

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Challenging Utilitarian Justice

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Rawls, J. (1999). [Sections 5–6]. In *A theory of justice* (Revised ed., pp. 19–30). Belknap. (Original work from 1971).

Questions

In these sections from *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls compares his own view of “justice as fairness” to the utilitarian conception of justice. We will come back to Rawls later in the course to carefully examine “justice as fairness”, so I have cut most of the references to it in this reading. Instead, we will focus on how Rawls understands the utilitarian conception of justice along with how he critiques that conception.

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. John Rawls begins section 5 by suggesting that “it is easy to suppose that the most rational conception of justice is utilitarian” (pp. 20–21).
What two arguments does he make to support this claim? What role does the difference between “the right” and “the good” (p. 21) play in the second argument?
2. Rawls concludes section 5 by claiming that “utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons” (p. 24). He then begins section 6 by arguing that this is extremely problematic.
Why does utilitarianism fail to take seriously the distinction between persons? Why does Rawls believe that this reveals a serious problem with utilitarian justice?
3. What other concerns with utilitarian justice does Rawls present in section 6?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.