

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

READING GUIDE #17

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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

Cohen, G. A. (1997, January). Where the action is: On the site of distributive justice. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 26(1), 3–30.

QUESTIONS

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. The slogan that G. A. Cohen wants to repeatedly defend throughout this paper is that “the personal is political” (p. 3).

What exactly does Cohen mean by this slogan? What does this have to do with his critique of John Rawls?

2. In section II of the paper, Cohen presents his criticism of Rawls’ incentives argument for permissible inequalities under the difference principle.

What is Rawls’ argument? What is Cohen’s criticism? (Hint: There is a short summary of Cohen’s argument starting at the bottom of page 23, though you will need to look back in section II to flesh out the steps of that summary.)

3. How does Cohen’s criticism of the incentives argument support his slogan?
4. In section III, Cohen presents the basic structure objection that Rawls might make in response to Cohen’s criticism. The idea behind this objection should seem familiar from Rawls’ division of labor between two kinds of social rules/principles, only one of which applies to the basic structure.

What is the basic structure objection? (Hint: There is a short summary of it on page 24, though you will need to look back in section III to flesh out the steps of that summary.)

5. What is Cohen’s preliminary reply to the basic structure objection in section IV? In particular, what three claims does Rawls make that weaken the objection?

6. How does Cohen’s preliminary reply support his slogan?

7. What is Cohen’s fundamental reply to the basic structure objection in section V? Why does this reply seem based upon Rawls’ own “second kind of reason” for the basic structure as first subject of justice? How does Cohen use that Rawlsian idea to show that principles of justice also apply individual behavior and choice?

8. How does Cohen’s fundamental reply support his slogan?

9. Cohen seems to suggest that we all hold significant personal responsibility for the justice or injustices for our choices.

With that, is Cohen hopelessly confusing the distinction between social justice and personal morality? Or are these concepts that should be unified? Or, based on his remarks in section VI about blame, is Cohen up to something altogether different?

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.