

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Neutrality & The State

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Sandel, M. J. (1996). [Chapter 1]. In *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy* (pp. 3–24). Belknap.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. According to Michael Sandel, how is ancient political philosophy (e.g., from Aristotle) different from modern political theory (e.g., from Robert Nozick and John Rawls)?
2. What does it mean for the state to be “neutral”?
3. How do utilitarian liberals (like John Stuart Mill) defend state neutrality?
4. Why do Kantians (like Rawls) reject this utilitarian approach? How do they justify state neutrality instead? How does this justification rest on the idea that “the right is prior to the good” (p. 10)?
5. What is the difference between “encumbered identities” (p. 12) and unencumbered identities? Which one do Kantians (like Rawls) accept? Why is this Kantian view of identity so appealing to many people?
6. What problem does Sandel see in this Kantian view?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.