

Serena Olsaretti (editor)
The Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice
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Reviewed by Asha Bhandary, 2020

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Quote:

"It is a thorough and substantial contribution to political philosophy that will be an excellent resource for years to come"

Serena Olsaretti's *Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice* canvasses a broad and virtually comprehensive selection of core and applied questions of distributive justice. Nearly fifty years since John Rawls published what is still probably the most influential theory of distributive justice, *A Theory of Justice*, the field of political philosophy needed a book to summarize the state of the field. Olsaretti fills this gap with a volume that truly moves the field forward, consisting of original essays by thirty-two leading figures in political philosophy in which they defend different fundamental presuppositions, evaluate competing theories, and craft positions about a range of applied questions. Political philosophers, and particularly those working on distributive justice, will value having this book on their shelves as an essential reference. Feminist political philosophers will find a number of essays that are relevant to their research program. Although the volume integrates a range of applied problems of justice, and does fairly well in addressing gender oppression for a volume not focused solely on this topic, its substance about critical race theory is thin, and it misses the opportunity for a more sustained engagement with methodological questions that might be informed by such evaluation (see Mills 2004 and Schwartzman 2016). In particular, the justice-related concerns of women of color are not really covered in the book, although they could have been discussed directly in several of the chapters. The absence of such material is not necessarily evidence of the lack of an editorial attempt, but the volume is nonetheless incomplete without it. As a result, it is not really an authoritative reference for philosophers at the vanguard of anti-oppression theory. I still recommend it, though, for there is much to gain from it, in no small part due to its encyclopedic nature, the novel and well-informed arguments of the contributors, and Olsaretti's clarifying assessment of the conceptual terrain of political philosophy.

In her introduction, Olsaretti outlines four different dimensions of accounts of distributive justice. First, what preconditions must be present for distributive justice to become a relevant concern? The "preconditions" of distributive justice include the circumstances of justice, the existence of social cooperation, and the presence of shared institutions with coercive power (4). The second dimension has to do with disagreements about the subject of distributive justice: do principles of distributive justice apply to a set of core institutions, or do they apply directly to the outcomes of the ways our institutions shape our lives? Inasmuch as the latter approach to the subject of justice includes the effects of social norms on who gets what, it is also the predominant approach by feminist philosophers such as Catherine MacKinnon, Sandra Bartky, and Diana Tietjens Meyers, who identify how toxic social norms and institutions create conditions that undermine women's agency and effective ability to what they need from the world (MacKinnon 1989; Meyers 1989; Bartky 1990). The third dimension is the "object of distributive justice," the allocation of income and wealth and/or the productive mechanisms that shape which goods exist in the first place. Fourth is the normative significance of distributive justice, which has to do with what characterizing something as an injustice brings with it: Does it mean there are strong reasons to address it or to undo it? Are they enforceable? Or is an injustice an evaluative term that does not import requirements for action (5)? I find these dimensions most illuminating when flattened into three categories: 1. what are the background conditions—either factual or theoretical; 2. (a combination of Olsaretti's 2 and 3) what is it that is being distributed and what is doing the distributing; and 3. what is the upshot of the fact that it is an issue of distributive justice? Regrouping these questions in this way results in a broader construal of distributive justice, one with the potential for greater integration of feminist work such as Susan Moller Okin's criticism of the assumptions placing the internal workings of the family should beyond scope of justice (Okin 1989)). These points, and others such as my argument that the need to receive care must be included among Rawlsian-Humean circumstances of justice (Bhandary 2016), should inform the first category, and the third category should be informed by Held's argument in this volume that justice is problematic because of its connection to violence, which might lead us to conclude that the possibility of justified violence should only be a *potential* corollary of a justice claim.

In part I, "Contemporary Approaches," over the course of seven chapters, contributors including Samuel Freeman, Richard Arneson, Gillian Brock, and Ingrid Robeyns argue for competing answers to the questions: What are the requirements of a just society, where justice is measured by the distribution of benefits and burdens? Is a just society one that meets everyone's needs to a sufficient degree, does it require strict equality in the meeting of needs, and/or does it require prioritizing the needs and well-being of the least well-off?

In part II, "Distributive Justice and Other Virtues," we find essays by Virginia Held and Steven Wall, both of which I highly recommend for feminist readers who are skeptical of the division of public and private spheres that predominates in contemporary political theory. In his chapter, "The Good Society," Wall defends the perfectionist view that a society that is not only just, but also good, will cultivate conditions that promote overall human excellence, where the goodness

of this excellence is not reducible to its impact on human well-being. Because social environments are inevitably more conducive to some kinds of activities than to others, a good society should select conditions that support human excellence and a wide range of impersonal goods, so long as they are compatible with autonomy. Forms of feminist doctrine that are perfectionist, in the sense that they argue that the right way of life is a gender-just one, may be sympathetic to Wall's view. Care ethicists, too, might find themselves agreeing with Wall's defense of the good, insofar as they hold that a just society is a caring society in which care serves as the guiding ethical and political principle. It is fitting, then, that Held's chapter follows Wall's.

In chapter 10, "The Ethics of Care," Held continues her philosophical defense of the ethics of care as a distinct form of moral and political theory (Held 2006). This chapter includes both a capacious overview of care ethics and a defense of the central characteristics of care ethics as a distinctive doctrine. It also includes descriptions of several prominent criticisms of care ethics and the care-ethical response to these criticisms. Granting that a justice-based approach can sometimes be appropriate, Held nonetheless faults justice for its connection to violence. In fact, Held's argument against a justice-based approach is based on the link between justice and the law, and the law's use of violence as a means of enforcement. Correspondingly, she identifies that care is built on trust, whereas justice is built on fear. This is an important difference, with moral and practical ramifications. However, I think recasting the problem with justice as a criticism of the way we conceptualize law enforcement is preferable because it affords us the ability to reframe a concept of justice to include the range of practices we use to organize social life; in fact, doing so is consistent with Rawls's thinking about the basic structure and even more strongly, with his earlier thinking about the idea of fairness in relation to practices (Rawls 1958).

I recommend reading Gillian Brock's essay, "Sufficiency and Needs-Based Approaches" (chapter 4) after Held's essay because Brock is concerned with the question of needs, which is central to the care-ethical injunction to respond to people's needs with sensitivity and empathy. Brock surveys competing accounts of needs, which include that needs can be defined as what we need for human agency or to flourish (100). She also makes a compelling case for the claim that any account of distributive justice must include both concern for sufficiency and concern for equality (95). For instance, Elizabeth Anderson's relational egalitarianism offers a way of addressing sufficiency within an overall egalitarian account. Rawls's theory of justice also includes both types of concerns. Not fully explored in this essay, though, is how an assessment of needs must include an interpretation of legitimate needs (Fraser 1983), where norms shaped by sexual and racial systems of oppression will taint our understandings of whose needs, and for what, are considered legitimate (Bhandary 2020).

Colin Macleod's chapter, "The Family," presents a solution to a particular way of framing the problem of distributive justice such that it includes the family. The solution is that parents should be allowed partiality for certain goods, such as intimacy and communication, but that the state can rightfully impose restrictions on the extent to which economic goods are transferred, which will include access to elite private schools. Macleod identifies the antinatalist challenge, which

states that people should bear full responsibility for children they bring into the world, and it also identifies the counterargument that children are public goods. A consideration bearing on parental competency that is overlooked in this essay is the way that the practice of mothering includes a rich and complex set of regulative ideals and competencies (Ruddick 1989). An acknowledgment of the role of gender in relation to parental competency, and of men's relative incompetence resulting from the inadequacies of typical masculine socialization, should be included in any discussion of parental competency. In addition, Macleod's claim that little work has been done to evaluate the role of the family in distributive justice overlooks a number of works by feminist philosophers about distributions of labor in the family and about the caregiving function played by families.

In contrast, in Anca Gheaus's chapter, "Gender," she supplies a nimble overview of the question of gender justice that is well informed by the extant feminist literature. A straightforward problem of distributive justice arises from gender norms and the gendered, heterosexual family: women bear a larger share of the burdens of social cooperation while receiving fewer benefits. Theorists of distributive justice, particularly liberals, must identify whether the resultant inequalities, which seemingly result from individual choices, are a matter of injustice. To answer this question, Gheaus suggests that there may be reason for a neutral state to disrupt the gender norms that perpetuate a gendered division of labor, if most citizens reject a traditional division of labor.

MacLeod's and Gheaus's chapters are both in part IV, "The Application of Distributive Justice," which is by far the longest segment of the book; with fifteen chapters, it comprises nearly half the overall volume. Its relative length is appropriate because so much interesting work in political philosophy is taking place in relation to questions about gender, race, the family, and discrimination. Olsaretti has captured this trend, and duly valued it, by making this part of the book so robust. In the chapter titled "Race," Bernard Boxill offers a lucid explanation of the ideology of racism and its links to slavery, and argues that a causal explanation of American racism is not reducible to our history of slavery; he includes, as well, the ideology of the Enlightenment (504). Because it is so clearly written, it can be used to teach advanced undergraduate as well as graduate students. Nonetheless, a single chapter on race is insufficient in light of the proliferation of significant work on the topic in philosophy today (see Mills 2017).

It would have been nice to have included an essay evaluating the complications gender, race, and intersectionality (see Crenshaw 1991) raise with respect to what it is that we need to measure for distributive justice. Although there is ample discussion of Anderson's important theory of relational egalitarianism, distinct methodological questions not encompassed by the turn to relational egalitarianism arise when we consider patterns of inequality. Colin Bird's chapter, "The Theory and Politics of Recognition," is an excellent intervention on the topic of recognition. However, even when we include considerations of recognition, if we only evaluate inequalities in distribution by the individual unit, we fail to see how patterns of inequality accrue to group members. Therefore, an awareness of the role of patterns and group membership brings up interesting methodological questions about how to evaluate our individual actions in the

context of broad-based patterns to which we do not intentionally contribute, and about how to track inequalities when the relevant social categories cannot be reduced simply to gender or race.

Methodology is discussed in the form of the debate about ideal and nonideal theory, and discussed most extensively in David Schmidtz's chapter, "Ideal Theory." Schmidtz argues against ideal theory that fails to bear on problems, to defend, instead, what he calls realistic idealism, which starts "from a sober assessment of real problems here and now" (329). The question of how to get people to comply is, for Schmidtz, "the defining problem of political theory" (341), and he correspondingly criticizes Rawls for failing to answer how we can get free-riders to reciprocate. However, a sober assessment of today's real problems should include virulent forms of racism and the prevalence of sexual violence. Unfortunately, readers do not get a sense of the urgency of these contemporary forms of social injustice in the essays on related topics, with the exception of Held's and Boxill's contributions.

Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, in "Discrimination" (chapter 22), distinguishes moral and nonmoral forms of discrimination, and goes on to argue that standard theories of distributive justice have a hard time identifying the particular injustice of non-moralized forms of discrimination to argue, as well, that the wrongness of discrimination is not reducible to the presence of an unjust distribution. He then evaluates whether social-relations egalitarianism can address the injustice of discrimination. He claims that it "is far from clear that all forms of discrimination would clash with democratic equality" (495). Ultimately, it seems that he shifts the term *discrimination* from what Sally Haslanger calls an "ameliorative project" to one that is analytic or conceptual (Haslanger 2012).

Finally, chapter 25, "Exploitation," is a useful reference and point of departure for further work in political theory that will take up questions of injustice that become evident to observant critics of human behavior. In it, Benjamin Ferguson and Hillel Steiner assess Robert Goodin's and Ruth Sample's accounts of exploitation.

Overall, this volume is a good reference for graduate students in political theory and theorists of distributive justice. It is a thorough and substantial contribution to political philosophy that will be an excellent resource for years to come. It also provides a theoretical scaffolding upon which political philosophers can build to further evaluate distributive justice's normative importance, subject, and theoretical preconditions in ways that are informed by the social positions of people whose invisibility persists in many contemporary theories of distributive justice.

Notes

1. American political philosophy is also indebted to Virginia Held's early work, which brought practical questions of social injustice into the domain of ethical and political theory (Held 1971).

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