

John Rawls

1921-2002

The political and philosophical problems John Rawls set out to solve arise out of the identity and conflicts of interests between citizens. There is identity of interests because social cooperation makes possible for everyone a life that is much better than one outside of society. There is a conflict of interests because people all prefer a larger to a smaller share of the benefits of social cooperation, and people have ideological differences. The problem a theory of justice has to solve is how, in the face of these conflicts, effective social cooperation can come about on terms that are justifiable to all.

A 'well ordered' society in which everyone accepts the same principles of justice requires some shared convictions about right and wrong, and about fairness. Rawls believed we can find such shared convictions in the culture of liberal democratic societies. These shared convictions can be organised under three headings.

First among these, Rawls argued, is our view of people as free and equal. This view is rooted in what he called people's 'two moral powers': their capacity to form, revise, and pursue their idea of the good life; and their capacity for a sense of justice. Second is a shared idea of fairness, which means not allowing ourselves to be influenced by our particular interests when agreeing on the distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. Third, we have shared, firm and well-considered moral judgements about specific cases: that slavery and religious intolerance are wrong, for example.

But though they may command some allegiance from all but the most anti-social or religiously fundamentalist inhabitants of Western societies, freedom, equality and fairness are vague notions. What we are looking for is a set of principles that show us what these ideals demand, and that combine our firm judgements on individual cases into a coherent system. As Rawls put it, we want our judgements of cases and our principles to be in 'reflective equilibrium'.

Here, Rawls introduced his great innovation: to have the resolution of these difficulties take place via a device called the 'original position': an imaginary situation in which we place our representatives, and charge them with coming up with a social contract. These representatives should be well-informed and look after the interests of those they represent. To ensure the contract they agree is fair, Rawls places the contracting parties behind 'the veil of ignorance' so they do not know their sex, race, social class, talents and abilities, nor their specific values and aims in life. Behind the veil, the parties have to ask themselves: 'which distribution of the benefits and burdens of social co-operation do I want, given the fact that, though I am ignorant of the person I will be, I will have to be some person in this society'?

Though such a liberal theory of justice cannot draw on any elaborate idea of what the good life for individuals is, it can, Rawls argued, draw on a 'thin liberal theory of the good', since the contracting parties have a most fervent desire to secure the material and social conditions which allow them to develop and exercise their capacities. This

means, Rawls argued, that they will evaluate social contracts in terms of the all-purpose means, or 'primary goods', that they make available to people who occupy different representative positions in society, namely, basic liberties, the powers and prerogatives of offices and jobs, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect.

Rawls's idea was that the parties would naturally first think of distributing all primary goods equally, and then consider improvements that render everyone, including the least advantaged, better off. This is what has become known as a 'maximin principle of justice': we assess social contracts by how well a person in the 'least advantaged social position' would fare under them.

This is the thinking behind Rawls's famous 'Difference Principle': inequalities of income and wealth are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the inhabitants of the social position that is accessible to those who are least advantaged by the distribution of talent and social and family background.

Rawls is sometimes criticised for being utopian. His response is that the task of finding a shareable conception of justice is one we cannot give up on before attempting it. He thought political philosophers should look for bases of agreement where none seem to exist, and should attempt to extend the range of existing consensus. Rawls viewed this task as an exercise in 'realistic utopianism': to probe the limits of practical possibility, taking people and social institutions not as they are, nor as we might naively like them to be, but as they can be.

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