

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Justifying & Legitimizing Political Society

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

Locke, J. (2008, March). [Chapters 7–9]. In J. Bennet (Ed. & Trans.), *Second treatise of government* (pp. 26–41). Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf> (Original work from 1689)

Comment

When approaching legal cases like this from a political philosophy perspective, try to distinguish the *political and moral* reasoning from the *purely legal* reasoning.

Legal reasoning says things like “this is right/wrong because of the following laws, sections from the Constitution, or previous court decisions.” While such things do matter for political philosophy, they are of much lesser concern. After all, the laws, Constitution, or previous decisions may themselves be unjust. (For instance, laws, constitutions, and judicial decisions permitting slavery are all unjust.)

So instead, focus on the political and moral reasons for why something is right/wrong. Or focus on why the laws, constitution, previous decisions being applied are themselves just and should be upheld. Or focus on why those things are unjust and should be reformed or overturned. That is the approach we favor in political philosophy.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. According to John Locke, how is political society different from the state of nature? What does a person gain and lose by entering into political society with others? What is the purpose or end of political society? Ultimately, how does this all come together to justify the existence of the state?
2. Even though Locke provides an argument justifying the state, this does not necessarily make it legitimate for the state to exert its immense power over a person.
What else does Locke believe must happen before the exercise of power by the state is legitimate?
3. Recall that Thomas Hobbes argues that the sovereign ruler of the state must have a significant amount of power.
Does Locke’s theory agree with that?

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.