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389-01 Ethics of Poverty and Inequality

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PHIL 389: ETHICS OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY  
Dan Hartnett, SJ – XU (Spring, 2014)  

THE LOGIC OF THE COURSE

Over the past thirty years, economic indicators show that economic inequality has grown significantly both in this country as well as in many other parts of the world. It is also a social fact that our country enjoys less economic mobility than it once did. In light of these trends, it is important to ask, from an ethical point of view, does this inequality and lack of social mobility matter and, if so, why? In a word, is it fair?

Before addressing this ethical question, however, it is crucial to understand the sources of inequality. Is inequality woven into the nature of social reality or is it something that we have created (or allowed others to create)? If inequality is pre-ordained or even the inevitable result of technological forces, perhaps it is out of our control. But if inequality is of our own making, then, it becomes less unalterable.

Assuming we are able to clarify these initial matters, then, we will be better poised to address the ethic question: what moral demands, if any, does inequality place on us? Does this existence of increasing inequality reflect a lack of fairness in the way we live together in society? If so, what moral demands does this place on us both in terms of our moral imagination and our actions?

THE STRUCTURE AND METHOD OF THE COURSE

The course will be divided into three parts. The first part of the course will concentrate on social contract theory. Here we will read and discuss Rousseau’s “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality”. The second part of the course will focus on “The Price of Inequality” by Joseph Stiglitz (Nobel Prize winning author) who has spent the greater portion of his life trying to understand how inequality affects our economy, our politics and our values. The third part of the course will examine the ethical question, by reading selected texts by Robert Nozick, Peter Singer, Martha Nussbaum, Thomas Pogge and Iris Marion Young. The challenge for us will be to learn from each of these philosophers in order to better formulate our own positions.

Beside reading and discussing the above-mentioned texts, students will be expected to hone certain skills throughout the semester. During Part One of the course, students will be asked, on the basis of a careful reading of Rousseau’s Second Discourse, to create a detailed outline of his argument and why it matters. During Part Two, pairs of students will be assigned a specific chapter of Stiglitz’ book and will be expected to expound on its content in class. We will use the interview method for these class presentations and there will be an in-class exam, once these are completed. Finally, during Part Three, students will prepare their personal position papers in dialogue with each of the
philosophers being studied. To assist in this task, students will be expected to submit a one-page précis of how each philosopher would frame the inequality question.

Beyond the specific content of this course, the hope is that, in some small way, this course may contribute to recovering the lost art of conversation. Over the past years, the public square has become more of a shouting match than a space for reasoned civic dialogue. As a result, it is more important that ever that the classroom (and the university as a whole!) become a place where students qua citizens learn how to navigate their way through complex ethical issues.

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Required:
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*
- Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*
- Robert Nozick, “Deliberative Justice” (on BB)
- Peter Singer, *The Life You Save*
- Martha Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach” (on BB)
- Thomas Pogge, “Assistance or Rectification?” (on BB)
- Iris Marion Young, “A Social Connection Model” (on BB)

Recommended:
- Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*
- Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty*
- Robert Reich, *Beyond Outrage*
- Peter Unger, *Living High and Letting Die*
- Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*

EVALUATION:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outline Rousseau’s Argument</td>
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<td>In-Class Interview/Presentation on Stiglitz</td>
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<td>In-Class Exam on Stiglitz</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six One-page Position Papers (5 pts each)</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final Position Paper on Inequality</td>
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