New Perspectives on Political Problems

Session I: Approaches

Reader Abstract: This reader presents three different ethical philosophies – utilitarianism, fairness, and non-aggression – and then presents different political problems that can be examined in light of these philosophies. The political issues analyzed in the reader are foreign aid, military torture, and gun ownership, though any set of political issues could be substituted with applicable alternative readings.


Session Abstract: The Mill piece presents the traditional argument in favor of utilitarian ethics that was common to the classical economists. The Rawls piece presents his own theory of justice, which revolves around the notion of “fairness,” which directly responds to the utilitarian approach. The final piece, by Nozick, addresses both utilitarianism and fairness in light of another ethical principle, being non-aggression. The first selection (26-35) presents the concept of a principle of non-aggression or non-coercion as an alternative to utilitarianism. The second selection (90-95) critiques Rawls’ principle of fairness.

Session II: Global Justice


Session Abstract: The piece by Peter Singer is an argument in favor of foreign aid – claiming it is a matter of moral obligation – and it can be viewed as an application of Rawls’ principle of fairness. The second piece, by Leif Wenar, presents a utilitarian argument against foreign aid, focusing on the consequences of foreign aid programs, rather than their intent.

Session III: Torture


Session Abstract: The Shue piece places torture within Rawls’ framework of fairness. He analyzes two different types of torture – terroristic and interrogational – and analyzes them according to various criteria of fairness. The second piece argues that terror is a form of unjustifiable coercion, which relates to the Nozick readings, but unlike Nozick, it does not reject coercion as per se unjust.

Session IV: Gun Control


Session Abstract: The Hughes-Hunt article takes a different approach than most of the other pieces by placing gun control within the ideological framework of “liberalism,” which the authors elaborate as two ideologies: wide and narrow liberalism (respectively referring to classical and modern liberalism). They conclude that most restrictions on gun ownership violate the ethical principles of both forms of liberalism. The second article argues in favor of gun control on utilitarian grounds. The piece presents a philosophical framework for analysis, but the argument ultimately rests on empirical-utilitarian grounds.