learn what an abstract is and is not.
- 6) Evaluate your preparation, strengths and weaknesses.
- 7) Plan to fill in the gaps in your preparation in part by auditing or TAing undergraduate courses in the history of political thought or by studying on your own.
- 8) Plan your course work. Decide what interests you and change your plan as your interests change. Discuss these choices with the theory faculty so that we can help you meet these objectives over the changes in the curriculum.
- 9) Discuss your research and teaching interests with each member of the Political Theory faculty so that we can keep an eye out for you and yours.
- 10) Plan your TA work. On a semester by semester basis you don't have control over what you are asked to TA, but you should know what courses you would like to TA and the Political Theory faculty and DGS should know this too. All first field students should have the experience of TAing 103 and of teaching it as a summer course before you go on the job market.

## ***Political Theory Field Exam Outline and Explanation***

### **Introduction**

The purpose of the political theory field exam is two-fold. First, we expect that in studying for the exam and taking it, you will become more aware of your strengths and weaknesses as a theorist. Second the exam offers you the opportunity to demonstrate your ability to write knowledgeably, coherently, and convincingly about the field.

Given the current state of the subdiscipline and in order to ensure that each student has the skills necessary to adapt to the field as it changes, the exam will test each student in three areas: 1) breadth across the history of political thought, 2) depth with respect to certain authors, and 3) familiarity and facility with key debates and issues in contemporary thought. We expect that you will be able to make use of what you have learned from the arguments of past and present theorists in order to help them think independently about important issues of political theory and political practice.

Each student is expected to write one question in each area; however, students for whom theory is a second field may write three questions in two areas. In each of three essays, students will demonstrate their ability to form a coherent and convincing argument based on knowledgeable discussion of political theorists.

Note that the sample questions below are adapted from last year's exam. As it works out this is a very democracy-oriented exam. You will certainly have a democracy-related question, but you should expect a range of themes to be covered.

### **Directions**

Answer three questions. If theory is your first field, answer one from each part. If theory is your second field, you may select your three questions from two parts. Try to ensure that your answers, when taken together, discuss a range of theorists from a range of historical periods and a range of subjects. Try also to offer sustained *analysis* of the question asked, rather than an overview of the general topic. We are looking for evidence that you can analyze in political theory at a sophisticated level.

### **Part I**

The purpose of this section is for you to demonstrate your knowledge of the history of political thought. There will be some choice as to theorists and questions, but you will need to write about 3-6 theorists from the history of political thought divided chronologically. In writing this essay each student will demonstrate a basic knowledge of the history of political thought that would be necessary (though not sufficient) for designing a course entitled, "Introduction to Political Thought." Although you may reference contemporary or secondary literature in this essay, it is not required and certainly discussion of interpretive and critical debates in contemporary scholarship,



while relevant, should not be the focus of this essay. (Save that for Part III.) These questions will be on major and recurrent themes in history of western political thought: power, order, citizenship, equality, freedom, democracy, rights, social compact, community, et al.

Group One: Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, Bible.

Group Two: Augustine, Aquinas, More, Luther, Calvin, Machiavelli.

Group Three: Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau, Burke, Wollstonecraft, Paine, Madison et al.

Group Four: Bentham, Kant, Hegel, Proudhon, Tocqueville, J.S. Mill, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, Lenin, Weber.

Group Five: Dewey, Woolf, Marcuse, Arendt, Oakeshott, Strauss, Dahl, Downs, Schumpeter, Rawls, Berlin, Habermas, Foucault, Taylor, Sen, Walzer, Dworkin, Benhabib, Pateman, et al.

*Examples:*

1.1 Select a political theorist from each of four groups and discuss the understanding of the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of democracy presented in the theorists' works as you critically compare them.

1.2 Theoretical explorations of the nature of democracy inevitably confront the problem of "essentially contested concepts." What is this problem and how does it provide guidance in comprehending "democracy" as the term/concept is given meaning in the literature. In presenting your discussion, employ the works of several political theorists, with at least one from among the contract theorists, one from among contemporary liberal theorists, and one from among those who explore democratic theory in an empirical or analytical context.

1.3 "The structure and content of political theory is often founded on the presuppositions concerning the causes and character of conflict." Discuss this claim employing at least three theorists – one from each of three groups.

1.4 Using between three and six theorists from at least three groups, discuss the relationship of equality and freedom.

## Part II

The purpose of this section is for you to demonstrate your in-depth knowledge of particular theorists. Prior to taking the exam, you should provide the exam committee with a list of four theorists with whom you expect to be very familiar. Such familiarity would require knowledge of multiple texts by the authors, of the context of the authors' writings, and of important secondary literature on the authors. However, familiarity with secondary sources on these authors should not be used as substitutes for your own judgment and interpretation of the primary texts. Expect these questions to be comparative and to require the discussion of more than one theorist per essay. If you write two essays from this part, they must not cover the same theorists.

### *Examples:*

2.1 Discuss the core assumptions of social contract theory comparing Hobbes and Locke with the presentations of the theory in Plato's *Republic*. Do these assumptions provide important elements to liberal justice? How?

2.2 Using Locke and Rawls, set out and discuss the role of religion in liberal theory.

2.3 What is the Platonic critique of democratic speech and deliberation? How did Aristotle answer it? Evaluate.

2.4 Using at least three works from John Stuart Mill and Thomas Paine, discuss each author's political theory and the value of consistency for political theory.

2.5 Set out and assess Nietzsche's critique of democracy. Refer to other theorists as appropriate.

## Part III

Part III is your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of issues currently being discussed by theorists. Topics in this section may include democracy, identity, multiculturalism, nationalism, recognition, toleration, representation, citizenship, and justice. Theoretical schools may include liberalism, "communitarianism," post-modernism, critical theory, and feminism. Prior to taking the exam, you should provide the committee with two or three proposed themes and sample bibliographies. The committee will approve your proposed themes and provide an expanded reading list where necessary. While you do not need to be familiar with all of the theorists who are interested in a given subject, you do need to be able to discuss important theorists and a range of theoretical approaches to the topic. Note that some of these topics overlap with topics in Part I. In designing an essay in response to this question, focus on contemporary and not historical theorists.

*Examples:*

3.1 Discuss rival theories of negotiating difference in liberal democracies, for example toleration, neutrality, and recognition.

3.2 Discuss the concept of identity in terms of the significance of its dimensions in association with at least five important companion concepts. Provide examples of how these associations are treated in the works of the three theorists you consider to be the most helpful in treating the subject.

3.3 Discuss the means of doing political theory and why, if at all, it is important. Employ examples from at least six theorists in developing your essay.

3.4 What insights does political philosophy bring to our understanding of nationalism?

3.5 Are strong notions of citizenship increasingly untenable, as some have claimed? Analyze, citing specific theorists and their arguments.

3.6 Can rights arguments developed in the West be used to criticize or understand non-Western societies?

3.7 What does democratic theory teach us about democratization?

## **Oral**

The oral exam provides an opportunity for students to have a deep theoretical conversation with the theory faculty about a question or set of questions of principle interest to the student and presumably of great importance in the student's dissertation project. Students may be examined in any area of the field the faculty deem appropriate. However, the student can anticipate the oral exam to focus on 1-3 questions from a list of a minimum of three that the student proposes to the theory faculty a minimum of three months prior to the exam. The reason for the three month deadline is to encourage the student to work with the faculty in refining those questions and in identifying an appropriate bibliography for preparing to discuss the questions.

## **Bibliography**

The theory exam, written and oral, turns on the texts the student studies. Students read, discover the questions that excite them, pursue the debates in the secondary literature that illuminate those question, think further about the concepts necessary to reflect meaningfully about those questions, and the cycle continues. Faculty can be invaluable at every turn in that cycle of inquiry, but the student is the author of the journey and all of its turns. A bibliography and a question are the starting point for any meaningful conversation with a faculty member about what the next turn might be.