

Weeks 4–5 Notes

Philo 101 Online | Hunter College

Daniel W. Harris

1 Ethical Theory vs. Political Philosophy

For the last two weeks, our focus has been on ethical theory, which is the study of how individuals ought to act. We now turn our attention to political philosophy, whose central question is how societies and their institutions ought to be organized. ‘How much money ought I donate to charity?’ is a question for ethical theory. ‘To what extent should government policy seek to help the poor?’ is a question for political philosophy. The broadest question that political philosophy is: “how would a just society be organized”—or, more concisely, “what is justice”?

Clearly, the two areas are connected in various ways. The question, ‘who should I vote for?’, is a question about what you, an individual, ought to do, and so is a question for ethics. However, answering it may require doing some political philosophy, since we’ll need to know how to evaluate the policies of different candidates in order to know which one is best. So, political philosophy places some constraints on what an ethical theory should tell us. But ethics also constrains political philosophy, since most political philosophers design their theories to satisfy some basic ethical requirements. For example, some political philosophers have been influenced by utilitarians, and have argued that a society should be organized so as to maximize the happiness of its citizens (at least to some extent). Others, including Robert Nozick, whose work we will read, are more influenced by Kant, and have argued that societies should seek above all to guarantee the autonomy of citizens by not treating them as mere means to greater societal ends. John Rawls—another philosopher whose work we will read—is famous for finding a creative way of capturing some of the insights of both consequentialism and Kantianism in his theory of justice.

2 Distributive Justice

Inequality is one of the central topics that political philosophers have debated, and it will be our main focus during the next two weeks. In particular, we will be focused on economic inequality—inequalities of wealth and income.

There are several common ways to measure these kinds of inequality within a society. One is the Gini coefficient, which (roughly speaking) is a measure of how much of a society's wealth or income would have to be redistributed in order for everyone to have the same amount. A Gini coefficient is usually represented as a number between 0 and 1 (or as a corresponding percentage), with a higher number meaning more inequality. A society in which everyone had the same amount of income would have a Gini coefficient of 0. A society in which a single member had all of the income and everyone else had nothing would have a Gini coefficient of 1. (This is if we use Gini to measure income inequality. It can also be used to measure wealth inequality, which may be different.)

Another common measure of inequality is the ratio of the wealth or income controlled by the richest 10% (or 1%, or whatever) to the wealth or income controlled by the bottom 10% (or 40%, or whatever.). In a highly equal society, the richest 10% would not have much more money than the poorest 10%. In a highly economically unequal society, the richest 1% might be richer than the bottom 90% combined.

We can use either of these measures to compare the countries of the world to one another, or the states within the United States. Although the data we have isn't perfect, it is pretty good, and the results can be interesting, particularly when we consider societies that are otherwise similar in their levels of wealth and political stability.

No matter how you measure, for example, the United States is among the most economically unequal of the developed countries.¹ Likewise, New York State is among the most economically unequal states.² And New York City is the most economically unequal part of the state, and has become steadily more unequal over the past several decades.³ When I first started reading about statistics like these, it made me wonder what effects it might have on me to live in the most unequal city in the most unequal state in the most unequal country in the developed world. Since many of us have nothing to compare it to, this is not an easy question to answer.

¹See, for example <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/income-inequality.htm>.

²See, for example, the Wikipedia page, List of U.S. states by Gini coefficient.

³See, for example, this New York Times article. Also interesting is this New Yorker infographic, where you can see average income by nearest subway stop.

But there is some evidence that economic inequality affects us in important ways that can only be noticed through careful empirical research. For example: in their book, *The Spirit Level* (2009), Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown that those who live in more unequal societies are also more likely to be less healthy (by many measures), less satisfied with their life, less trusting of others, less safe from crime, and so on. Interestingly, even the wealthy people in unequal societies are affected in these ways, as compared to the wealthiest people in more equal (but similarly wealthy) societies.

Facts like these should lead us to ask some of the central questions of political philosophy. How much inequality is compatible with a just society? Are more equal societies more just? How, if at all, should social institutions be designed so as to promote equality?

Egalitarian political philosophers argue that equality is among the most important values that society should be designed to uphold. Of course, there is much disagreement about the details. Some have argued that inequality of wealth and income themselves are unacceptable. Others have argued that inequalities of wealth and income can be acceptable, as long as we ensure *equality of opportunity*, which would require that everyone has an equal ability to make their way to the top through hard work. A variety of other kinds of equality have been explored as well.

Of course, not everyone is an egalitarian. One kind of political philosophy that is often opposed to egalitarianism is libertarianism. The central message of libertarianism is that the rights of individuals, including their property rights, should come before the right of the society as a whole to redistribute wealth.

3 Rawls vs. Nozick

Our two main readings this week are excerpts from books by John Rawls and Robert Nozick, respectively. Rawls and Nozick are two of the giants of 20th Century political philosophy. They both taught at Harvard for many years, and their debates are legendary.

The highest political value, according to Rawls, should be *fairness*. His principles of justice are designed to ensure that any society that embodies them would be a fair one. This leads him to a version of the idea that social institutions should be designed to ensure equality of opportunity. Rawls would criticize our society on the grounds that too much of a person's position in life is determined by luck—who their parents are, what sort of genes they have, and so on. Since we can't control

these factors, Rawls would say that it's unfair, and so unjust, that they have such an impact on our lives.

By contrast, the highest political value, according to Nozick, is autonomy—the ability to exercise our natural human rights, including our property rights. In order to have social institutions that ensure equality, according to Nozick, we would have to have social institutions that continually threaten innocent citizens with violence. Consider income taxes, for example. These are the main method by which we redistribute wealth from rich to poor in our society. But if you don't pay your income taxes, the government will take them by force, and they might also put you in prison while they're at it. Think about that for a moment: imprisoning a fellow citizen—kidnapping them, that is—is one of the morally and legally worst offenses that you could commit. So why is the government justified to do this? According to Nozick, they usually aren't—not unless they are using the money they get to prevent even more egregious violations of citizens' rights.

In addition to the next two week's readings, we also have three more youtube videos by Michael Sandel, in which he discusses Nozick and Rawls. These videos do a nice job of explaining the central aspects of their theories, as well as the arguments they use to justify them, and so I won't go into more detail about them here. Your job in the second assignment will be to try to imagine how the two philosophers would argue with each other, especially with respect to real-world social policies. Think of this as a much more intelligent and intellectually satisfying version of the kinds of arguments that play out in the American public sphere every day. Given the influence that these two philosophers have had on American political thought, this is not an inaccurate way of thinking about the assignment.

References

Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009). *The Spirit Level*. Allen Lane.