

**PHILOSOPHY 447/GOVERNMENT 465**  
**Contemporary Political Philosophy**  
**Topic for 2006: Economic Equality**

Spring 2006  
Uris 262  
TR 2:55-4:10  
R. Miller

The moral status of ideals of economic equality continues to be deeply controversial. Most Anglophone political philosophers insist that people have a demanding political duty to promote some form of economic equality among their fellow-citizens, a goal requiring dramatic reduction of actual inequalities. But the egalitarian conceptions of justice that they advance have been vigorously criticized for neglecting differences in what people deserve, violating natural rights, improperly intruding on freedom, and degrading social relations. These criticisms are especially painful to egalitarian philosophers now because they reinforce tolerance for current trends of increasing economic inequality.

In response to these controversies, many egalitarian philosophers have turned from the appeals to fairness characteristic of Rawls' paradigmatic case for equality in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) to what seem radically different considerations (which give rise to their own distinctive problems): controversial assessments of what is important in life, doctrines of personal virtue, goals of improved community, and condemnations of economic relationships as exploitive. In addition to the variety of rationales, the nature of the ideal of equality itself is hotly contested among self-described egalitarians.

Finally, the duty to reduce the enormous economic inequalities among humanity worldwide is even more widely contested. Among those committed to duties to reduce inequality among fellow-citizens, many refuse to extend their egalitarianism worldwide – leading to the charge that their refusal reflects unprincipled selfishness or bias.

We will consider contributions to these debates, in an effort to overcome current impasses. **There is a tentative schedule of topics and readings at the end of this syllabus.**

Readings:

The following book should be bought for the course. It is on sale at the Campus Store.  
Thomas Nagel, *Equality and Partiality* (Oxford.)

Our other readings will be supplied electronically, via e-reserve, the Course Documents section of the course Blackboard site (phil447,) and online journals.

Format:

Although there will be some lecturing, there will be lots of emphasis on class discussions of our texts and issues.

Prerequisites and Background (Mostly the Rawls/Nozick Question)

The normal prerequisite is at least one 300-level course in Philosophy or a 300-level course in another department in which arguments over justice figured as an important

topic. If you haven't met this prerequisite, and still want to take the course after reading this syllabus, we can talk some more about whether other background adds up to enough.

The controversies that we will investigate continue disputes that began with Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), intensified with Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) and were complicated by Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (1993). These books will not be assigned. To understand our readings, you need not have read these books in their entirety or in large part, or have studied them intensively in a course. But you will get a great deal more out of this course, if you have a grasp of the major themes of Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, Nozick's libertarian alternative and Rawls' final, political-liberal perspective on political justification. Academic understanding to one side, these are classic philosophical statements of leading components in current principled political controversy. If you haven't been exposed to these perspectives in previous courses, you can get up to speed for our purposes by independent reading in the first month of the course.

1. Rawls' theory of justice as fairness. Here are two alternatives. The quickest is to read Rawls' 1975 summary statement, "A Kantian Conception of Equality," which I will post as a Course Document in our Blackboard site. (Subsequently, Rawls came to place less emphasis on the connection between his theory of justice and Kant's moral theory, emphasizing specifically political notions of free and equal citizenship instead. But the main lines of *A Theory of Justice* are nicely sketched, here.) Alternatively, in *A Theory of Justice*, you could read the following sections (the basic, relatively short units): 1-5, 11, 13-17, 24, 26-30, 31-33, 39- 40, 82. (Don't worry if the discussions of graphs captioned "The Difference Principle" and "Chain Connection" sec. 13 don't strike you as helpful. Few find them illuminating, and these representations are not important in the book as a whole.) If you have the time, the second route is better. You won't be sorry to have bought the book.

2. Nozick's libertarianism: Nozick presents his libertarian approach to economic justice mostly in Chapter 7, Section I (a big chunk, followed by section II, "Rawls' Theory") in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Some preceding pages help to set the stage and to set out the general view of morality underlying Nozick's theory of justice: pp. ix, 28-35. Here's a money-saver: virtually all of Chapter VII appeared as an article, "Distributive Justice," in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1 (!973), which the Cornell library site has as an e-journal. I will post the few preceding pages I mentioned as a Course Document, entitled "Nozick bits." If you are sufficiently intrigued to move on to the critique of Rawls, you won't be sorry.

3. Rawls' political liberalism. Rawls' last great essay, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (Summer 1997):765-807, presents the "political liberalism" of his later years and defends its most controversial component in detail. The *University of Chicago Law Review* is available on-line, as an e-journal. As background, this is less important than items 1 and 2.

### Course Requirements

1. Attendance and participation. Coming to class and taking part in discussions on the basis of reading the day's assignment is a requirement. Because many perspectives,

intellectual backgrounds and personal backgrounds have much to contribute to all of our topics, active and informed participation will be essential to the success of the course.

2. Discussion Board contributions: Every Thursday, two people will take on the task of each contributing two or three pointed questions or brief comments to the Discussion Board on the course website, concerning the reading assigned for the following Tuesday. I will ask for volunteers (pressuring/assigning as a last resort), with the understanding that this assignment rotates so that everyone gets to contribute at least once. Of course, in addition to the delegated pair, everyone is welcome to contribute. The contributions must be posted by 8:00 PM on Monday, so that everyone has a chance to read them.

3. Papers: There will be two papers, a midterm of six to eight pages and a term paper of twelve to fifteen pages. I will hand out a list of midterm paper topics on February 23. It will be due at class March 16. The term paper will be due May 10, the last day of study period. On April 18, I will pass out a list of possible term paper topics, asking people to consult with me if they want to work on a topic far from any listed.

#### Grades:

In assigning a grade for the course, I will give the midterm paper a weight of 30%, the term paper a weight of 60%, class participation (including Discussion Board postings) 10%. If the outcome is right on the border, I will give some added weight to the quality and frequency of participation.

#### Office hours:

My office hours are TR 4:30-5:30, GS 329. My e-mail is [rwm5@cornell.edu](mailto:rwm5@cornell.edu).

Enrollment: Undergraduates should enroll online. There is an online cap (18), which the course has not reached as yet. I expect that anyone who wants to get in will be able to, perhaps with repeated trying. Graduate students should try to enroll online, but may enroll manually if they can't, going to the relevant administrator: Sarah Weibly in Philosophy (218 GS), Charlene Lee in Government (210 White.) I have told them that graduate students have my permission to enroll over the cap. (This procedure responds to the different registration schedules for grads and undergrads.)

#### Tentative schedule of topics and readings:

Let's not be slaves of this schedule. Interests, suggestions and the course of class discussions may lead to revisions, which we can implement without much fuss, given the small size of the class and electronic resources.

e=e-reserve; cd=Course Documents section of Blackboard site. If I have any doubt about whether an e-reserve will be posted in time, I will post independently in Course Documents, as well. Most of the articles assigned are in journal issues accessible online. I will work with e-reserve to get the readings listed in order of their assignment.

1/24: Introduction

I. Economic equality as a dictate of impartial morality

1/26. From moral objectivity to equality. Reading: Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, chs. 2-4 and 7. (The first two readings are longer than most. Font and page size make the next one shorter than page count might suggest.)

1/31. Social institutions and the ideal of equality. Reading: Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, pp. 53f., 60-62, 75-84 (i.e., ch. 8), 93-95, 96-119 (i.e., ch. 10.)

II. In what ways does respect for liberty protect economic inequality?

February 2: The libertarian challenge. Readings: Jan Narveson, "Liberty, Equality and Distributive Justice" e [from Larry May et al., eds., *Liberty, Equality and Plurality*

(Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1997), pp. 38-57]; Narveson, “Contracting for Liberty, pp. 25-27 e [from Tibor Machan and David Rasmussen, eds., *Liberty for the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995]

Responses to the challenge:

February 7: The value of autonomy as the basis for rights. Readings: Charles Taylor, “Atomism” e [*Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 187-210)]; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp. 244-50; 262-273 cd as “Nozick bits II” [(New York: Basic Books, 1973).]

February 9: “Forced to work for low wages.” Reading: Serena Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*, chapter 6 cd

February 14: Exploitation revisited. Readings: Richard Arneson, “What’s Wrong with Exploitation?” sections I-V, X e [*Ethics* 91 (1981): 202-213, 225-27]; Allen Wood, “Exploitation,” sections 2 and 3 e [*Social Philosophy and Policy* 12/2 (1995):135-58.] The omitted sections are certainly worth reading, but not squarely addressed to our concerns.

III. Why do some people deserve higher income or better jobs?

February 16: Deserving to deserve – and the importance of effort. Reading: George Sher, *Desert* pp. 22-36, 94-108 e [(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.)]

February 21: Contribution as the basis for economic desert. Reading: David Miller, *Social Justice*, pp. 87-89, 102-121 e [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.]

February 23: Contribution, opportunity and luck. Reading: Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*, pp. 24-33, 62-75 cd.

February 28: Desert as achievement. Reading: David Schmidtz, “How to Deserve” e [*Political Theory*, 30 (2002): 774-99.]

IV. Community and equality

A. Community and social equality

March 2: Egalitarian community. Reading: R.H. Tawney, *Equality*, ch. 1 [(London: Allen and Unwin, 1931, pp. 19-48] plus some egalitarian poetry of Walt Whitman e.

March 7: Equality as plural and social. Reading: Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, pp. 3-17, 31-63 (i.e., chapter 2 cd. [(New York: Basic Books, 1983.) Sorry about the length. Walzer’s reliance on diverse examples makes for a diffuse style, but a fairly smooth read.] Recommended but not assigned: David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, pp. 239-44 e [(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.)].

March 9: Community and aid. Reading: Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, ch. 3 cd. Recommended but not assigned: Ronald Dworkin, “What Justice Isn’t” e [from *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 214-20.]

March 14: An egalitarian cultural revolution? Readings: G.A. Cohen, “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice” e [*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26 (1997):3-30]; Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, ch. 11.

March 16: Non-ethical egalitarianism. Reading: Andrew Williams, “Incentives, Inequality and Publicity” e [*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 226-48.]

B. Does equality degrade social relations?

March 28: Equal opportunity vs. dignity? Reading: Jonathon Wolff, “Fairness, Respect and the Egalitarian Ethos,” e [*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 27 (1998):97-22.] Recommended but not assigned: Timothy Hinton, “Must Egalitarians Choose between Fairness and Respect?” e [*Philosophy & Public Affairs* 30(2001):72-88.]

March 30: Luck egalitarianism vs.dignity? Reading: Elizabeth Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?” e [*Ethics* 109 (1999): 287-337.]

April 4: Luck egalitarianism modified. Reading: Richard Arneson, “Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism” e [*Ethics* 110 (2000): 339-49];

V. Reasons of need and the demands of equality

April 6: In search of a moral threshold. David Copp, “The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living” e [*Social Philosophy and Policy* 9 (1992): 231-61.]

April 11: Is poverty comparative? Reading: Amartya Sen, “Poor, Relatively Speaking” e [*Oxford Economic Papers* 35 (1983): 153-69.]

April 13: Lofty thresholds. Reading: Alfred Marshall, “The Future of the Working Classes (1873) e [*Memorials of Alfred Marshall* (London: Macmillan, 1925), pp.101-118.]

April 18: Can liberals rank human interests? Reading: Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, chs. 12, 14.

April 20: A Rawlsian social minimum? Reading: Jeremy Waldron, “John Rawls and the Social Minimum” e [*Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3 (1986): 21-33; John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, pp. 124 middle 9 (“36.4. To sum up ...”) through 133 middle e [(Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2001.] What Rawls calls “the principle of restricted utility” in these excerpts is essentially the principle Waldron prefers: “The basic structure is ... to be arranged so as to maximize average utility consistent, first, with guaranteeing the equal basic liberties (including their fair value) and fair equality of opportunity, and, second, with maintaining a suitable social minimum” (p. 120.)]

VI. Global egalitarianism?

April 25: Radical inequality and global justice. Readings: Nagel, *Equality and Partiality*, ch. 15; Henry Shue, *Basic Rights*, pp. 18-21, 23-25, 111-27 e [(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996 (orig: 1980.))]

April 27: What is special about disadvantaged compatriots? Reading: Richard Miller, *Globalizing Justice* excerpts cd.

May 2: The responsibility for global poverty. Reading: Thomas Pogge, “‘Assisting’ the Foreign Poor” e [from Deen Chatterjee, ed., *The Ethics of Assistance* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 260-88.] Recommended but not assigned: Richard Miller, “Globalization Moralized” cd.

May 4: Transnational Relationships and political duties. Reading: Richard Miller, “The Ethics of Empire” cd.

Optional Supplementary Stuff on Reality: Although I will sometimes describe uncontroversial facts of inequality in the U.S. and elsewhere, we will not be studying current empirical controversies. However, empirical inquiry into inequality is both important in itself and sometimes suggestive of problems that philosophers inappropriately ignore. Dennis Gilbert, *The American Class Structure* (6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2003) is a deft, detailed and reasonably up-to-date presentation of troubling aspects of U.S. inequality. Samuel Bowles et al., *Unequal Chances* (2005) presents powerful recent findings on mobility and opportunity, frequently in statistacalese, but usually with adequate translation. There are many further references in the footnotes to my “Too Much Inequality,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 19 (2002): 275-313. The best study of global inequality is Branko Milanovic, *Worlds Apart* (2005.) Lester Thurow, *Generating Inequality* (1975) is a nice discussion of departures from neoclassical economic models that generate inequality in actual labor markets.