

POLITICAL & SOCIAL THOUGHT

John Rawls & Immanuel Kant

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 premises, assumptions, reasons, evidence, and other important considerations 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 and justify accepting the author's conclusions as opposed to other ones.

Reading

Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (Revised ed.). Cambridge, MA: Belknap. (Original work from 1971.)
(Excerpts are from section 40.)

Questions

1. What is Immanuel Kant's distinction between acting autonomously and acting heterogeneously? How does John Rawls use that distinction to justify the idea that "deliberately [assuming] the limitations of the original position... is to give expression to one's nature" (p. 222)?
2. What is Kant's distinction between categorical and hypothetical imperatives? (Kant thought that ethics and morality must be based upon a categorical imperative and not upon any hypothetical ones.) How does Rawls use that distinction to show that his two principles of justice are similar to categorical imperatives and not hypothetical ones?
3. Why does Rawls believe that Kant's notion of autonomy justifies the assumption of mutual disinterest for those in the original position?
4. Putting all this together, why does Rawls believe that "the original position may be viewed... as a procedural interpretation of Kant's conception of autonomy and the categorical imperative within the framework of an empirical theory" (p. 226)?

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 (unless you miss or are late to class, and must then submit a written reading question review).

You do need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting. You may, during the following class, be randomly selected to present answers to these if selected to do so for a verbal reading question review.