

# KRISTI A. OLSON

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**EDUCATION**      **Harvard University** – Ph.D. in Philosophy, expected May 2010  
**Harvard University** – A.M. in Health Policy, Ethics Concentration, Nov. 2009  
**Duke Law School** – J.D., *with honors*, May 1996  
**Indiana University** – B.A., *with high distinction*, Music and Geography, Dec. 1992

**RESEARCH**      Areas of Specialization: Political Philosophy, Ethics, Bioethics, Applied Ethics  
Areas of Competence:    Introductory Logic, Philosophy of Law

Dissertation Title: **JUSTICE, UNEQUAL TALENTS, AND THE MARKET**

People who are equally hard-working can command radically different wages, and hence different life prospects, merely because they possess different innate talents. Inequalities of this sort strike many people as unjust. Yet, the challenge is to characterize the injustice precisely and to explain what form of social institutions would target and eliminate the injustice. My thesis takes up this challenge by solving three related problems. First, I explain why individuals should not be taxed according to their ability to earn, after showing why explanations put forward by John Rawls, Liam Murphy, and Thomas Nagel fail. Second, I show that, contrary to Ronald Dworkin, it is not merely desirable but also possible for a distribution of resources to be sensitive to how hard an individual works, but insensitive to the distribution of talents. And, third, in response to G.A. Cohen, I argue that individuals who forego their preferred occupation for the sake of social welfare can accept greater rewards consistent with an egalitarian ethos.

Committee: Thomas Scanlon (chair), Frances Kamm, and Amartya Sen

**FELLOWSHIPS  
& HONORS**      Whiting Dissertation Completion Fellowship, 2009-10  
Radcliffe Dissertation Completion Fellowship (funding declined), 2009-10  
Project on Justice, Welfare, and Economics Graduate Fellowship, 2008-09  
Edmond J. Safra Graduate Fellowship in Ethics, 2007-08  
National Science Foundation Graduate Student Fellowship, 2002-03, 2005-07  
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality Training Grant, 2001-02  
Neill James Blue Scholarship, Duke Law School, 1993-96  
Outstanding Senior of the Year, Geography Department, Indiana University, 1993  
Phi Beta Kappa, Indiana University, 1992  
Jay Lovins Memorial Scholarship, Indiana University, 1990-92  
Balfour Honor Scholarship, Indiana University, 1990-92

**PAPER  
PRIZES**      **American Philosophical Association**, Pacific Division, Graduate Student Paper Prize (2009)  
*Equality of Resources and the Equally Talented Society*  
**International Society for Utilitarian Studies**, Graduate Student Paper Prize (2005)  
*Scanlon's Precarious Balancing Act: Another Reason for Skepticism about Saving the Many*

**PAPERS:** *Equality of Resources and the Equally Talented Society*  
**CONFERENCES** American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, Vancouver, BC (Apr. 2009)

*Incentives or Special Burdens: When Are Greater Rewards to the Talented Justified?*  
Northeastern Political Science Association Meeting, Boston, MA (Nov. 2008)  
Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, University of Colorado (Aug. 2008)

Commentator on Rahul Kumar's *Why Reparations?*  
Conference on the Grounds of Justice: An Essay on Global Political Philosophy,  
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University (May 2008)

*Scanlon's Precarious Balancing Act: Another Reason for Skepticism about Saving the Many*  
International Society for Utilitarian Studies, Dartmouth College (Aug. 2005)

**WORKSHOPS** *Freedom, Fairness, and the Endowment Tax Puzzle*  
Workshop in Moral and Political Philosophy, Harvard University (Sept. 2009)  
The Project on Justice, Welfare, and Economics, Harvard University (Oct. 2008)

*In Defense of Rich Egalitarians*  
Workshop in Moral and Political Philosophy, Harvard University (Mar. 2008)

*What's Attributable to Individual Choice? Dworkin's Compromise and the Equally Talented Society*  
Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics Graduate Fellows Seminar (Dec. 2007)  
Workshop in Moral and Political Philosophy, Harvard University (Nov. 2007)

*Freedom and Taxation for All: Why Taxing (and Redistributing) Producer Surplus Does Not Violate Libertarian Rights*  
Workshop in Moral and Political Philosophy, Harvard University (May 2006)

**TEACHING AWARDS** Harvard University Certificate of Distinction in Teaching (*Deductive Logic*), 2007  
Harvard University Certificate of Distinction in Teaching (*Kant's Ethical Theory*), 2006  
Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Dean's Award for Excellence in Student Teaching (*Responsibilities of Public Action*), 2006

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE** **Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences**, Cambridge, MA  
Teaching Fellow, *Nonconsequentialist Ethical Theory: The Morality of War and Terrorism*  
(Frances Kamm), Spring 2007

**Harvard University, College of Arts and Sciences**, Cambridge, MA  
Head Teaching Fellow, *Deductive Logic* (Peter Koellner), Fall 2006  
Teaching Fellow, *Kant's Ethical Theory* (Christine Korsgaard), Spring 2006

**Harvard's Kennedy School of Government**, Cambridge, MA  
Teaching Fellow, *Responsibilities of Public Action* (Frances Kamm), Fall 2005  
Course Assistant, *Empirical Methods II* (Suzanne Cooper), Spring 2002  
Course Assistant, *Quantitative Analysis and Empirical Methods I* (Edward Parson), Fall 2001

**TestMasters**, Cambridge, MA  
LSAT Instructor, Summer-Fall 2002

**GRADUATE  
COURSEWORK**  
(\* Audited)

**Contemporary Moral and Political Philosophy**

*Economics and Political Theory* (Michael Rosen, Harvard's Government Dept.)\*  
*Egalitarianism* (Andrew Williams)  
*Equality and Democracy* (Thomas Scanlon)\*  
*Ethical Theory* (Melissa Barry)  
*Global Justice* (Thomas Scanlon, Joshua Cohen, and Amartya Sen)  
*Nonconsequentialist Ethical Theory* (Frances Kamm)  
*Nonconsequentialist Ethical Theory: The Morality of War and Terrorism* (Frances Kamm)\*  
*Political Philosophy* (Niko Kolodny)  
*Political Philosophy Seminar* (Thomas Scanlon and Amartya Sen)  
*Topics in Bioethics* (Frances Kamm)

**History of Philosophy**

*Aristotle* (Raphael Woolf)  
*Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein* (Warren Goldfarb)  
*History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Christine Korsgaard)  
*History of Modern Political Philosophy* (Nancy Rosenblum, Harvard's Government Dept.)  
*Kant's Ethical Theory* (Christine Korsgaard)  
*The Rationalists* (Donald Rutherford)

**Other Courses in Philosophy**

*Deductive Logic* (Warren Goldfarb)  
*Philosophy of Mind* (Peter Godfrey-Smith)  
*Philosophy of Science* (Peter Godfrey-Smith)  
*Skepticism* (Warren Goldfarb)

Additional graduate coursework in law, public policy, and health policy available on request.

**EMPLOYMENT**

**Staff Attorney, National Health Law Program**, Chapel Hill, NC, 1996-2000  
Litigated class action lawsuits on behalf of low-income individuals and trained attorneys, advocates, and policymakers on civil rights and health issues including Medicaid, Medicare, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and constitutional due process requirements.

**REFERENCES**

**Committee Members:**

Frances Kamm	Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University & Professor of Philosophy and Public Policy, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government Frances_Kamm@harvard.edu
Thomas Scanlon	Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University scanlon@fas.harvard.edu
Amartya Sen	University Professor, Harvard University Contact his assistant, Laura Gillen, at lgillen@fas.harvard.edu.

**External:**

Edward A. Parson	Professor of Law & Professor of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan, parson@umich.edu
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## **DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: JUSTICE, UNEQUAL TALENTS, AND THE MARKET**

People who are equally hard-working can command radically different wages, and hence different life prospects, merely because they possess different innate talents. Inequalities of this sort strike many people as unjust. Yet, the challenge is to characterize the injustice precisely and to explain what form of social institutions would target and eliminate the injustice. My thesis takes up this challenge by solving three related problems. Together, the three parts develop a comprehensive account of the just treatment of unequal talents in the market.

### **I. Freedom**

Unlike the traditional earnings tax which is based on the individual's *actual* income, the endowment tax is based on the individual's maximum *potential* income. The endowment tax raises a frightening prospect: an individual taxed according to her potential income as, say, a corporate lawyer might be forced to give up her preferred career as a philosophy professor and to work as a corporate lawyer in order to pay her taxes. Although this seems to be an impermissible intrusion on freedom, the challenge is to specify why the endowment tax is impermissible in a way that does not rule out all forms of taxation. After showing why the solutions put forward by John Rawls and by Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel fail, I provide my own solution. I claim that the endowment tax is impermissible not because it forecloses more options but because of which options it forecloses. Thus, in order to explain the impermissibility of the endowment tax, we first need to distinguish the options to which individuals have a legitimate moral claim. I suggest one way of drawing this distinction by appealing to two principles widely embraced in the philosophical literature. I conclude with implications for the current tax system.

### **II. Equality**

As John Rawls recognized in his theory of justice, we are not entitled to a greater share of the benefits of social cooperation merely because of our place in the distribution of natural talents. However, as Ronald Dworkin subsequently added, we are entitled to greater compensation to the extent this merely compensates for harder work. While numerous attempts have been made to integrate these two principles, they have all ended in a compromise. I show that the reason they inevitably end in a compromise is because they all defer, to varying degrees, to a distribution of wages which reflects the unequal distribution of natural talents. As a result, these accounts take as an input the very unfairness they are trying to eliminate. To avoid this problem, I instead ask what wages would be if wages were determined solely by individuals' preferences over occupational positions. To that end, I ask what wages would be if currently existing jobs were auctioned off among equally talented individuals. The resulting wage distribution would be sensitive to differences in the onerousness of the work, as determined by individuals' preferences, but insensitive to the distribution of natural talents. I conclude by showing the ramifications of my account for the current welfare system.

### **III. Incentives**

According to conventional economic wisdom, in order to help the poor we must allow greater rewards to the talented. Indeed, John Rawls included incentives in his theory of justice for precisely that reason. According to Rawls, inequalities are just if and only if they are necessary to benefit the least advantaged. As G.A. Cohen has pointed out, however, Rawls' theory appears to be internally inconsistent. If, as Rawls assumes, the talented are themselves committed to the difference principle, then they cannot claim that incentives are necessary when they could choose to do the socially beneficial work without the incentives. Although I agree with Cohen's argument as it applies to Rawls, I argue that egalitarians who, unlike Rawls, are concerned about the distribution of the *burdens* of social cooperation and not merely the benefits can accept incentives consistent with an egalitarian ethos. To the extent the greater rewards merely compensate for the burden of sacrificing their preferred occupation, there is no inequality to justify. Nonetheless, I conclude by showing why few incentives in the real world satisfy this requirement.