

POLITICAL & SOCIAL THOUGHT

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 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

Sandel, M. J. (1996). *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
(Excerpts are from chapter 1.)

Questions

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 problems 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 (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.