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A Course on Economic Justice: The Intersection of Philosophy and Economics

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Abstract

The process of teaching a topic that inhabits the upper reaches of both philosophy and economic theory, while swooping as near the earth as political policy, is both exhilarating and terrifying. To do it well is indeed are.¹ We present our approach, some of the characteristics and thoughts from our students, and some of the insights that we developed along the way.

Introduction

Twice in the past five years we arranged to jointly teach a course in economic justice: colleagues from the philosophy and economics departments. We believe that our experiences in preparing and teaching this course together led to insights that we believe others will find valuable. This paper will describe our approach, some of the characteristics and thoughts from our students, and some of the insights that we developed along the way.

The majority of our students come to us with a set of unorganized intuitions, emotions, attitudes, prejudices, and sentiments. Some of these are vaguely organized either in harmony with or in opposition to the political persuasion of their parents. There is a strong presumption in favor of capitalism. For the most part, our students are simply parroting the rhetoric of their contemporary economic/political culture. Of course we understand that the particular beliefs and

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¹ Apologies are probably appropriate for this unabashed lifting of J. M. Keynes's famous "Rare Bird" quotation. The full text, delivered as an homage to Alfred Marshall in Keynes's eulogy, is

"In another respect the diversity of his nature was pure advantage. The study of economics does not seem to require any specialised gifts of an unusually high order. Is it not, intellectually regarded, a very easy subject compared with the higher branches of philosophy and pure science? Yet good, or even competent, economists are the rarest of birds. An easy subject, at which few excel! The paradox finds its explanation, perhaps, in that the master-economist must possess a rare combination of gifts. He must reach a high standard in several different directions and must combine talents not often found together. He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher—in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of man's nature or his institutions must lie entirely outside his regard. He must be purposeful and disinterested in a simultaneous mood; as aloof and incorruptible as an artist, yet sometimes as near the earth as a politician." (Keynes, pp. 321-22)

attitudes of our students are primarily a manifestation of contemporary American culture and that students in other parts of the world (or perhaps even in other parts of the United States) would have a different set of “dogmatism.” However, we suspect that the basic nature of the 18-year-old is fairly consistent across cultures. It is likely that a similar set of attitudes would arise in any class, manifesting themselves quite differently from place to place.

When it comes to the source or content of their moral commitments, our students are mostly inarticulate. They lack either the vocabulary or the habit of articulating the basis for their beliefs regarding economic policy or substantive questions of economic justice. They want prosperity—first and foremost for themselves. They favor equality of opportunity only in the sense of prospective nondiscrimination. They are deeply resistant to the suggestion that there is any structural bias that operates to the advantage of the wealthy. They deny that differences distributed by the natural lottery are features that require institutional amelioration. They deeply hold that they are entitled to or deserve the advantages acquired as a result of being born into privilege or with superior natural assets. They adopt an attitude something like destiny or fate regarding the *de facto* current situation. Their most deeply held moral intuition is that people deserve what they have worked to achieve and that to deprive them of it, to tax it, or to redistribute it is unjust.

Approach to Teaching

We understand that we are dealing with enduring philosophical problems. We did not fall into the trap of believing that we have the answers or that there is a deductive argument that establishes one view over all others. Our aim was NOT to establish one perspective or another as true. Rather, we sought to deepen our student’s understanding of their antecedent intuitions and to develop their capacity to appreciate fresh considerations.

In Perry’s (1970) framework, we get them when they are somewhere between dogmatic and entirely relativistic. In short, they have TRUTH. We see it as our task to disabuse them of the notion that TRUTH is so easy or so facile as they assume. We began by laying out several positions in the abstract. We thought that if we left our students with a thorough knowledge of theorists and little else, then we would have failed. It is critical that the students come away with an appreciation for, and the ability to engage meaningfully with, policy and real-world issues of justice and distribution. Our responsibility was to create conditions in which students could move well beyond current social discourse and toward a deeper appreciation of the foundational principles that support various approaches to today’s problems.

We sought to mildly destabilize everyone’s capacity to be dogmatic about anything. We sought to help them see in multiple shades of gray. To accomplish this required a familiarity with the literature; a genuine engagement with the issues; a nondogmatic attitude; focus on the students’ development and learning; and the courage to expose our own confusions, doubts, worries, and ambivalences. Our approach was to think of ourselves as “master students.” We have more training, we have read more broadly, and we have years of experience coping with these issues, but we most assuredly do not have THE answers. From there, we simply invited students to join us in the struggle of engaging meaningfully with policy and real-world issues of justice and distribution. Our assumption was that, as professors, our struggles would simply be a more articulate and slightly more systematic example of the kinds of intellectual struggles that our students would or should be enduring as they read, thought through, and discussed the various texts we placed before them.

Courses in economic justice must, by their nature, deal with broad and various issues of the human condition. The specific topics will vary course by course. In our course, we chose as

paramount: income and wealth, efficiency, natural lottery, inheritance, desert (?), positive and negative externalities, public and private goods, determination of the role of government, and how human nature manifests itself in economic activity. To approach these topics, we adopted some texts and techniques that we want to briefly describe.

We selected Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* for two main reasons. First, it introduced many of the above listed considerations. Second, it compelled most of our students to question their culturally acquired dogmatic acceptance of unfettered capitalism and individualism. It reveals capitalism as a system based on seeing individuals as engaged in cutthroat competition against one another. This vision is contrasted with a conception of individuals relating to one another on the basis of brotherhood and cooperation. This vivid description of an alternative social structure was important because it enabled our students to step into that world and then to see our society with new eyes. This imaginative exercise engaged our students both theoretically and emotionally. It was a very powerful and effective introduction to the themes and aims of our course.

We chose Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom* to articulate the other pole in the individualist/communitarian spectrum. Friedman lays out fundamental arguments for competitive free-market capitalism. Additionally he provides students with Smith's minimalist state—government as the enforcer of contracts, provider of the common defense, and guarantor of individual liberties (including private property). Friedman's individualism stands in stark contrast to Bellamy's communitarian framework where government plays a much larger role. Friedman allows students to see competition as the best way to achieve liberty and the general welfare.

Finally we used a standard anthology, *Justice and Economic Distribution*, to introduce our students to abbreviated versions of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. We felt that any study of economic justice after the middle of the 20th century must include the Rawls-Nozick debate. These readings were selected because (beyond the obvious issue of completeness) they provide the philosophical framework within which the issue of justice must be placed. From these two we were able to draw the philosophical underpinnings of both Bellamy and Friedman.

We did not focus on Rawls and Nozick in the typical theoretical manner. Rather, we used their work to entice our students into thinking much more systematically and coherently about the foundations of their initial intuitions. Rawls and Nozick provided students with a richer conceptualization of issues and thus greater refinement in the formulation and expression of their own, now more subtle, thoughts.

We supplemented these texts with short readings on utilitarianism and various simulations, speakers, and other assorted articles. The class was conducted in an informal conversational style—both of us present at all times. We would present an issue or an article taking divergent positions and encouraging students to think carefully while joining in the debate we had orchestrated. Noteworthy among the supplementary materials were the case of slavery reparation and the Rawls game simulation.

The essential argument in the slavery reparation case is that many years ago the Federal and state governments, public corporations, and private individuals were the direct beneficiaries of slave labor. There is an outstanding moral debt. The responsible parties are identifiable. The country as a whole was enriched on the backs of slaves. The question of slavery reparations is especially fruitful because it involves so many important elements of the course. In particular, students are compelled to confront the legacy of structural injustice. That is, they must begin to come to grips with the notion that the current economic distribution is not the result solely of desert and effort, but also involves history and accidents of birth.

We also employed an active simulation. We chose the Rawls game. We integrated two variations of this game—one from Green, the other from Moulder. This simulation was especially

helpful in assisting students to understand Rawls' notion of a veil of ignorance and that a hypothetical social contract is a way of uncovering foundational principles of justice.

Lessons Learned

We want to briefly share a few insights that we acquired as a result of having taught this course. Everyone has, we presume, from time to time come to insights that strike one as novel or that help one to a larger than usual feeling of intellectual progress. It is always difficult to know whether others will share this sense of novelty. However—following our practice of revealing our half-baked ideas in the hopes that others might gain thereby—in this section, we will describe two types of insights. First, we will describe some observations concerning our students, their beliefs, and our teaching. Second, we will share some insights concerning our personal intellectual advances and our collaborative quest.

- Students have a tendency to radically discount the contributions of others to their achievements. They take too much credit for their successes and too little blame for the failures. This connects to Rawls's discussion of the natural lottery. This question reveals an inability to see the historical conceptualization of contemporary issues and relations—in particular, whether capitalism is a neutral and fair system that rewards those who work hard to achieve the rewards that they receive.
- Social construction, especially when driven by tastes, also creates relative poverty. Some years back, in an address to the annual meetings of the American Economic Association, Lester Thurow related the hypothetical experience of classical musicians in two separate societies. In the first the general public had no taste for classical music and the musicians were poor. In the second the general public had great love for classical music and the musicians were, consequently, rich. Their circumstance had nothing to do with their ability or with their merit – their well-being was purely the consequence of the taste-driven social conception they happened to call home.
- The saying attributed to Winston Churchill²—“If you are not a Liberal until you are thirty, you do not have a heart, and if you are not a Conservative after thirty, you don't have a brain”—compels us to ask, “What ever happened to the radicalism of youth?” We find that our students are more conservative than their parents. This is seen, for example, in the fact that our students were much more receptive to Friedman than to Bellamy.
- Our students showed absolutely no awareness of the risks of unrestrained capitalism. The desire for balance and rich debate constantly led us to detail these limits.
- Our students struggled in their attempt to provide systemic organization to their views. Consistency and the interrelatedness of views constituted an especially difficult challenge.
- Our students were deeply opposed to affirmative action policies. According to them, any policy that attempts to adjust for past discrimination or to account for prior disparity is unjust.

² The source and the actual quote elude us. It is variously attributed to Churchill, Clemenceau, and G. B. Shaw, but most frequently to Churchill. The text varies quite a bit, from “anyone who is not a socialist until 30 has no heart; anyone who is not a conservative after 40 has no brain,” to “any man who is not a liberal at 21 has no heart and any man who is not a conservative at 40 has no brain.” The sentiment, however, is clear, whoever said it and however it was said.

Turning now to personal tidbits. The conceptualization of “liberty” and “property” and their interrelation is near to the core of many of the most foundational issues.

- It is important to appreciate that there is a linkage between your conception of human nature and your economic paradigm. Some prefer individualism and competition, and that leads them to libertarianism. Others prefer brotherhood and cooperation/love, and this leads them to communitarianism.
- One of our students pointed to something that we feel deserves more exploration. The Christian professor tended to favor libertarianism while the atheist tended to favor the communitarian conception of brotherly love.
- We were particularly pleased with the Bellamy novel and slightly disappointed with Friedman’s book. The next time we teach this course, we will be considering the writings of Ayn Rand, due to the more nearly accessible nature of the material.
- Although we used Rawls to provide philosophical depth to Bellamy’s novel and Nozick to provide additional depth to Friedman, thus covering both poles of a spectrum, we were somewhat disappointed with our efforts to provide students with the practical ability to apply their acquired insights to current real policy statements or issues.
- We feel that the concept of “charity” is a notion that deserves additional exploration and would likely connect to many of the central aspects of our course.
- There is a growth imperative in practical and theoretical economic thought. But if growth entails larger population, environmental degradation, the depletion of non-renewable natural resources, and increased pollution, then we have a real problem as we look to the future. The environmental movement raises serious issues. It is unclear whether “sustainable development” is a viable response to this concern. It is also debatable whether this is a genuine dilemma. Whatever the case may be, this is a topic that we need to explore in greater depth in the future.

Some final thoughts: Of course it would be helpful to actually survey the students to see if our intuitions and hunches about their initial positions and attitudes are, in fact, correct. It is our intention to do so at some point in the future. However, this overview is just that: an overview from which we will gain a better perspective so that we might proceed along a more fruitful path in the future. Additionally there is validity to the point that we should have our students analyze and criticize the works of economists and philosophers like Marx, Russell, Tawney, and Keynes. This exercise would help them to categorize their thoughts and, perhaps, lend depth to their positions. We have discussed this at some length and are of the opinion that working with a more varied reader than the one we have used is likely to be a good idea. We will pursue this as well as the questions of position and growth noted above. All in all this has been a very fruitful activity, both for our students and for us. Of the former we are hopeful, and of the latter we are certain.

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