



Philosophy 470  
**Equality/Inequality**

Fall 2021  
Amherst College

Professor: Rafeeq Hasan  
Email: rhasan@amherst.edu  
Meetings: W 2:30-5:15pm

Office Hours: W 10:00-Noon; Th 3:00-5:00pm  
Office Location: Cooper House 209  
Class Location: Cooper House 201

**Course Description**

Open a newspaper today and you will encounter statistics like the following: in the United States the top 1% of households have 15 times more wealth than the bottom 50%. Over the past three decades, the top 10% of U.S. households have seen their wealth rise by almost ten percentage points, while the total wealth controlled by the bottom 50% has been cut nearly in half. In the time of pandemic, the gap between rich and poor grows ever wider.

Many people think there is something unjust about a society in which some have so much more than others. But is inequality unjust, and, if so, why? Reducing inequality will involve taking away some of what hard-working, innovative people have earned through legitimate avenues. What could justify governments in doing this?

We will consider these questions by studying two of the most-discussed works of modern political philosophy: John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). Rawls argues that a society genuinely committed to equality must redistribute wealth so as to promote the well-being of the worst off. Nozick counters that redistributive taxation unjustly interferes with our freedom. Reading Rawls and Nozick together allows us to investigate whether freedom and equality are, in fact, irreconcilable values.

Along the way, we will also examine arguments for a universal basic income, the relation between personal responsibility and economic inequality, and between economic inequality and racial injustice. To this end, we will read contemporary philosophers such as Elizabeth Anderson, G.A. Cohen, Charles Mills, Thomas Nagel, Susan Okin, and Tommie Shelby.

**Required Texts**

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) (New York: Basic Books). ISBN: 978-0465051007

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), original edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). ISBN: 0-674-01772-2

Both books are available at Amherst Books. You should feel free to acquire them however you choose, but I highly recommend keeping local bookstores alive! If you are looking for an alternative to Amazon, you may also consider Bookshop.org.

I have also placed several copies of each book on reserve at Frost Library.

Almost all the other assigned readings are contained in a course reader, which I will distribute to all enrolled students. Any remaining readings will be posted on Moodle.

Remember: **philosophy is not best read from a computer screen, or while checking email, reading the news, etc.** Please make sure that you bring hard copies of the readings to class.

### **Assignments/Grading:**

Midterm Essay 1200-1400 words (~5 pages)	Due: 10/18	25%
Final Essay 2000-2500 Words (~10 pages)	Due: 12/15	50%
Attendance/Class participation (including 10 reading responses)		25%

### **Policies/Requirements:<sup>1</sup>**

#### **1. Academic Honesty**

Upon entering Amherst College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. According to the Honor Code's Statement of Intellectual Responsibility, "the College considers it a violation of the requirements of intellectual responsibility to submit work that is not one's own or otherwise to subvert the conditions under which academic work is performed by oneself or by others."<sup>2</sup> I expect you will honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and anything from your Googling bounty.

Please also consult the information contained in 'Intellectual Responsibility and Plagiarism' on the Dean of Students website: <https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/community-standards/intellectual-responsibility-and-plagiarism>. Particularly helpful is: <https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/community-standards/intellectual-responsibility-and-plagiarism/using-sources>

If questions remain about what constitutes academic honesty or dishonesty, please ask me.

#### **The penalty for plagiarism in my course is failure, absolutely no exceptions**

#### **2. Deadlines**

Late policy. Three principles guide my late policy:

1. Work should be assessed on its quality and on whether it demonstrates learning.
2. Each assignment has a purpose; that purpose can only be fulfilled within a certain timeframe.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of what follows is borrowed from syllabi from two friends and colleagues, Katia Vavova (Mt. Holyoke) and James Wilson (University of Chicago).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/dean\\_faculty/fph/policies/sir](https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/dean_faculty/fph/policies/sir)

3. Deadlines allow us to organize our time and learning and to meet our goals.

Reading Response Policy: In light of these, late reading responses will not be accepted for credit. These assignments are meant to help you practice working through and understanding the readings on your own, and to prepare for class discussion. These goals are defeated if you do not complete the assignment on time. Your reading response must be printed out and brought to class on Wednesday. If you have an excused absence, the reading assignment should be brought to the following class.

Essay Final Version Policy: If you find that you are unable to complete the essay by the deadline because of a crisis or emergency, you must contact me no less than 2 days before the due date. I MAY be able to grant a slight extension. Papers that are submitted late and without an extension will be marked down .3 down (see #9 for grading scale) for every day of lateness. This means that even one day of lateness turns a B+ into a B. Essays received late may not receive full comments. This is not about punishing you for getting in late work. It's about enabling me to schedule my time.

Finally, keep in mind first, that I am here to help. Get in touch if you're worried about anything.

Second, when it comes to assignments, late > never > plagiarized.

### 3. Communication

Important announcements and assignments will sometimes be communicated to you via email, usually through Moodle. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news. Get in the habit of checking your email at least once daily and don't miss class. If you do miss class, check with your classmates.

Of course, you are always welcome to email me with any questions. But please keep in mind that there are a lot more of you than there are of me and modern email demands are crazy-making. To stay sane:

- I do not answer emails in the evening (after 5pm Eastern) or on weekends.
- I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day.
- I can't guarantee a response to emails about assignments that are due within 24 hours of the email.

These rules are here so that I can manage to respond promptly to questions that do need to be answered via email.

### 4. Attendance

You should attend class regularly, on time, and well-rested. If you need to miss a class because of illness or family emergency, or some other pressing matter, please let me know ahead of time by email.

*I couldn't make it to class the other day. Did I miss anything important?* Of course you did. To learn what you missed, contact your classmates, check Moodle for handouts, and make sure you get caught up. *After* you've done all that, feel free to schedule an office hours appointment with questions and comments on the readings.

Of course, things happen. But *you are expected to attend every class.*

### 5. Participation

In order to get full credit for attendance/participation, you must also regularly *participate* in class. Be ready to explore ideas critically, boldly, and creatively with others.

Your participation grade turns on the quality, not the quantity of your contributions, and the extent to which you exhibit the respect and care necessary to promote good discussion. Contributions do not have to be in the form of “answers” or completed “theories” about a text or position—thoughtful questions are highly encouraged, and you will certainly not be penalized for a spirit of humility. While good contributions obviously vary immensely, I especially value comments and questions that pay close attention to the relevant text and those that build on, and reflect attention to, others’ contributions.

***Why do I have to participate in class?*** Philosophy is a communal activity, and you’ve chosen to join our community this semester. Don’t talk just for the sake of talking, but also don’t wait for brilliance or insight to hit you before raising your hand. Shy? Nervous? Me too. Participation is more difficult for some of us than others, but writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. And all of these are skills we must work on. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together—just as we would on any other aspect of the class that you find difficult.

Attendance/participation will count for 25% of your grade. There will be a .2 reduction in your overall participation grade for each day missed without a medical excuse.

*Office hours:* I will hold regular office hours from 10:00am-12:00pm on Wednesdays and 3:00-5:00pm on Thursdays (EST). **You can schedule an appointment with me at rhasan-1.youcanbook.me. I have it set up so that you can schedule up to 10 days in advance.** Again, since there are many more of you than there are of me, I ask that you please do not schedule more than one meeting with per week unless we’ve made prior arrangements. Office hours will be held via Zoom at least until September 13<sup>th</sup>. At that point, I will re-assess based on official College guidelines. My goal, of course, is for office hours to be in person (Cooper House 209).

I hope you schedule an office hours appointment with me often! Just a few minutes of one-on-one discussion can often help clarify a lot of issues. Please don’t feel as if you have to have something brilliant to say (or, alternatively, some burning problem or question) to come and talk to me; feel free to come without any real agenda at all. You are not intruding by coming by.

***Can we meet outside office hours?*** If you can’t make my office hours because of a class or work conflict, or if all the spots are full, then by all means send me an email earlier in the week with a list of times when you are free to meet, and I will try my best to find an alternative.

## 6. Reading

This is a course about making, analyzing, and evaluating arguments. All of the readings are dense and some are written in outdated language. Leave yourself ample time to complete the readings.

Take the reading process seriously: read actively, doing your best to think about, and respond to, the works you are reading. Active annotation (e.g., underlining, tabbing, note-taking) will help you track down important passages when you come back to them later, such as in class or when writing a paper.

**I repeat: philosophy is not best read from a computer screen. You will have a very hard time comprehending the readings if you are also checking email, reading the news, chatting with friends, etc.**

Some reading advice: 1. When I give you reading response questions, use these to help focus your attention on what is most important. 2. If you encounter a passage that you don’t understand, re-read it a few times. If you still don’t understand it, pass over it! Try to get a sense of the whole instead of getting lost in the part. 3. Jot down any questions or confusions you have about any particular passage or argument and raise them in class. (Note: if you’re nervous about speaking up in class, having a prewritten question on hand can help.) 4.

Skim over the reading again after class discussion. It should be much easier to understand at this point. 5. If you're still unclear about something, get help: ask other classmates, schedule office hours, etc.

## 7. Weekly Reading Responses

**10 times this semester you will be given a short response assignment on the week's readings. The assignment will be posted to Moodle no later than Friday @ 5pm for the following Wednesday's class. Your 200-250 word response (~1 page, double-spaced, 12 pt. font) should be organized like a mini-essay. In other words, there should be a central claim, distinct paragraphs with topic sentences, etc. You must bring your printed out response to class on Wednesday.**

I will not provide written comments on your responses, though I will read them. They will play an integral role in class discussion. Although I will not grade the responses, if you are not putting forth your best effort, this will adversely affect your class participation grade. Putting forth your best effort does not mean providing the "right" answer. Rather, it involves your: 1. engaging with the text; 2. explaining rather than merely summarizing, and 3. organizing your response in a clear manner (e.g., paragraphs, topic sentences, etc.).

## 8. Essays

*When will my essay be graded?* I aim to return essays within two weeks of the date they were submitted. I realize it's hard to wait, but it's also hard to grade. I want to give your work the care and attention it deserves.

*Can I send you a draft to read?* I'm happy to help you on your essay, but I don't read drafts. Feel free to schedule office hours with questions, an outline, an argument you're considering, etc. We can talk through your ideas and questions. Don't forget also that you can visit the Writing Center with drafts. This is a great resource. To schedule an appointment, visit

<https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/support/writingcenter/makeappointment>

*What sources should I use for writing my paper?* You **do not** need to read any additional material beyond the readings on the syllabus—and I don't encourage it. However, if you do consult outside sources, you must remember to *always* cite your sources.

As for my expectations on writing, David Foster Wallace put it well in his own syllabus:

“If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them “because the ideas are good” or something, please be informed that **I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression**, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief.”<sup>3</sup>

## 9. Grading

You will be given both a number grade and a letter grade for each assignment. Only the numerical grade is taken into account in determining your final grade. Numerical grades correspond to letter grades as follows: A 10-9.5; A- 9.4-9.0; B+ 8.9-8.7; B 8.6-8.3; B- 8.2-8.0; C 7.9 or below

## 10. Accommodations

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<sup>3</sup> <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

This course is open to all students who meet the academic requirements for participation. Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should make an appointment to speak with an Accessibility Services Staff Member. In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the *Office of Accessibility Services* at Amherst College (even if you are a 5-College student). (<https://www.amherst.edu/offices/student-affairs/accessibility-services>). This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss how to accommodate you.

## 11. Summary of Requirements

1. Don't plagiarize.
2. Do all required readings.
3. Do 10 reading responses. Bring printed copies to class.
4. Don't miss class without a legitimate excuse.
5. Participate in class discussion.
6. Write 2 essays.

### Reading Schedule

*Note: This schedule is not a contract. It is entirely provisional. We may speed up, slow down, skip readings, or add readings, depending on where our discussion leads and the interests of members of the class.*

#### **Week 1:           What's Wrong with Inequality?**

W 9/1           Harry Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal" (1987) (22 pages); RR #1 Due.

#### **Week 2:           Rawls: Justice as Fairness**

W 9/8           John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), chapter 1: sections 1-5, 9 (31 pages); RR#2 Due.

#### **Week 3:           Rawls: The Difference Principle**

W 9/15          Rawls, *TJ*, chapter 2: sections 11-17 (48 pages); RR#3 Due.

#### **Week 4:           Rawls: The Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance**

Tu 9/22         Rawls, *TJ*, chapter 3: sections 20-26, 29 (51 pages); RR#4 Due.

#### **Week 5:           Racial Justice: Beyond Rawls?**

W 9/29          Charles Mills, "Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls" (2009)

Tommie Shelby, "Race and Ethnicity; Race and Social Justice: Rawlsian Considerations" (2004); (52 pages total)

RR#5 Due

Midterm Essay Assigned

#### **Week 6:           Gender and the Site of Justice: 'Public' and 'Private'**

W 10/6         Susan Okin, "Justice and Gender" (1987)

G.A. Cohen, "Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice" (1997); (61 pages total)

RR#6 Due

**Week 7**      **Nozick: Freedom Verses Equality?**

W 10/13      Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), Preface; Part I, chs. 1-3 (50 pages); RR#7 Due

**Week 8:**      **Nozick: The State**

**M 10/18**      **Midterm Essay Due @ 5pm.**

W 10/20      Nozick, *ASU*, Part I, ch. 5 (32 pages)

**Week 9:**      **Nozick's Critique of Rawls**

W 10/27      Nozick, *ASU*, Part II, ch. 7 (selections) (~50 pages); RR#8 Due

Th 10/28      Optional Event: Professor Anthony Appiah (NYU) in conversation with Professor Adolph Reed (Penn) about reparations and racial justice (7:30pm)

S 10/30      Optional Event: Professor Anthony Appiah's keynote address for President's Colloquium on Race and Racism (4:00pm)

**Week 10:**      **Critiques of Libertarianism: Liberal and Socialist**

W 11/3      Thomas Nagel, "Libertarianism Without Foundations" (1975)

G.A. Cohen, "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat" (2011) (32 pages total)

Optional: G.A. Cohen, "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom" (1983)

RR #9 Due

**Week 11:**      **'Luck Egalitarianism': Making Room for Responsibility?**

W 11/10      Richard Arneson, "Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare" (1989)

Philippe Van Parijs, "Why Surfers Should be Fed: The Liberal Case for Unconditional Basic Income" (1991) (48 pages total)

RR#10 Due

**Week 12:**      **Anderson's Critique of Luck Egalitarianism: Democracy and Citizenship**

W 11/17      Elizabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" (1999) (51 pages)

Optional: *New Yorker* Profile of Elizabeth Anderson  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/07/the-philosopher-redefining-equality>

F 11/19 Proposals for Final Paper Due @ 5pm

Thanksgiving Break: 11/20-11/28

**Week 13:** **Your Final Paper Projects!**

W 12/1 Paper Workshops (schedule tbd)

**Finals Week**

W 12/15 **Final Essay Due @ 5pm (no exceptions)**