

Comprehensive Exam Questions for Antonin Lacelle-Webster

Please answer one question from each of the two sections. You have four hours to answer the two questions.

I. Approaches to Political Theory

1. The discipline of political theory works between what is and what ought to be. Theories that are fully immersed in what exists lack the capacity to criticize, and to move toward realities we ought to prefer. Theories that are entirely normative tend to become disconnected from realities, and thus lose their capacities to guide and justify actions that might make collectivities better. Over the last couple of decades, a loosely defined collection of “realists” have argued that parts of political theory have become so normative that they have lost touch with “politics,” and thus collapse the spaces between is and ought within which political theory exists. Identify the most important strains of this emerging school, and discuss the merits of their critique. As part of your answer, engage with at least three of the major figures in this school.
2. To what extent do those who identify (or are identified with) “agonism” capture “the political”? What characteristics, in their view, define politics? What are this strengths and limits of this ontology? In what ways are they “realists” in their approach? In your answer, discuss both the agonist position, and two actual or potential alternative approaches.
3. Among some putatively “realist” political theorists who have construed political conflict as constitutive of politics, such as Carl Schmitt, there has been a tendency to take existing conflicting political groupings as (relatively?) given. But this view of “what is” is questionable from the perspective of constructivist thinkers (such as Foucault) who insist that one key aspect of political reality is the political construction and transformation of social or political groups (e.g., races, genders, and nations). Respond to this part of the ontological debate over “what is politics?” with reference to the work of at least three major figures from your list.

II. Thinker: Hannah Arendt

1. Because action, Hannah Arendt writes at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, is “the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.” What does Arendt mean by this statement? How does it define her approach to “the political”? And in what ways is the idea of natality intrinsically connected to democracy in her thought? In your answer, include at least two of Arendt’s interpreters.

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2. For Hannah Arendt, political judgment is different than moral judgment, both as a kind of activity, and in its demands on political organization. Explain Arendt's reasoning, particularly with reference to her concept of the public sphere. Reference at least two of Arendt's interpreters in your answer.

3. What resources does Hannah Arendt's thought offer for thinking about the places and roles of diversity in contemporary politics? Reference at least two of Arendt's interpreters in your answer.