

Reading Guide Equality

Readings for 5 April 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] John Rawls, selections from *A Theory of Justice* (1971 rev. 1999) Reprinted in *The Elements of Philosophy*, pp. 296-304

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Background

John Rawls (1921-2002) is considered by many to have been the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century. His major work – *A Theory of Justice* (1971 rev. 1999) – has been enormously influential both inside and outside the academy. Our selections are taken from the opening sections of this book.

In addition to “TJ” (as insiders like to call *A Theory of Justice*), Rawls published a number of other books, most of which are collections of thematically-linked lectures. These include: *Political Liberalism* (1993 – known to insiders as “PL”), *The Law of Peoples* (1999) and *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001), as well as two volumes of lectures on the history of philosophy: *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (2000) and *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (2007), and a volume of *Collected Papers* (1999).

In *TJ*, Rawls defends a view that he calls *justice as fairness*. According to this view, a just society is one in which all citizens are equal with respect to their basic rights and access to opportunities, and in which inequalities persist only if removing them would worsen the condition of those who are worst off. Rawls argues for this view in a number of ways, the most famous of which involves appeal to the idea of the “original position” (which you will learn about in the course of your reading.)

A comprehensive and reasonably accurate overview of his political philosophy can be found at: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/r/rawls.htm>. A more detailed discussion of the “original position” appears at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read the selection in full. If you find §26 difficult, you may skim that section.

Terms and Concepts

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: original position, veil of ignorance, justice as fairness, reflective equilibrium, maximin

Reading Questions:

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Rawls mean when he says that “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought”? How does he go on to explain this idea? (§1)
- (2) What does Rawls mean by the following expressions:
 - principles of social justice (§§1-2)
 - basic structure of society (§2)
 - justice as fairness (§§3-4)
 - reflective equilibrium (§5)
- (3) What *is* “the main idea of the theory of justice”? (§3)
[Note that Rawls is working in the “social contract” tradition, which we learned about in our discussion of Hobbes. But (as he notes in footnote 1, see page 307), he is working with a somewhat different framework than Hobbes. We will discuss this briefly in lecture on Tuesday.]
- (4) What does Rawls mean when he says that “the original position is the appropriate initial status quo which insures that the fundamental agreements reached in it are fair”? (§4)
- (5) On what grounds does Rawls criticize classical utilitarianism (§5)? How is his criticism similar to and different from that of Williams’? How might a defender of utilitarianism (such as Mill or Green) respond?
- (6) What are Rawls’ two principles of justice? (§11)
- (7) What are the basic liberties with which the first principle is concerned? What are the sorts of inequalities with which the second principle is concerned? (§11)
- (8) What does it mean that the principles “are to be arranged in a serial order with the first principle prior to the second”? (§11)
- (9) What is the connection between Rawls’ claim that “injustice...is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all” and the two principles of justice? (§11)
- (10) How does the discussion in §26 connect to the discussion in §5? How does it allow Rawls to argue for the two principles from §11? What role does maximin reasoning play in his analysis here? Do you think this assumption is reasonable? Why or why not?

[posted 4/2/11]