

THE PROBLEM. How to think of a just arrangement for the members of political society? We imagine that citizens cooperate, and that they get together to decide ‘in one joint act’ rights and duties of each one, as well as the distribution of assets and benefits. We believe that, if certain conditions are met, their considered opinion will yield a morally significant conception of justice. 10

VEIL OF IGNORANCE. Here is the special condition where the conception of justice is formulated: every actor is endowed with extreme self-ignorance. No-one knows his position in the society, his abilities, even his values and preferences. The idea is to deny the actors the motive of self-interest. If you don’t know who you are, or what you are, you don’t know what your self-interest is. 17

ORIGINAL POSITION. This denial of self-interest leads, so Rawls, to the adoption of two principles: 13

- (I) Equality of ‘basic’ rights and duties.
- (II) Inequalities allowed only if they benefit the least advantaged citizens.

As Rawls notes, one may accept the idea of the veil of ignorance, but reject the particular principles that the parties are expected to adopt.

What, however, is a possible justification of these principles? Rawls is adamant that they are not ‘self-evident’ principles knowable by intuition. They are not necessary a priori truths. Instead, they are arrived at in the condition of ‘reflective equilibrium’. We examine various proposals by rational reflection. Various subsidiary principles may be proposed and rejected in the process. 19
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CRITIQUE OF UTILITARIANISM. One major argument in favour of Rawls’ view is the weakness of alternative accounts. Primary among them is utilitarianism. As Rawls sees it, the sin of utilitarianism is in its ignoring the differences between persons. The society is considered as one large individual whose well-being is served by the elements (i.e. particular citizens) of his organism. Just as we don’t care about the well-being of our finger on its own, there is no reason why we should care about the well-being of individual citizens. 24

It is, however, highly ironic that Rawls had to make this criticism. It seems that the original position is so designed as to ignore the differences between people. We don’t distinguish between individuals in terms of their preferences, talents etc., nor do they do so themselves.