

POLI 390: Contemporary Liberalism

Claire P. Curtis

Office: 114 Wentworth, #206

Office Hours: MW 9:30-10:30, 12:30-1:30 or by appointment

e-mail: curtisc@cofc.edu

Course Description:

This course analyzes 20th-century liberal political theory, focusing on the work of John Rawls. Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* revitalized the field of political philosophy and provided a benchmark for understanding the principles of liberalism in our time. In 1993 Rawls published a series of lectures, printed together as the collection *Political Liberalism*, responding to criticisms of *Theory*. In 2001 Rawls produced a restatement of his main ideas from *Theory*. We will begin this class with a four week analysis of Rawls' theory from this restatement of ideas. We will then turn to three theorists deeply influenced by and often critical of Rawls within the liberal boundary, broadly construed. Finally, we read two works that take up the application of some of these principles. Martha Nussbaum's *Frontiers of Justice*, which draws on three pervasive problems for theories of justice and moves away from Rawls towards what she calls a "capabilities approach." At the end of the semester we will read three contemporary theorists who engage with both Rawls and Nussbaum in thinking through contemporary issues in society. The expectation for this class is that you will gain both a comprehensive understanding of liberal theory and an understanding of what that theory would mean in practice.

Course Objectives:

This course has four aims. First, this course aims to plunge you into the midst of a key debate in contemporary political philosophy over the meaning and scope of Rawls' understanding of justice. Second, this course will give you the opportunity to analyze theoretical arguments closely. Third, this course allows you to see what theorists are still saying on these topics through a paper on a secondary article of your choice. And finally this course provides the opportunity to link the theoretical to a political issue of your choosing and to present those connections and the potential impact of those connections in a group presentation. The learning outcomes for this course are for students to:

- 1) Demonstrate an understanding of Rawls and his critics;**
- 2) Explicate theoretical arguments;**
- 3) Analyze secondary scholarship on Rawls and other thinkers;**
- 4) Apply theoretical frameworks to new situations.**

Course Expectations:

As an upper level class focusing on political theory you will be asked to read closely and analyze the arguments of the theorists made. You will be expected to keep up with the reading and participate in discussions on both the meaning and the application of the theories we read. Each week (you choose Monday or Wednesday) you will submit a one page reading response (on OAKS) to the reading for that day. You should read carefully with an eye to the structure of the arguments that we read and you should take note of any places where the logic of the

arguments presented is not clear. I recommend that you keep track of the reading by noting any questions that you have about the arguments prior to any class discussion. The latter third of the semester will be spent more directly on applying theory to practice; we will consider how all of the ideas are or are not practicable. Active participation is expected and I encourage you to come to class with questions and issues for discussion. Each of you will be able to work with other students connecting theory to practice in a presentation on an issue of your choice. More about the presentations is discussed below.

Course requirements:

- Weekly reading responses 15%
- Final exam 10%
- Papers (2) 20% each
- Group presentation 20%
- Participation 10%
- Lecture/event response papers (3) 5%

There are two papers, explained further below, each worth 20% of your grade. You will notice that there are two possible due dates for each of these papers. You may choose the dates that best fit your schedule, as long as each paper is handed in during one of the two dates. Unexcused late papers will be downgraded 1/3 of a grade a day. You must hand in all written work in order to pass the class. The exams will be primarily identification and passage explication. The final will include a take home essay asking you to link theory and practice. Presentations are described in more detail below.

Course scale:

A (93-100)	A- (90-92)	B+ (87-89)	B (84-86)	B- (80-83)	C+ (77-79)
C (74-76)	C- (70-73)	D+ (67-69)	D (64-66)	D- (60-63)	F (0-59)

Required Readings

John Rawls	<i>Justice as Fairness, A Restatement</i>
Michael Sandel	“The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self” (on OAKS)
Michael Walzer	<i>Spheres of Justice</i>
Susan Okin	<i>Justice, Gender and the Family</i>
Martha Nussbaum	<i>Frontiers of Justice</i>

- 1/11: Introduction and the idea of the social contract
- 1/13: Classical Liberalism (Benjamin Constant) (reading on OAKS) and Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, Part One pp. 1-5

1/18: Martin Luther King Day, No Class

- 1/20: Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, Part Two, pp. 5-66

- 1/25: Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, Part Two, continued, and Part Three, pp. 66-134
 1/27: Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, Part Four, pp. 135-179
Paper due date
- 2/1: Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, Part Five, pp. 180-202
 2/3: **Rawls Group Presentation**
Paper due date
- 2/8: Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self” (OAKS)
 2/10: Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self” (OAKS)
- 2/15: Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self” (OAKS)
 2/17: **Sandel Group Presentation**
- 2/22: Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 3-94 (Chs. 1-3)
 2/24: Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 95-183 (Chs. 4-6)
- 2/29: Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 184-248 (Chs. 7-10)
 3/2: Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 249-321 (Chs. 11-13) – **Walzer Group Presentation**
- 3/7: Spring Break
 3/9: Spring Break
- 3/14: Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, pp. 3-40, pp. 62-73, (Chs. 1-2 and part of 3)
 3/16: Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, pp. 89-133 (5-6)
- 3/21: Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, pp. 134-186 (Chs. 7-8)
 3/23: **Okin Group Presentation**
Paper due date
- 3/28: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, Introduction and Ch. 1 pp. 9-95
 3/30: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, Ch. 2 96-154
- 4/4: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, TBD
 4/6: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, TBD
Paper due date
- 4/11: **Nussbaum Group Presentation**
 4/13: Ingrid Robeyns, “Gender and the Metric of Justice” (OAKS)
- 4/18: Fritz Alhoff, “Germ Line Genetic Enhancement and Rawlsian Primary Goods” (OAKS)
 4/20: Elizabeth Anderson, “Fair Opportunity in Education, A Democratic Equality perspective” (OAKS)
 4/21: Review

Final Exam, Monday, April 25, 4pm

Reading responses

You are expected to write a one page response paper each week (you can choose which day of the week to submit it). These response papers will be submitted in the OAKS dropbox (there is a folder for each week). I expect you to write a focused and informed reaction to some portion of that day's reading. Response papers need to address the reading *prior* to any class discussion. Response papers can take a number of forms:

- 1) *Passage explication.* Frame your response around a key passage in the reading. Explain the passage. Relate that explanation to the theme of the reading as a whole or explain the ways in which that passage reflects a key argument. Or use the passage to highlight something you find confusing or problematic about the reading.
- 2) *Relate the reading to an earlier reading or class discussion.* Explain how this reading responds to or furthers that earlier discussion. Use specific examples from the reading you are discussing and from the earlier reading or discussion.
- 3) *Relate the reading to something you have read or seen outside of class.* Explain how the reading illustrates this incident or issue in a wider setting – readings in the newspaper or other media, an experience on campus or off, a conversation with a family member or friend. Again, be specific about how the reading relates and explain how the argument in the reading might be used to analyze the event.

Lecture/event responses

Students are required to attend three lectures/events outside of class and to submit a one page response to EACH event/lecture linking the topic of the event/lecture to a class reading/discussion. The lectures/events will be announced in class, posted on the syllabus or found in the weekly e-mails from Kristin Wichmann. Papers will be uploaded to the lecture/event dropbox on OAKS and will be scored with the following rubric:

	3 –excellent	2- good	1- barely adequate	0-inadequate
Outline event/lecture	Clearly and briefly describes event	Describes event	Little sense of event/lecture	Unclear on nature of event/lecture
Link to class	Uses details and examples to clearly link lecture/event to class reading/discussion	Links lecture/event to class discussion/readings with no example	Brief allusion to class.	No discussion of class readings/discussion
Clarity/writing	Clearly written, well organized, no errors.	One or two errors, clearly written, organized	Multiple errors, lack of clarity.	Multiple errors, disorganized, unclear

Papers

The first paper (due either 1/27, 2/3) is a short (5-7 p.) explication of some portion of Rawls' argument. I will hand out more specific paper topics. The second paper (3/17, 4/2) is a longer (8-10 pp.) analysis of a secondary article on one of the key authors we have read in the course (Rawls, Sandel, Walzer, Okin). Both papers will be discussed further in paper proposal handouts.

Group Presentations

The class will be divided into 5 groups (you may choose your own group members – no more than 6 people per group) or I will assign you to a group. Each group will be responsible for one 20-25 minute presentation, followed by a class discussion that the group will lead. Each group is to **choose a contemporary political issue and examine the way in which that practical issue is resolved in accordance with the theoretical arguments we are reading.**

You will be expected to

- 1) Outline the issue
- 2) Set up the theory you have chosen
- 3) Apply the theory to the problem
- 4) Present opposing viewpoints

In outlining the issue you have chosen you should consider: what the issue is, why it is a problem and what do people think about the issue. You might consider using handouts or be sure to present clear evidence about the issue. In explaining the theory be sure to outline the key features of one portion of an argument that you think seems particularly fruitful for thinking through the issue you have chosen. Use passages from the text to show how you are reading the text. In applying that theory to the issue in question you should walk through how the theory in question both **understands** and **solves** the issue. In considering opposing viewpoints you should offer some thoughts on how the issue might be considered differently (from either a liberal or a non-liberal perspective) and explain how those viewpoints would be justified.

Presentations will be graded on both the clarity of the oral presentation (including any handouts or visual aids you might want to include) and the quality of your theoretical application and problem solving. All members of the group will receive the same grade unless it is made clear to me that someone was either derelict or particularly helpful with the presentation.

I would recommend that each group make an appointment with the speaking lab prior to the presentation. Evidence that you have prepared in advance and met with people at the speaking lab will improve your presentation. The speaking lab is located in the Center for Student Learning, first floor of the library. The speaking lab requires that appointments be made in advance.

	Poor	Weak	Good	Excellent
Outline of issue 20 points	Unclear explanation of issue, no evidence. 0-5 points	Weak explanation of issue, little evidence. 6-10 points	Clear explanation, good use of evidence, 11-16points	Clear explanation, good use of evidence, made sure that other understood issue at hand 17-20 points
Set up of theory 20 points	Unclear explanation of theory. No passages explicated. 0-5 points	Weak explanation of theory. Only one passage explicated. 6-10 points	Clear explanation, multiple passages clearly explicated 11-16 points	Excellent choice of passages and clear understanding of arguments. 17-20 points
Application of theory to issue: Understanding issue 20 points	Unclear application, no understanding of how theory understands problem. 0-5 points	Weak application, little understanding of how theory understands problem. 6-10 points	Clear application, step by step connection between issue and theory. 11-16 points	Step by step connection between theory and issue. Excellent understanding of theory and how it connects to issue. 17-20 points
Application of theory to issue: Solving issue 10 points	Unclear application, no understanding of how theory solves problem. 0-3 points	Weak application, little understanding of how theory solves problem. 4-6 points	Clear application. Good evidence for how theory solves problem 7-8 points	Excellent understanding of how solution reflects the theory and solves the problem. 9-10 points
Opposing views 10 points	Unclear on how someone would approach issue from a different perspective. 0-3 points	Weak on how someone would approach issue from a different perspective. 4-6 points	Clear understanding of opposing views. Evidence provided for how those views are different. 7-8 points	Excellent choice of opposing viewpoint and clear explanation of that perspective. Uses evidence. 9-10 points
Clarity and effectiveness of overall presentation 10 points	Hard to hear, poorly structured 0-3 points	Structure or individual speaking hard to follow. 4-6 points	Well structured, clear speakers. 7-8 points	Well structured, clear speakers, engaging and interesting. 9-10 points
Group cohesion 10 points	Evidence that group did not work together. 0-3 points	Evidence that group worked poorly together 4-6 points	Group provides evidence that they worked well together. 7-8 points	Group provides evidence that they worked well together. 9-10 points