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THE CASE FOR JUSTICE FOR ADJUNCTS

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Abstract: In the United States, about 40% of classes in colleges and universities are taught by adjunct faculty. In recent years, adjuncts and their advocates have argued that such faculty are treated immorally by their employers: working long hours for comparatively little pay, with no benefits or job security, and with little respect within the university. The description of adjunct working conditions is generally accepted as accurate, but there is debate about whether institutional treatment of adjuncts amounts to injustice. There three main reasons why universities – and many full-time faculty – argue that such conditions are morally allowable are: firstly, that adjuncts choose their work in a free and open labor market with many non-academic options; secondly, that remedying the situation would require tremendous amounts of money, and raising it would unjustly burden students; and thirdly, that changing the status quo would not necessarily help all current adjuncts. I argue that the treatment of adjuncts is unjust by taking these three defenses of the status quo in turn. I will first focus on the ethics of sweatshops, which helps to show that a freely chosen job can still be exploitive and unjust, and leads to the idea that the morally required solution is to convert adjunct-taught faculty into Full-time Lecturer positions. I will then argue that much of the problem could be solved with a 10% increase in tuition (or other revenue), which is an acceptable price to pay to create a more just environment. Finally, I will argue that even if there are short-term disruptions, protecting the marginal utility of some workers is not a justification for maintaining an unjust economic system. I will conclude by noting that

many universities say that social justice is a central part of their missions, which makes their continuation of an unjust two-tiered system of faculty employment particularly problematic.

Keywords: *Adjunct faculty, Economic Justice, Sweatshops*

According to a recent survey by the American Association of University Professors (2020), about 40% of classes in colleges and universities in the United States are taught by adjunct faculty—that is, by faculty who are employed on a class-by-class basis without a long-term contract. This level increased from about 30% in the 1970s through the 2000s, when it leveled off and has since remained steady. The increased reliance on adjuncts has not gone unnoticed—the argument has been made that students would be better served by less reliance on adjuncts (Nica, 2018, p. 214), and also that current full-time faculty would benefit from having fewer adjunct colleagues (Hose and Ford, 2014, p. 55). But these are essentially instrumental arguments, and here I want to focus on the question of whether the treatment of adjuncts themselves is unjust. In the recent literature this debate has been taken up on the one side by Mann and Hochenedel, who argue that there are good reasons to think that the majority of adjunct faculty are treated unjustly. On the other side of the debate, Brennan and Magnus have challenged this conclusion and argued that the differential treatment of adjuncts does not necessarily amount to injustice, and even if it does, it would be a larger injustice for universities to correct it by raising tuition. This paper largely sides with Mann and Hochenedel, expanding on what justice for adjuncts would be, and offering counterarguments to Brennan and Magnus's most central challenges.

There are some facts about adjuncts that are not in dispute. The most obvious fact is that adjuncts are paid less compared to their full-time colleagues for each class taught, even if they hold the same degrees as their full-time colleagues (as many do[1]). Another survey from the AAUP (2021) found that the average adjunct pay per class is about $3,500, which would amount to an annual income of $28,000 for teaching four classes per semester, which (according to the same survey) is less than half of

[1] Like many aspects of this situation, exact numbers are hard to come by. But a recent large survey by Paul Yakoboski (2018) for TIAA reports that 56% of people working as adjuncts hold master's degrees, and 32% hold doctorates.