

POLS 8090
Spring 2026
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Systems in Political Philosophy

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 fundamental interests must an acceptable theory of justice protect? What is the legitimate jurisdiction of such a theory?

Since the publication of Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the question has been the subject of a continuous stream of articles, monographs and extended studies. Robert Nozick, Richard Arneson, G. A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Martha Nussbaum, and Amartya Sen have contributed seminal work during the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

This course will explore the theoretical basis for claims about justice. When we claim that a policy is unjust, what kind of a judgment are we making? If a policy is unjust, what reason does that give us to oppose the policy? 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 works of John Rawls, the leading contemporary theorist of justice, and will examine contrasting views in the work of Robert Nozick, Elizabeth Anderson, Richard Arneson, G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, Samuel Scheffler, and Amartya Sen.

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)

I. *Justice as Fairness*

J13 *Introduction*

J20 *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 3-46

Thomas Nagel, "Rawls on Justice," pp. 1-16

Ronald Dworkin, "The Original Position," pp. 16-53

Norman Daniels, "Wide reflective equilibrium and theory acceptance in ethics," pp. 21-40

Joshua Cohen, "For a Democratic Society," pp 86-138

T. M. Scanlon, "Rawls on Justification," pp. 139-167

Alexander Kaufman, Rawls and Kantian Constructivism," pp. 227-56.

Anthony Simon Laden, "Constructivism as Rhetoric," pp. 59-72.

Stempowska and Swift, "Rawls on Ideal and Nonideal Theory," pp. 112-27.

Samuel Freeman, "The Basic Structure of Society as the Primary Subject of Justice," 88-111.

J27 *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 47-93

T. M. Scanlon, "Rawls's Theory of Justice," pp. 169-205

G. A. Cohen, "Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice"

Norman Daniels, "Democratic Equality," pp. 241-276

Thomas E. Hill, "Stability, A Sense of Justice, and Self-Respect," pp. 200-215.

F3 *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 102-139, 144-149, 153-160

Allen Buchanan, "The Unsoundness of the Maximin Argument", pp. 26-35

Joshua Cohen, "Democratic Equality," pp. 727-751

Alexander Kaufman, "A Satisfactory Minimum Conception of Justice: Reconsidering Rawls's Maximin Argument," pp. 349-69.

F10 Rawls Overview

Income Distribution and Justice

Handout

II. *Entitlement Theory*

F17 *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. ix-xvi, 3-25, 149-167

F24 *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 167-213

M3 *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 213-232

III. Equality of What?

M17 Dworkin, R. "What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources" (1981b), *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981), pp. 283-345.

M24 PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

Sen, A. "Equality of What", in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1, S. M. McMurrin (ed.) (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1980), Pp. 195-220.

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

M31 Arneson, R. "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare", *Philosophical Studies* 56 (1989): 77-93.

"Liberalism, Distributive Subjectivism, and Equal Opportunity for Welfare", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 19 (1990): 158-94.

A7 PAPER DRAFT DUE

Cohen, G. A. "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice", *Ethics* 99 (1989), 906-944.

Cohen, G. A. "Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods and Capabilities", *Recherches économiques de Louvain* 56 (1990): 358-381.

III. Relational Equality

A14 Anderson, E. "What is the Point of Equality?", *Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337.

A21 Scheffler, S. "What is Egalitarianism", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 31/1 (Winter 2003): 5-39.

Nussbaum, M. "Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism", *Political Theory* (1992) 20: 202-246.

M5 Final Paper Due

Requirements

The course will be conducted in a seminar format. It is imperative that students come to class well-prepared to discuss the readings. The grade will be based on class participation (including one presentation) (25%), weekly submission of research issues, and a 12-15 page paper (75%), due the last class meeting, and addressing issues discussed in the course and readings. A paper proposal will be due on March 24; and a draft should be submitted for comments on April 7.

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.

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

Grades

The paper will constitute 80% of the course grade. Participation in discussion will constitute 20% of the grade. The instructor reserves the right to raise the letter grades of students who have participated exceptionally well over the course of the semester. Attendance is mandatory, and the instructor reserves the right to make up to a ten percent reduction in the overall paper grade in the case of poor attendance. Assignments handed in late will be subject to significant grading penalties.

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.

Selective Bibliography

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Chambers, Simone. 1996. *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Charney, Evan. 1998. "Political Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Public Sphere." *American Political Science Review* 92 (March): 97-110.

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