

**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 by a procedure of rational reflection leading up to ‘reflective equilibrium’. 19 18

We begin with some ‘generally shared’ premisses and attempt to extract from them, rationally, general principles. If we can’t find such principles, presumably because the premisses are too weak, then we add further premisses. Once we find principles, we see whether they ‘match our considered convictions of justice’. If they do, we are done. If not, then either we revise our the conditions of our original position, or else we revise those convictions (intuitions). Rinse and repeat: eventually, Rawls predicts, we’ll achieve the state of equilibrium in which both our convictions and our principles are in balance (they will ‘coincide’, as he says). The result yielded in the reflective equilibrium will be the rationally correct judgement of justice. 18

But if this equilibrium results, at least partially, from considering a purely hypothetical situation (and Rawls emphasises that it is so), why think that it reflects *the* correct conception of justice? The answer is that the condition of equality in the Original position is already characteristic of our own conception of justice. Tellingly, Rawls then adds that, even if don’t think of justice (initially) this way, we may be persuaded by ‘philosophical reflection’ to think so. The Original position systematises our actual thinking about justice, and therein lies its relevance. It does not simply codify our raw moral judgements that exist prior to rational reflection. It may serve to revise them quite radically. 19 42-43

This view of the Original position connects to the later remarks on moral theory. Its purpose is to systematise our already developed capacity for moral thinking. We don’t know, however, the content of our moral thought before we formulate general principles responsible for our particular judgements in the given situation. That is, supposing that we have ‘deontological intuitions’ about a case like ‘Aysegül Teyze’. These intuitions do not yet tell us what our moral position is, before we formulate general principles. 41

*Remark 1.* Compare these claims to Haidt’s views about the relation of intuitions and rational thought.

**CRITIQUE OF UTILITARIANISM.** One major argument in favour of Rawls’ view is the weakness of alternative accounts. Primary among them is utilitarianism. Rawls explicitly positions his theory in opposition to utilitarianism. As Rawls sees it, the sin of utilitarianism is in its ignoring the differences between persons. The society is conceived 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. 20 24 21

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. We’ll return to this issue when discussing Williams’ ideas.