

## **Desert and Distributive Justice**

Fall 2005

Phil 780

### Objective

This course will examine the nature and value of desert, and consider its role in contemporary political theory. We will begin by asking what it means to deserve something. We will then examine the connection between desert and responsibility, starting with John Rawls's rejection of desert as a distributive principle in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls rejects desert because of worries about the robustness of human agency. We will ask whether these worries can be overcome. Third, we will inquire into the value of desert. That is, we will ask: why should people get what they deserve? Is desert a fundamental value, or does its value derive from the values of other properties, e.g., freedom? Fourth, we will examine the relevance of desert for contemporary theories of justice. We will ask what it is that people deserve and consider whether states should make efforts to give those things to them. Our discussion of this matter will lead us, fifth, to an examination of comparative vs. noncomparative desert. We will conclude by looking briefly at the connection between egalitarianism (especially so-called "luck" egalitarianism) and desert.

### Contact information

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Office hours: Monday and Wednesday, 5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m., and by appointment.

I may have reason to email you during the semester. Because I have access only to your BGSU email address, you must either occasionally check that address, or set it up so that it forwards messages to the account you normally use. You are responsible for making sure you receive any information I send via email.

### Meeting times and places

1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m., Wednesday. 317 Shatzel Hall.

### Optional texts

1. George Sher, *Desert* (Princeton University Press).
2. David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice* (Harvard University Press).

These books are available at the BGSU bookstore. Selections from them will be made available in the department office. The other readings for the course will also be made available there, though many are available through on-line sources. Other useful books, if you are interested in doing further work in this area, are *Desert and Justice*, ed. Olsaretti (Oxford) and *What Do We Deserve?: A Reader on Justice and Desert*, eds. Pojman and McLeod (Oxford). The former is quite expensive, and the articles in the latter are relatively easily accessible (through, e.g., JSTOR).

### Assignments

1. Four reading response papers, 2 pages each: 10%.
2. Either one 20 page paper, or two 10 page papers: 80%.
3. One class presentation, about 20 minutes: 10%.

### Reading response

The reading response papers are designed to help you start thinking and writing about the assigned readings. In two double-spaced pages, you should briefly state the main point of one of the assigned readings, sketch its argument, and make one critical point about it. Do not go over 2 pages! Brevity is a virtue.

You are required to turn in a reading response paper on four separate occasions during the course. You are welcome to turn in a reading response paper on the week you give your presentation.

### Paper(s) and presentation

You may do your presentation and your paper—or one of your papers, if you choose to write two 10 page papers—on the same topic. Indeed, I encourage this.

### Attendance policy

Attendance will not be taken, nor will it count as part of your final grade. However, I expect you to attend class regularly, and to contribute to discussions in class.

### Academic integrity policy

I doubt you need to be reminded of this, but don't plagiarize. At this level, what's the point? Just in case, BGSU's official policy can be found here:

[http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad\\_policies/Acad\\_policies2.html](http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad_policies/Acad_policies2.html)

### Late policy/missed exam policy

Reading response papers will not be accepted late. If you can't get it done by the time class starts, don't bother. Do it another week. For every reading response you fail to turn in by the final day of the course, your final grade will be docked 2.5%.

Presentations must be done on time. If an emergency comes up, then you will be allowed to do your presentation on another day, or (possibly) present on another topic. Otherwise, be prepared to present on the day you are assigned.

Plan to turn in your final paper(s) by December 17<sup>th</sup>. There will be no penalty for late papers. But it is in your interest to get your work done on time.

### Withdrawal policy

The university's withdrawal policy can be found here:

[http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad\\_policies/Acad\\_policies15.html#withdraw](http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad_policies/Acad_policies15.html#withdraw)

## Readings

Below is a *tentative* list of readings. These are subject to change, depending on time and class interest. You are expected to have completed the relevant readings *before* class meets.

## What is desert? \_

Week 1, 8/24: No reading.

Week 2, 8/31: Feinberg, "Justice and personal desert."  
Miller, *PSJ*, ch. 7.

## Desert and responsibility

Week 3, 9/7: Rawls, selections from *A Theory of Justice*.  
Sher, *Desert*, ch. 2.  
Young, "Egalitarianism and the Modest Significance of Desert."

Week 4, 9/14: Scheffler, "Responsibility, reactive attitudes, and liberalism in philosophy and politics."  
Kelly, "Doing without desert."

Week 5, 9/21: Strawson, G. "The impossibility of moral responsibility."  
Hurley, "Why responsibility is not essentially impossible."

Week 6, 9/28: Feldman, "Desert: reconsideration of some received wisdom."  
Smilansky's responses to Feldman and Feldman's reply.  
Lamont, "The concept of desert in distributive justice."

## Why should people get what they deserve?

Week 7, 10/5: Ross, selections from *The Right and the Good*.  
Rachels, "What people deserve."

Week 8, 10/12: Sher, *Desert*, ch. 3 and 4.

## Desert and justice

Week 9, 10/19: Miller, *PSJ*, ch. 9.  
Olsaretti, "Productive contributions and deserved market rewards."

Week 10, 10/26: Wolff, "The dilemma of desert."  
Arneson, "Egalitarianism and the undeserving poor."

Week 11, 11/2: Sher, *Desert*, ch. 5.  
Husak, "Why punish the deserving?"

Week 12, 11/9: Sher, *Desert*, ch. 6.  
Olsaretti, "Distributive justice and compensatory desert."

Week 13, 11/16: Scheffler, "Justice and desert in liberal theory."  
Moriarty, "Against the asymmetry of desert."

#### Comparative and noncomparative desert

Week 14, 11/30: Feinberg, "Noncomparative justice."

#### Egalitarianism and desert

Week 15, 12/7: Kagan, "Equality and desert."