

# Introduction to political philosophy: Utilitarianism and Rawlsianism

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## Theme

**QUESTION:** How to distribute goods in a just way in society?

**UTILITARIANISM:** Maximize the sum average of individual utilities.

**RAWLSIANISM:** Maximize the condition of the least well off.

## Key understandings

**APPLICABILITY:** No theory of justice seems universally applicable in all situations.

**VALUES:** A theory of justice may be compatible with a plurality of ethical/religious doctrines.

**PRINCIPLES:** A theory of justice may commit to a hierarchy of principles of distribution.

## Target

**ACADEMIC:** MA students in political science, law, economics, sociology, or philosophy

**ATTENDANCE:** 10-15 students

## Session 1: Preparation

**READINGS (selections):**

Mill: *On liberty and utilitarianism*<sup>1</sup>

Singer: *Practical ethics*<sup>2</sup>

## Session 1: Activities

**INTRODUCTION (5'):** Summary and outline of this and the next session.

**PRESENTATION & VOTE ON TWO MORAL DILEMMAS (5'):** Students tend to favor a utilitarian resolution of one but not the other case.

**DISCUSSION (15'):** Why are intuitions different in these cases?

**LECTURE (15'):** On utilitarianism.

**GROUP TASK (20'):** Think of real-life utilitarian policy decisions.

**DISCUSSION (20'):** Do we agree with the decisions?

**VIDEO (13'):** Presentation of legal case: *Queen vs Stephen and Dudley*

**VOTE (2'):** What's your judgment?

**WRAP-UP & HOMEWORK (5'):** Justify judgment (see next section).

## Session 2: Preparation

**READINGS (selections)**

Rawls: *A theory of justice*<sup>3</sup>

Rawls: *Justice as fairness*<sup>4</sup>

**WRITING:** Justify vote in previous session with respect to legal case.

## Session 2: Activities

**INTRODUCTION (5'):** Summary of utilitarianism and the legal case.

**DISCUSSION (10'):** How (not) to justify the legal ruling?

**LECTURE (15'):** On Rawlsianism.

**PARLIAMENTARY-STYLE DEBATE (40'):** One group prepares and argues for, whereas another group prepares and argues against a hypothetical law on taxation.

**REFLECTION (10'):** Contextualization of debate.

**DISCUSSION (15'):** Focus on issues related to key understandings.

**WRAP-UP & HOMEWORK (5'):** Is social inequality justifiable? (paper)

## Challenges

**ACADEMIC BACKGROUND:** Students may have varying levels of prior knowledge about these issues.

**EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:** Students may find it hard to assess theories of justice without interference by their personal ethical convictions.

## Plan B

**ORAL PRESENTATION:** Should the video fail to work, the legal case can be presented by the instructor.

**CASE STUDIES:** More real-life cases can be discussed in the first session. Students might then be assigned to watch the video between sessions.

## References

<sup>1</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On liberty and utilitarianism*, New York: Bantam Books, 1993, part 2.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Singer, *Practical ethics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, ch. 4.

<sup>3</sup> John Rawls, *A theory of justice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, sections 2-4, 9, 11-14, 20, 24-26.

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as fairness: A restatement*, Cambridge, MA: Balknap Press, 2001, part 2.