Course Description

The growing inequality of income, wealth, and opportunities is a central political problem of our times. This course will be dedicated to the question, what are the moral reasons for the objection to it.

It is plausible to argue that if economic inequality is morally objectionable, this is because it conflicts with the requirements of equal moral status. However, not everyone agrees that equal moral status is a ground for objecting economic inequality. Nozick, for example, claims that individuals are morally equal in the sense of having equal rights and, that, no inequality is objectionable as long as it is produced in a process in which nobody’s negative rights have been violated. According to him, the pursuit of economic equality is based on a false ideal, and it leads to systematic violations of basic rights. So the first question is, What is the correct interpretation of the principle of equal moral status, and what follows from it for the problem of economic inequality.

A number of further questions follow. Equal moral status is a non-distributive principle. Economic (in)equality is a distributive property. How can a non-distributive principle sustain principles for distribution? One answer is given by the relational conception. Equal moral status demands egalitarian social relations, and social equality is incompatible with certain kinds of economic inequality. Another answer is institutional. Equal moral status imposes principles of fairness on social institutions, including the principle that institutions distribute the burdens of their operation and the benefits from it in a fair manner. Relational or institutional theories argue for economic equality indirectly, by objecting to consequences of inequality for social relations or to institutional arrangements that are unfair. Distributive conceptions, on the other hand, suggest that equal moral status entails, under conditions of scarcity, an equal claim to resources.

This controversy is closely related to the question of the scope of the principles of distributive justice. Distributive justice makes comparisons between the endowments available to different individuals, but what is the proper scope of those comparisons? Is it a society? Is it a political community? Is it the cosmopolitan community of humankind?

Next, what kind of resources matter for the aims of distributive justice? Only external resources such as money, energy, and raw materials are relevant, or so are the “internal resources” as well, such as personal talents? Does the principle of equal importance imply a norm of equal distribution of external resources only, or it is the total set of external and internal resources that is to be equalized across individuals?

A further question refers to what is called the metric of equality. It is extremely unlikely that a distribution is equal in all possible respects simultaneously. Which respects are relevant? Equality of what is required by the principle of equal moral status? Is it equality of welfare? Is it
equality of opportunity for welfare? Equality of opportunity for meaningful freedom? Equality of capabilities? Or equality of resources? The answer seems to depend on the following observation. The distribution of resources reflects partly personal choices and efforts, but it also depends on luck. On a plausible interpretation of the principle of equal moral status, people are properly held responsible for their choices and efforts, but not for their contingent circumstances. If so, insofar as the distribution of the costs and benefits respond to personal choices, each individual should bear the cost themselves. But we should share the costs that are due to luck (e.g., the costs of genetic disabilities). Is this a plausible prima facie principle? Is it in need of amendments?

These are the main questions this course will address.

Course requirements and evaluation

This is a four-credit course for doctoral students in philosophy or political science, mandatory for those enlisted in the Political Theory track. MA students may be admitted upon request. The course continues over both terms. In the Fall term, students do not earn credits. The four credits and the grade will be assigned at the end of the Winter term.

The format of the course will be a combination of alternating seminars and lectures. Each topic will be introduced by seminar discussion of a key reading and concluded by a lecture (except for the first three introductory lectures which will not be accompanied by seminars).

The grade will reflect class participation (50%) and a 4500-5000 words long final essay to be submitted at the end of the Winter term (50%). Class participation includes at least one seminar presentation based on a hand-out.

Expected learning outcomes

Deepening the grasp of the problem of justice.
Understanding the nature of arguments in political philosophy and of the way they differ from arguments made in institutional political theory.
Fostering the ability to make such arguments.
Enabling critically to present a philosophical text.

Topics

Zero Week
General Introduction (Lecture)


Week One
Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory (Lecture)

Week Two (Lecture)

**Basic Equality**

U. Steinhoff: „Against Equal Respect and Concern, Equal Rights, and Egalitarian Impartiality.‟

Weeks 3-4.

**Distributive Implications: (Right) Libertarianism**


Weeks 5-6.

**Distributive Implications: Prioritarianism**


Weeks 7-8.

**Distributive Implications: Sufficientarianism**


Weeks 9-10.
Egalitarianism: The Relational View


Weeks 11-12.
Egalitarianism: The Political Theory


Weeks 13-14.
The Metric of Equality: Complex Equality


Week 15-16.
The Metric of Equality: Equality of What?

Weeks 17-18.
**Egalitarian Justice: The Difference Principle**


Weeks 19-20.
**Egalitarian Justice: Luck Egalitarianism**


Weeks 21-22.
**Egalitarian Justice: Critiques of Luck Egalitarianism I**


**Egalitarian Justice: Critiques of Luck Egalitarianism II**


Week 25. (Lecture, optional)
**Conclusions and Applications**