Grading Systems
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One of my responsibilities as your instructor is to assign a grade to you: A, B, C, D, or F.[1] How should I do this? That is, on what *basis* should I assign grades? What follows are descriptions of five grading systems, each of which corresponds to one of the theories of distributive justice that we will discuss in the course. These are not the only theories, to be sure, but they are the main ones being discussed in the academic literature (and, to some extent, in society generally). I have listed them in the order in which we will discuss them.[2] As you read the descriptions, ask yourself which grading system you prefer (or would choose, were it up to you), for no more than one of the systems can be implemented in a given semester.

      1. Libertarianism (Justice as Entitlement). One grading system that I could adopt is the one I have traditionally used. It works like this. I give my students examinations (either in-class or take-home); they study for and take these examinations; I grade the examinations, assigning numerical scores to each; and then I assign grades based on the final scores. Typically, I give A's to students who accumulate 90% or more of the available points, B's to students who accumulate between 80% and 89.9% of the available points, and so on. This system is analogous to libertarianism, according to which people are entitled to whatever holdings they come to acquire while following (complying with) the rules of the system. Some people do very well in this system; others do poorly; still others acquire enough holdings to satisfy their needs but few (if any) of their wants. Libertarianism says that it is unjust for authorities to take from some in order to give to others. It also says that if you acquire something in violation of a rule (as by force or fraud), you must make reparation to the wronged party. In the classroom, by analogy, people caught cheating are forced to disgorge some or all of their ill-gotten gains.

      2. Radical Egalitarianism (Justice as Equality). Another grading system that I could adopt (but never have) is to give and grade examinations, as before, but, instead of letting the chips fall where they may, to give everyone the same numerical score and hence the same

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[1] The University of Texas at Arlington describes a grade of A as "Excellent," a grade of B as "Good," a grade of C as "Fair," a grade of D as "Passing, Below Average," and a grade of F as "Failure." See the section entitled "Grades and Grading Policies" in the University Catalog.

[2] No significance should be attached to the order. I chose it for the sake of convenience: because it makes for easier segues. A segue, according to Merriam-Webster, is "a transition made without pause or interruption."

grade. Suppose there are 14 students in a given course, and they end up with the following point totals: 95, 95, 85, 85, 85, 75, 75, 75, 75, 65, 65, 65, 55, and 55. The average point total is 75. Thus, if I distribute the available points (1,050) so as to give everyone the same amount (75), everyone will get a C in the course. Five individuals (those with scores of 95, 95, 85, 85, and 85) are likely to be unhappy as a result of my adoption of this grading system (assuming they care only, or primarily, about themselves), but five others (those with scores of 65, 65, 65, 55, and 55) are likely to be happy. Four individuals (those with scores of 75) will receive the same score that they would have received under a libertarian system, so, if all they care about is their own grade, they will be indifferent between the two systems.

   3. Liberal Egalitarianism (Justice as Fairness). A third grading system can be viewed as a hybrid of the first two, inasmuch as it incorporates elements of entitlement (libertarianism) and equality (radical egalitarianism). It may have occurred to you that if everyone receives the same grade in the course, regardless of how much effort he or she expends and regardless of how many sacrifices he or she makes, and if students know this in advance, they will lack incentive to study (or even to come to class). This will have the effect of reducing the overall number of points in the course and hence (potentially) of reducing everyone's grade. It would seem, therefore, that we would want to allow some degree of inequality—for the sole purpose of creating or preserving incentive. But how much inequality? One answer is "Just enough to motivate people to strive." This striving will, presumably, produce a larger overall point total and therefore improve everyone's grade (since points will be taken from those who do the best and given to those who do the worst). Everyone will do better under this grading system than under the second grading system, because the pie will be bigger. To see this, suppose we begin with an equal distribution of 75 points. If I announce to the students that they can do better for themselves *from now on*, some of them will be motivated to try harder and will, as a result, do better. I can take *some* of the points they earn over 75 and distribute them to the students who do the worst, which brings their point total up and gets them a higher grade. There is more equality in this grading system than under a libertarian grading system, but not as much as under a radical-egalitarian grading system. This is what I meant when I called it a "hybrid" system.[3]

   4. Conservatism (Justice as Desert). A fourth grading system

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[3] A hybrid, according to Merriam-Webster, is "something heterogeneous in origin or composition."

assigns grades in accordance with desert (or merit) rather than performance. As is well known, there is no perfect correlation between effort and performance, that is, between (a) how much effort one expends on a given task and (b) how well one performs that task. A student may study hard, expend great effort, and make substantial sacrifices, but receive only a mediocre score on an examination. Another student, blessed with greater wit, intelligence, or just plain good fortune, may study briefly, expend only minimal effort, and make few (if any) sacrifices, but do well on an examination. If I adopted this fourth grading system, I would rank students by desert (which is a function of such things as initiative, effort, discipline, contribution, and sacrifice) and assign grades accordingly. Students who deserve A's (based on their effort &c.) would receive A's; students who deserve B's would receive B's; students who deserve C's would receive C's; and so on. It would be like giving trophies to the marathon runners who *train hardest* rather than to those who *run fastest*. Obviously, there are significant information costs involved in implementing this grading system. For example, I would have to observe each student over time, wherever he or she goes, to see how long and how hard he or she studies. Whether there are cost-effective ways to acquire some or all of this information is debatable.

5. Utilitarianism (Justice as Utility). A fifth (and final) grading system assigns grades in whatever way maximizes overall utility (for example, overall happiness). This is not very illuminating, admittedly, but the basic idea is simple enough. Of all the possible distributions of points among the students in a course, one of them ranks higher than the others (unless there is a tie) in terms of the amount of happiness produced. This, according to utilitarianism, is the just distribution. Obviously, *implementing* such a system would require a great deal of information about which grades would make which students happy, and by how much; but there is no theoretical barrier to obtaining such information. A particular student may need a good grade in the course in order to be admitted to graduate or professional school, which, we may assume, will make the student happy. Another student may be just as happy (or almost as happy) with a C as with a B. Utilitarians rely on the economic doctrine of diminishing marginal utility of money, which means that a given dollar produces more happiness to someone with only a little money than to someone with a lot of money. Perhaps examination points are like this. A given point may produce more happiness to someone with few points than to someone with many points. If this is true, then overall happiness will be increased by transferring points from those with many

points to those with few points. This process, iterated,[4] inclines toward an equal distribution of points. But it's unlikely to require an *equal* distribution (as is the case with radical egalitarianism), for that may undercut (and perhaps destroy) people's incentive to study. Utilitarians value equality not as an end in itself (as radical egalitarians do) but as a means to an end, the end being overall happiness.

The purpose of this handout is twofold: first, to introduce you (if you're already enrolled in the course) to the five theories of distributive justice that we will be discussing; second, to pique your curiosity (if you're wondering *whether* to enroll). Abstractions such as theories of distributive justice are understood more easily when they are brought down to earth (as it were) in the form of concrete examples. The classroom, in this case, can be viewed as a microcosm of society.

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[4] To iterate, according to Merriam-Webster, is "to say or do again or again and again." "Iterated," therefore, means "done again and again."