Equality and Inequality in Society

OSHER 941-001
Dates: Wednesdays, 1/18/17 - 2/22/17
Times: 9:30 AM - 11:00 AM
Location: Commander's House, Fort Douglas
Instructor: Bruce Landesman, Emeritus Professor, Philosophy, University of Utah
Email: Bruce.Landesman@utah.edu Phone: 801 558-7549

Course Description

In a good and just society, what should be equal and what unequal? We take it for granted that rights should be equal and that the law should treat people equally. Inequality, however, often seems appropriate for other things: teachers give unequal grades based on performance; desirable jobs are given to some but not to others based on merit; and people receive higher pay for more skilled and difficult work. Our fundamental question, then, is when equality is appropriate, when inequality is.

We will discuss the idea that there is some sense in which people are equal as human beings (“all men [and women] are created equal and endowed…with certain unalienable rights”). We will also look at certain ways of justifying inequality: desert and merit, respect for liberty, the good consequences for all often claimed to be result of inequality, especially economic inequality.

We will also note that many inequalities can add up to serious overall inequalities in the lives and welfare of persons within a society. Is that acceptable? If not, what ought to be done about it?

Most of our discussion will focus on equality and inequality within a society. There is also a question about the world, about the unequal distribution of wealth among nations. We will ask similar questions about the justification of this form of inequality.

Readings: There will be short readings distributed as handouts in class. Most of the readings will be from political philosophers but there will be a few from economists.

Schedule

Week 1, January 18

Introduction to the subject
Equality, Inequality, Justice, Fairness
Valued Things: Rights, Opportunities, Respect, Jobs, Wealth and Income
What things should be equal, what things may be unequal?
Basic Equality
John Rawls: Society as a Scheme of Social Cooperation
Week 2, January 25

Justice and Desert
What is it to deserve something?
Desert differs from Rights and Entitlements
Desert and economic inequality
Desert and Luck, Desert and Free Will, Desert and Opportunity
What kinds of inequality can desert justify? How much can it justify?

Week 3, February 1

Equality, Opportunity and Liberty
What is Equality of Opportunity?
Is there tension or a conflict between equality and liberty?
Libertarianism
Justice and the Market
Economic Transfers (Welfare, etc.), Regulation, Liberty and the Economy

Week 4, February 8

John Rawls’s Theory of Justice
Primary Goods
Two Principles of Justice
The Hypothetical Social Contract

Week 5, February 15

Global Justice
Domestic vs. Global Justice
What are our duties to fellow Citizens? To People in general?
What do affluent Nations owe to poor Nations?
Borders, Immigration

Week 6, February 22

Catch Up
Fundamental Questions:
How much Equality does Justice demand and of what sorts?