

RETH 44802 Contemporary Political and Social Ethics

Winter 2021

REMOTE

Tuesday 9:40am-12:40pm

Professor Richard Miller

Office: Swift 202

Office Hours: Mon.: 1:50

3:10pm and Tues.: 2:40-

4:00pm

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Description

In 1971 John Rawls set new terms for political and social ethics with the publication of his landmark work, *A Theory of Justice*. This seminar will focus on the work of Rawls along with critical engagements with his ideas in the 1980s and 1990s by Michael Sandel, Michael Walzer, Susan Moller Okin, Seyla Benhabib, and Will Kymlicka. In order to provide an understanding of the evolving nature of this engagement, the seminar's readings are arranged roughly in chronological order. One aim is to make plain the nature of public philosophy regarding social justice as it was carried out from 1971-1996, and to identify how and where Rawls adjusted his ideas in response to his critics during this time. Another aim is to correct for the ongoing misrepresentation of liberal democratic theory in the academy and in public culture more generally. Topics include theories of distributive justice, gender equality, cultural rights, religion and politics, toleration, identity and difference, and, more generally, the relation between the right and the good in political thought.

Format

Class meets once a week in a seminar format. For the first class, I will make introductory remarks about the organizing ideas of the course and sketch a plan for the following weeks. Then we will turn to the first reading for discussion (see below).

Starting on week 2, students will help to lead each seminar by presenting a ~5-8 minute **Focal Discussion Question**. Each presenter should identify a passage in the assigned text for that day that warrants close scrutiny and indicate what it is about that passage that is illuminating, puzzling, or questionable—and why. The Focal Discussion Question is not to summarize the text but should launch a focused analysis and discussion of a specific passage in the reading. It must be concise and to the point. Students will be required to launch **two** seminar sessions.

Students should send me their FDQ on a Word document via email to review by 5pm on the Monday before their presentation.

As you think about your assignments and the work in the seminar, consider the following:

- You should *think through and with* each author's argument, considering his or her work on its *strongest terms*. Imagine yourself as a ventriloquist of each author and consider how you

would defend or develop his or her ideas, and why. What central ideas and methods characterize each author's work? What are the distinctive marks of each author's method and core claims? Who are what are the author's foils? What is the author accomplishing? Only when those questions are addressed are you in the proper position to raise challenges or critical questions.

- What weaknesses of each author's work can you identify? Explain.
- How would you compare one author's work with the work of at least one other author, either by way of similarity or contrast? What concepts shape your comparison? Why are these comparisons important?
- The works under review are theoretical, not empirical. What *method* shapes the development of the theory? Does the method rely on unpacking canonical texts? Constructive theorizing? Interpretation of existent meanings and practices? Naming and refining moral intuitions?
- What core concepts inform the theory you are reading?
- These authors are engaged with theorizing about justice. What is their view of justice? How is it defined? To what or whom does it apply? What are its interpersonal and institutional aspects? What *wrongs* is it meant to prevent or correct for? What distinctions enable you to sharpen your grasp of the meaning and application of justice? What other concepts, e.g., freedom, equality, solidarity, desert, entitlement, or power, enable you to clarify the concept of justice that is being developed by the author under review?
- What implicit or explicit theory of the person, society, and political institutions informs the author's theory? What background considerations about individual, social, and political life shape our authors' theorizing about justice?

Requirements

1. **Regular attendance and participation.** 20%.
2. **Two Focal Discussion Questions (FDQs).** 40%.
3. **Final Paper** on topic approved by the instructor. 40%. Each student is to write a 12-15 page double-spaced, 12pt font paper on one or more of the texts read in the course on a topic approved by me. Your Final Paper may borrow only selectively from your FDQ and Concept Analysis. **Note: Your paper title, 1-2 paragraph thesis, and brief bibliography are due on March 1.** The Final Paper is due on **Tuesday, March 16.** These written materials are to be submitted to me as a Word document via email by 5pm on their due dates.

Texts

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (rev. edition: 1999 [1971]): **Please acquire this revised edition.**

John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (expanded edition: 2005 [1993]). **Please acquire this expanded edition.**

Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed. (1998 [1982]): **Please acquire this second edition.**

Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (1983)

Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (1989)
Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (1992)
Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (1995)

These books have been ordered for purchase at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore.

Most of the course assignments extract portions from these books. Before you begin reading each assignment, please examine the work's Table of Contents to familiarize yourself with its structure, arc, and central topics.

I have posted a few articles on Canvas\Files as recommended reading.

Schedule

N.B. Sections in brackets below are recommended.

Wk 1

Jan. 12 What is justice?
John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (rev. edition: 1999 [1971]): Prefaces and secs. 1-25, [29], 32-35, 40, [43].

Wk 2

Jan. 19 Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, secs. 60, 65-72, 75-79, 81, 82, 85-87.

Wk 3

Jan. 26 Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 2nd ed.: Introduction, chaps. 1-4, Conclusion.

Wk 4

Feb. 2 Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, Preface, chaps. 1, 2, 4, 10, 13.

Wk 5

Feb. 9 Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, chaps. 1-3, 5-8.

Wk 6

Feb. 16 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Introductions and pp. 1-43; 47-66; 77-86; 133-158; 190-206; Sandel, "A Response to Rawls's *Political Liberalism*," in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, pp. 189-218.

Wk 7

Feb. 23 Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” in *Political Liberalism*; Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration”; Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (on Canvas\Files)

Monday, March 1: Paper title, brief thesis statement and provisional bibliography due on Word via email at 5pm.

Wk 8

Mar. 2 Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Introduction, chaps. 1, 6, 7; skim 2-5.

Wk 9

Mar. 9 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, chaps. 1-3, 5-6, 8-10.

Tuesday, March 16: Final Paper due on Word sent via email by 5pm.