Class #3: Rights
Discussion Questions for Class on September 5
Readings: Hunter and Milofsky, Ch. 2; Leonhardt; Zinczenko

Because writing assignments are meant to prepare you for class discussion, you must post a draft question on the Moodle Forum for this date if you want your submission to count. After posting a draft, you must revise and submit your final response for a grade by midnight on the following Sunday night, in the case of these questions the due date is September 8. Include your name and the full question number both on your Moodle Forum response and on your final paper submission.

Discussion Questions

3-1. What makes a right a right?

You should define “right" and tell why we emphasize this idea when we talk about politics and public policies. We have some familiar explanations of where rights come from—"the God-given rights of man" or rights guaranteed by the constitution. We have social benefits like free public education or health care that some call rights and others call market services (that one may or may not be able to afford). Many Bucknell students do not think one way or the other about rights so the purpose of this question is to sharpen your thinking on this issue and to consider whether you care a lot or a little about rights.

3-2 Two issues have been in the news in recent years. One is whether people born in the United States have a right to citizenship when both of their parents are not citizens. The other is whether Muslims have the right to build a community center with a small prayer room on private land two blocks from Ground Zero (the site of the 9/11 crash into the World Trader Center). Some presents this as a matter related to the right Americans enjoy to freedom of religion. The constitutional position on both issues is clear but are rights really involved? Would it be OK for politicians to change the rules if it turns out to be the case that voters would prefer to deny citizenship to the children of non-citizens and deny Muslims the opportunity to build their center close to the 9/11 site? The point of the question is for you to think about whether things really are and should be rights if they are guaranteed by the constitution.

3-3 Do we need to define services as rights before we can expect them to provided (like education or health care) or are there other perspectives to tell why services should be provided?

3-4. Hunter and Milofsky say that rights are inseparable from matched responsibilities. If that is true does that mean that rights are lessened if people do not follow through on their responsibilities?

Let’s consider obesity. Is obesity the result of bad personal choices and moral failures and are people responsible for their excessive weight? Two short articles arguing pro and con on this issue, one by Leonhardt and one by Zinczenko, have been placed on Blackboard, to help with your thinking about this issue.

Would affected individuals be thinner and healthier if people worked to be more disciplined and socially responsible? Remember that obesity causes higher medical care expenses and these must be paid by other citizens when health insurance rates go up.
What would that mean to say that obese people should be more responsible or moral and how could we as a society encourage this greater morality? Talk about where you think "morality" comes from and whether social problems are the result of bad morals. You might want to argue, alternatively, that family problems are most caused by social structural problems. If that’s the case, what role then does free choice have in terms of personal health?