

# SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

## READING GUIDE #16

### THE PRIMARY SUBJECT OF JUSTICE

**W**HEN 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. (1993). The basic structure as subject. In *Political liberalism* (pp. 257–288). Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, J. (2001). Principles of justice. In *Justice as fairness: A restatement* (pp. 39–79). Belknap Press.

#### QUESTIONS

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. In these readings, John Rawls, wants to explain why justice as fairness begins by first specifying principles of justice for the basic structure of society.  
What does Rawls mean when he speaks of the basic structure?
2. Do utilitarian and libertarian approaches attach any special importance to the basic structure of society? Explain. (Of note, Rawls seems to include both John Locke and Robert Nozick as adopting libertarian approaches.)
3. How does Rawls distinguish justice as fairness from utilitarianism and libertarianism?
4. Based on what Rawls says throughout the readings, what reasons might he have to ensure that justice as fairness adopts a different approach from utilitarianism and libertarianism?
5. What does Rawls seem to mean by “background justice”? How is the basic

structure connected with background justice? Why does this make the basic structure special, while also suggesting that it is appropriate as the first subject of justice?

6. In what ways does the basic structure affect individuals? According to Rawls, in what ways *ought* the basic structure affect individuals? Why does this make the basic structure special, while also suggesting that it is appropriate as the first subject of justice?
7. Given the basic structure’s relationship to background justice and its affect on individuals, what role might it have for social justice and systemic inequality?

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.