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PubPol 580: Reading Notes for Class 11 (October 13, 2009)

On Tuesday we'll be discussing ethics and education policy as Jencks lays out the challenge. Jencks' article begins with one of the common formulations of justice: treat equals equally (and its corollary, treat unequals unequally). At which point we move to "how do we construct the categories of "equals"? Equal in what sense? And here's where one needs a fuller account of justice to answer the question.

Throughout the article there are questions raised about what equal treatment or justice requires us to do about the genetic and social lotteries. So this gives you an opportunity to think about this topic, which Rawls thinks is key to a theory of justice.

I'd like all of you to think about this and make yourself get off the fence and pick an answer.

Here's what I'd like the presenters to do. They can decide who does which topic. The first presenter should tell us what they think utilitarianism requires in this case. I don't agree with Jencks' account of what utilitarianism requires, so the presenters shouldn't feel like they need to go with his notion—in fact, I'd prefer them not to slavishly follow his lead. Tell us what you think utilitarianism requires.

The second presenter should defend whichever one of the first four of Jenck's five principles they think is the most compelling (or present their own hybrid if they think that's better). That way we'll have a utilitarian option and one that isn't fully utilitarian and we can discuss them.

This class provides an opportunity to think about the spirit underlying the No Child Left Behind Act in the US. NLCB says, among other things, that we won't measure the success of our schools by the average performance of students, but by how various subgroups perform. So you can't hide the lack of success by a subgroup behind the average success of the whole group. There is a kind of Rawlsian difference principle embedded in this—that in order for your school district to get a gold star all of the subgroups must get a gold star. This shift in focus from aggregate performance to subgroup aggregate performance is similar to Rawls' call for not losing sight of the individual in the pursuit of aggregate gains.

Jencks' article is very much about the US situation. I think he captures pretty well how Americans talk about these issues and he does a good job of trying to encapsulate these views in his "five common ways of thinking about equal educational opportunity." But I would like to hear from students from other societies whether this is the way talk about education and justice goes on there. Do other societies make different decisions than the US on these matters and, if they do, what kinds of justifications do they rest on?