

Winter 2017
Philosophy 765
Topics in Ethical Theory
Topic: Survey of Public Reason

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Course description:

[S]ince political power is the coercive power of free and equal citizens as a corporate body, this power should be exercised when constitutional essentials and basic question of justice are at stake, only in ways that all citizens can reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of their common human reason. (Rawls, PL, 139-40).

Here, Rawls offers a canonical statement of his understanding of the idea of public reason. This course surveys a number of approaches to political philosophy, normative ethics, and meta-ethics that can be loosely grouped together under the banner of public reason approaches. Some key questions that we will consider are the following:

- (1) What first-order normative considerations (e.g., equal respect for persons, civic stability, or individual well-being) motivate public reason approaches? Are these normative considerations defeasible in any circumstances?
- (2) Is it possible to populate the idea of “ways that all citizens can reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of their common human reason” with determinate content? Are there any such ways that we can all endorse in light of our common human reason? One key worry is that if we build too much into this idea (e.g., with a controversial conception of reasonable or common human reason), the idea of public reason would be self-defeating, but if we do not then the idea would be hopelessly indeterminate.
- (3) In some passages, Rawls seems to deny that the ideal of public reason is a meta-ethical thesis. Other public reason theorists, such as Thomas Scanlon and Rainer Forst, seem to offer their versions of public reason as meta-ethical claims. Are these formulations of the idea of public reason fundamentally different kinds of theories that can only be loosely grouped together, or is there a thread (perhaps a first order normative claim or a meta-ethical commitment) that unifies them?
- (4) More generally, are the various public reasons theories that we will consider primarily meta-ethical theses, first-order normative claims, or some kind of combination?

We will read material from proponents (e.g., John Rawls, Joshua Cohen, Charles Larmore, Gerald Gaus, Rainer Forst, Jonathan Quong, and Thomas Scanlon) and critics (e.g. Jean Hampton, Thomas Christiano, and David Enoch) of public reason approaches.