

Question

In class, we discussed how John Rawls' article¹ was an example of political philosophy, by pointing to the unique way it combined a particular method and ontology. Is it possible to make the same argument that Rawls was making, using another theoretical tradition? If so, which method is appropriate? If not, explain. In either case, make your argument with reference to the class readings as they relate to theoretical tradition, methodology and method, and support them with quotes from the Rawls' article.

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Whatever the response, I expect to see a clear and explicit argument that is well designed, argued and supported.

First of all, it is essential that candidates have a firm argument/statement, which they prove in a coherent and convincing manner. Rambling descriptions, with no point, should be severely marked down. The answer should have a thesis statement and a clear outline or road map of how that thesis statement will be proven. Evidence for this argument, as well as the operationalization of important concepts (e.g., constructivist/naturalists; political philosophy, etc.) should be done with explicit references to the course readings. Traditional academic and referencing standards should be maintained, although the candidates are free to choose a particular referencing system (so long as it used *consistently*, and contains enough information to track down the underlying evidence). Direct citations/quotes need to be referenced with page or location numbers, so the readers can track down the original.

This particular question asks a Yes or No question, with a follow up. Hence, I expect to see thesis statements that are either: a) It is possible to make the same argument as Rawls, using another theoretical tradition; or b) It is not possible to make the same argument as Rawls, using another theoretical tradition. If a clear and explicit answer to the question is not stated, then we have a problem. I then expect to see a short description of how this thesis statement will be proven in the introduction.

Second of all, the candidate should demonstrate a capacity to discuss Rawls' work in light of the different theoretical traditions covered in the course (political philosophy; rational choice; behaviouralism; post-modernism and new institutionalism). The candidate should be able to extract specific quotes from Rawls to support the argument, and these should be explicitly interpreted, so that the reader is clear about what role the citations are playing in the underlying argument.

In particular, candidates need to: a) explain Rawls' argument; and b) position it in the political philosophy tradition (i.e., it uses a deductive approach and a constructivist ontology). In class, I argued that Rawls wanted to prove that the standard for evaluating justice as fairness in a

¹ Rawls, John (1985) "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (3): 223-251;

democratic context was not some sort of metaphysical or transcendental standard, but one based on deliberation and consensus. I then demonstrated that it was an example of political philosophy, in that it reflected a constructivist ontology and a deductive approach.²

There is a chance that some students will misinterpret the question, and try to re-classify Rawls' work as representing another tradition (e.g. prove that Rawls is actually making a rational choice argument, rather than a political philosophy argument). Let me be blunt: the question being asked is not "Is Rawls a Rational Choice theorist?". Rather, the question asks whether Rawls' argument (i.e., justice is fairness) could be made using another theoretical tradition (such as Rational Choice). We need to be careful here: it is possible to suggest that the same argument could be made from a different theoretical tradition, and that Rawls himself seems to hint as much...; but the question does not ask to analyze Rawls work to see if it should be categorized in a different theoretical tradition (e.g. Rational Choice).

If the focus is on rational choice (which seems most likely), then the attention of the candidate should be aimed at ontological differences, as rational choice and political philosophy both share a deductive method. From the perspective of these four theoretical traditions, it doesn't matter if the deduction takes the forms of axioms and mathematic proofs, or assumptions and reasonable conclusions. What distinguishes rational choice from political philosophy is the underlying ontological assumptions. Hence, the question becomes: can you make an argument that "justice is fairness" (and hence will vary with the political majority), and still hold that there are certain absolute truths and patterns in the Real World, independent of our observation of them...

There are several ways to answer this question, the three most likely are as follows:

- a) Some people will argue that it is not possible to use a different method. I think this is the least imaginative argument, and a good grade will rely on the ability of the candidate to show a strong understanding of Rawls' argument, and why it can only be proved with deductive approaches. E.g, that justice is an ideal, which can be demonstrated empirically (ala Plato). In doing so, however, the candidate will need to demonstrate that this is a political (not metaphysical) argument (and I'm not sure how this can be done). Either way, this argument needs to be secured by pointing to sections in Rawls that can support this interpretation, and by clearly (and explicitly) navigating between inductive and deductive methods and naturalist and constructivist methodologies.
- b) Rawls wants to argue that "justice is fairness" rests on political, not metaphysical, ground. Given that, it should be possible to apply more inductive approaches—but what would they look like? This would move the answer in the direction of post-modern or behaviouralist approaches. Once an argument for an inductive approach is made, the particular method (case, comparative, statistical, experiment) doesn't really matter. What is necessary is a clear discussion about how to operationalize justice (empirically);

² In my lectures I construct a Cartesian map, where different theoretical traditions are mapped out along two dimensions: ontology (Naturalism to Constructivism) and method (inductive to deductive). The class reading doesn't provide the map, but Moses and Knutsen is based on the main ontological cleavage (naturalism vs. constructivism), and most of the methods chapters are inductive in nature.

and how it will vary with the structures of democratic constitutions. The choice of method, then should allow to control for that variation in some meaningful way. Once this is set up, the different methods can be used to demonstrate the expected correlation.

- c) Also, as I noted in lecture, there are hints that Rawls' argument may be consistent with a more naturalist ontology, and his affinity for rational choice seems to imply as much. Hence, candidates may want to suggest that someone could make a similar (to Rawls) argument from a naturalist/deductive approach (Rawls' other work is consistent with this interpretation; although I don't expect students to know this). In choosing this strategy, students need to make sure they are answering the question (suggest how this argument might be formulated from a naturalist ontology), and not focusing on a reinterpretation of Rawls—as I warned against above.

Whichever route is chosen, the best responses will show students struggling with the nature of the question Rawls asks: (e.g., What is justice? How will we know when justice exists?), in light of different ontologies and methods. After all, if one is going to argue that justice is fairness, and this fairness is determined by democratic consensus (and hence will vary from context to context), you have to think about whether this sort of definition/understanding is consistent with a naturalist ontology, and/or a more inductive approach. In short, I'm looking for students that can distance themselves from Rawls: to take up his argument from where he left off.