

Potential Uses and Limitations of In-Class Simulations

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In my experience teaching social contract theory I have found in-class simulations to be an effective method for bolstering student engagement and collaboration. For example, I typically ask my students to perform a game-theory simulation of the Prisoner's Dilemma, as well as a game on Rawls's Second Principle where students are asked to imagine themselves in the Original Position and choose a principle of distributive justice for society. While I was impressed with the results of these activities, I noticed that they are primarily geared towards addressing *canonical* texts in social contract theory. In an effort to make my classroom activities more inclusive, I have designed a simulation to address some of the *criticisms* facing social contract theory stemming from Virginia Held's feminist philosophy. Within the simulation framework, students will find themselves interacting with assumptions, widely-shared among canonical social contract theorists, that human beings are rational, independent and self-interested.

The activity should take place after reading a canonical text (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau) where students have been familiarized with the core conceptions of social contract theory. After breaking into small groups of 5-7 students, they will negotiate with each other on a list of issues that have been provided to them. Unbeknownst to the students, some of the groups will have different instructions for the activity than the others. Half of the groups will be asked to imagine themselves negotiating based on the assumptions of the canonical figure they have read. The other half of the class will be asked to imagine themselves as a family consisting of both adult parents and small children. Each group will negotiate a set of issues concerning voluntary relationships, mutual advantage, efficiency, freedom of association, non-interference, etc. Then, students will appoint a scribe for their group to put their answers on the board. After all of the small groups have completed the activity, the class will reconvene as a large group to discuss the results. To the students' surprise, the groups will have conflicting answers owing to the different background conditions they were told to imagine themselves in. This creates a fruitful environment for the class to discover, explore, and debate some of the criticisms facing social contract theory.

For the first half of the presentation, I will have the session's attendees break into small groups to perform an abridged version of the simulation. After reconvening as a large group, I will spend the second half of the presentation discussing potential ways for instructors to adapt this simulation activity for their classrooms, as well as some limitations to doing so. More specifically, I would like to emphasize the importance of exercising caution when designing a variation of this activity to address issues of domination and oppression that are explored by philosophers like Carole Pateman and Charles Mills. In these cases, I will discuss why it is crucial for the simulation to take a non-ideal scenario as a starting-point to be remedied, followed by some suggestions of how to accomplish this.