

# Fall Semester Justice Project Syllabus

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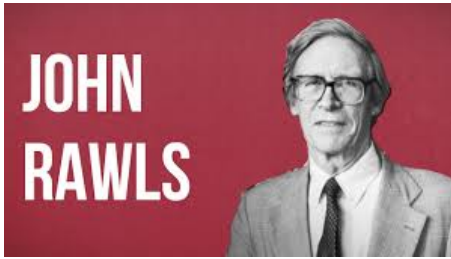
## Essential Questions

1. What is Justice?
2. What is the relationship between environmental, racial and economic justice?
3. Should "Justice and Liberty for All" be attainable? And if so, how? And if so, who/what counts as "all"?
4. What is the individual's and community's responsibility for justice?

## Overview

Justice is a fundamental governing norm of society, providing the rules and principles by which we live together in community. John Rawls explains that "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thoughts." However, justice is super hard to define!

- Justice is concerned with giving every person what they deserve ("to each their due"). But theories of justice differ in determining exactly what people deserve.
- More contemporary theories of justice focus more on *how people should be treated* with TWO primary values guiding the way:
  1. **Liberty**
  2. **Equality**
- To respect individual human beings is to leave them to make their own decisions as far as possible (*liberty*) and to recognize that each individual deserves respect *equally*.
- Over the course of this semester, we will thus examine justice through the lens of these ideas-- what people deserve, how people ought to be treated, and how we balance liberty and equality in the pursuit of "Justice for all"
- We will examine just what exactly we mean by "all". Who should be included? Just how far do our obligations for justice extend? Surely beyond our own family and town? What about to our our fellow US citizens? What about to people living in other countries? What about non-human life forms?
- **APPLICATION:** We will apply these philosophies to an investigation into Native American history and contemporary indigenous rights as well as case studies on Environmental Justice. We'll read a novel by Native American author, Leslie Marmon Silko, called *Ceremony* and read/watch/listen to various other texts/films/podcasts related to the intersection of Environmental and Racial Justice.
- The final project is to be determined by us, as a class community, as well as the constraints AND opportunities of COVID-19.



**These are some of the authors we'll read this year: John Rawls, the Dalai Lama, Leslie Marmon Silko and Dr. King**

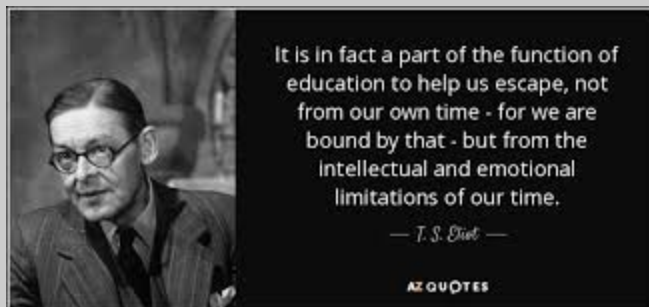
## Why Study Philosophy?

Education ought to be devoted to much more than it is, to the exploration of real-life, open problems, which requires critical thinking of a philosophical nature. What *should* we do is a very different question than what *can* we do.

We are at present facing numerous challenges that require us to question the way things have been done before. Most glaringly, we're experiencing a global pandemic that has pulled our nation's skeletons out of the closet and into broad daylight, exposing how skin color predicts the likelihood of contracting or dying from COVID; how working from home compounds the domestic burden born by women; and how the environment can catch its breath when we all slow down a beat. Literally. Air quality, worldwide, improved with the decrease in traffic and a number of different analyses show that emissions this year will fall by 4-8%, somewhere between 2 and 3 billion tons of the warming gas.

These patterns are seen globally and are compounded by population growth, destruction of natural habitats and rapid extinction of species, vast inequities of wealth and power around the world, the list goes on. It is no surprise that we're witnessing a racial justice revolution amidst a global pandemic. As Dr. King wrote in "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail", "Justice too long delayed is justice denied" and without justice, there will be no peace.

Thus, we will study philosophies of justice to formulate our own opinions not HOW justice is currently defined as shown through our laws/systems, but what justice SHOULD be-- the IDEAL rather than the reality. And, it is upon you, the next (and current) generation of leaders, to imagine a better world, a more just world, than the one we've inherited.





## Class Norms for Productive Dialogue

Addressing these questions as moral philosophers will demand a lot from us, not only intellectually, but also, at times, emotionally. Some people will argue that our assigned “identity” is more important or more definite than we think it is, while others will argue that our cherished IDENTITY is less important or less definite than we think it is. Some will argue that our complaints against them are misplaced or exaggerated, while others will argue that they have valid complaints against us, which we must hear.

We must strive, despite this, to make philosophical conversation possible. On the one hand, we must avoid saying things, or saying them in ways, that diminish or exclude others, that drain them of confidence to contribute, that divert their attention away from the content of what has been said toward the feelings stirred by hearing it said *like that*. On the other hand, we can’t just reply, “That offends me as a ...,” or “You wouldn’t understand, because you are...,” even when, in another context, such replies might be sufficient and fitting. We must listen with an open mind, take a deep breath, and then say which false assumption the other side makes, what possibility they overlook, where their analogy breaks down, how their logic goes off the rails, where our values differ. It’s a balancing act, easier preached than practiced. But we must try.

Thus, in order to ensure that we can hear a diversity of perspectives to enable us to think more deeply and openly about the issues, we will follow a few key class norms.

### **We will be kind to each other.**

Mean, intolerant, hateful or profanity-ridden speech will absolutely not be tolerated. We will be discussing many controversial topics and I expect all students to do so with compassion and an open-mind.

### **We will step up and step back**

It is important that all students share their ideas, otherwise we’ll live in an echo chamber where we aren’t able to further our own thinking. Thus, each of us will make sure that we are not only contributing to class discussions, but that we are conscious of how much space we are occupying and step back if need be to allow other voices in the mix.

### **We will challenge all premises**

Progress can’t happen without critical thinking. If we merely go with our initial perspective, or take an author/philosopher’s word as law, we will only continue to maintain the status quo. When it comes to achieving justice, the status quo is simply inadequate. Thus, we will all work to challenge premises, whether they are our own, society’s, the law’s, etc.... In other words, be open-minded, identify your assumptions, and then challenge those.

