

POLS 4090
Spring 2026
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Social Justice

Inequalities of income and employment opportunity; deprivations arising from poverty and disability; the sufferings of victims of oppression—all of these are routinely denounced as *unjust*. What is justice? Why is it important? How does it relate to other political values?

This course will explore the theoretical basis for claims about justice. Should the rules and institutions that govern the distribution of social goods be designed to maximize social utility; or does justice require rules and institutions that can be *justified* to the persons who are subject to the rules? What kind of arguments might such persons be willing to accept? The course will focus on the work of John Rawls, the leading contemporary theorist of justice, and will (i) examine contrasting views in the work of Robert Nozick and (ii) evaluate practical implications of these theories.

These texts are available at the University Bookstore:

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press)

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Basic Books)

Sheldon Danziger and Peter Gottschalk, *America Unequal* (Harvard University Press)

Assignments

I. Rawls

Tuesday, January 13
Introduction

Thursday, January 15
A Theory of Justice: 3-19 Overview

Tuesday, January 20
A Theory of Justice: 19-46 Basic Terms and Assumptions

Thursday, January 22
A Theory of Justice: 40-46 (rev.); 46-52 Justification in Ethics

Tuesday, January 27
A Theory of Justice: 46-52 (rev.); 52-64 Chapter 2/The Intuitive Argument

Thursday, January 29
A Theory of Justice: 64-86 Democratic Equality

Tuesday, February 3
A Theory of Justice: 64-86 (rev.); 86-93 Inviolability

Thursday, February 5
A Theory of Justice: 102-122 Property/Chapter 3

Tuesday, February 10
A Theory of Justice: 130-139; 153-160 The Formal Argument

Thursday, February 12
A Theory of Justice: 171-180; 194-206; 214-227 (skim) Criticisms of the Formal Argument/Chapter 4/Liberty Interests

Tuesday, February 17
A Theory of Justice: 228-234; 267-277 Chapter 5/Distributive Interests

Thursday, February 19
A Theory of Justice: 308-335
Coates: handout, pp. 2-18, 32-38, 40-45, 51-54, 65-66 Failures of Equal Opportunity/Chapter 6/Civil Disobedience

Tuesday, February 24
Review

Thursday, February 26—FIRST PAPER DUE
America Unequal: 39-66

Tuesday, March 3
America Unequal: 92-110

Thursday, March 5
America Unequal: 124-150

Tuesday, March 17
A Theory of Justice: 347; 450-486 The Congruence Argument

Thursday, March 19
A Theory of Justice: 486-514 The Congruence Argument

II. Nozick

Tuesday, March 31
Anarchy, State and Utopia: ix-xvi, 3-25 Basic Ideas/Fundamental Explanation/Contractarianism

Thursday, April 2
Anarchy, State and Utopia: 149-167 Entitlement Theory

Tuesday, April 7
Anarchy, State and Utopia: 167-189 Critique

Thursday, April 9
Anarchy, State and Utopia: 189-213 Critique

Tuesday, April 14
Anarchy, State and Utopia: 213-232 Critique

III. *Justice and the State*

Thursday, April 16—SECOND PAPER DUE
Welfare "Reform"

Tuesday, April 21
International Comparisons: Handout

Thursday, April 23
Sen, A. "Well-Being, Agency and Freedom: The Dewey Lectures 1984", *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), Pp. 169-220

Tuesday, May 5—THIRD PAPER DUE

Requirements

There are three course requirements. First, each student will write three papers on topics addressed by this class. The due dates for these papers are indicated in the list of assignments. Second, there will be five in-class quizzes. The third requirement is engaged participation.

The course syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations announced to the class by the instructor may be necessary.

Grades

The three papers will constitute 90% of the course grade. The quizzes will count for 10%. Any semester average falling between two letter grades will be resolved according to the quality of class participation. The instructor reserves the right to raise the letter grades of students who have participated exceptionally well over the course of the semester. Grades are calculated on a 4-point scale.

The use of generative AI technology (such as ChatGPT) is explicitly forbidden in this course. The use of ChatGPT or other such technology to prepare a paper **will be treated as pure plagiarism. Any paper prepared with such technology will receive a failing grade**, and the student who employed the technology will face an ethics hearing.

Attendance is mandatory, and the instructor reserves the right to make up to a twenty percent reduction in the overall course grade in the case of poor attendance. Three unexcused absences will lead to a mandatory grade reduction. **Five unexcused absences will lead to a mandatory F in the course.** Assignments handed in late will be subject to significant grading penalties.

A makeup quiz will be scheduled at the end of the semester for students who have missed one or more quizzes.

The instructor reserves the right to lower the letter grades of students whose behavior in class falls below the standards of civility and respect for fellow students expected of UGA students.

Finally, you are bound by the University's conduct regulations concerning academic honesty. In the context of this course, **the inaccurate presentation of written materials as your original**

work would constitute academic dishonesty. All academic work must meet the standards contained in a culture of honesty. Students are responsible for informing themselves about those standards before performing any academic work.