

Moral Theory

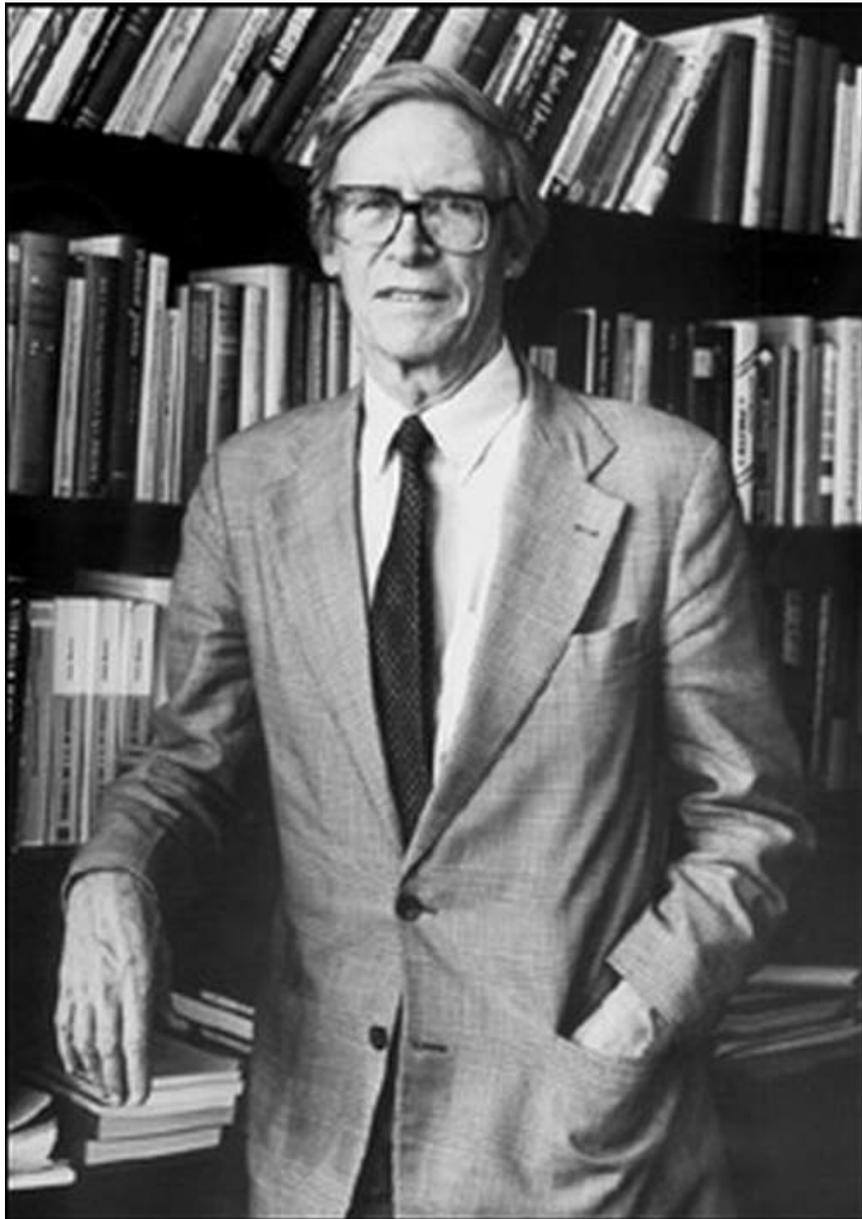
What makes things right or wrong?

What “rules” should society follow?

What “principles” determine how we ought to interact with other people?

What makes for a *just* society?

Social Justice:
What makes for a *just* society?



John Rawls: (1921—2002)

- ◆ 20th c. American moral/political philosopher
- ◆ A Philosophy Prof. at Harvard for almost 40 years
- ◆ A defender of “Political Liberalism”
- ◆ His *Theory of Justice* is considered one the major 20th c. works in political philosophy.

What is “Justice?”

- Thrasymachus (in Plato’s *Republic*) argues that “justice” is simply the will of the powerful.
 - i.e., “Might makes right.”
 - (Plato ultimately rejects this view)
- What makes for a “just” society?
 - What kinds of moral *rights* should people have in society?
 - What kinds of limits should there be on those rights?
 - How should wealth and opportunity be distributed?
 - How should society be organized to insure this?

A Social “Contract”

- Rawls’ position is a version of what is known as “social contract theory.”
- Social contract theory views societal limits on individual rights as being justified as a kind of agreement or “contract” that reasonable people would make with each other.
- Social contract theories provide a way of understanding how to avoid a “state of nature.”

**Thomas Hobbes:
The “State of Nature”**

“State of Nature”

- 17th c. philosopher Thomas Hobbes asked us to think about a “society” in which there were no rules. He called this the “State of Nature.”
 - This is a mere thought experiment to help us think about what life would be like without social rules. (Hobbes didn’t claim that there ever was such a true “state of nature.”)
- In this “state of nature,” there are no social rules, and so everyone has a “natural right” to do whatever will best advance their interests.
 - In this situation, there is a maximum of “individual rights,” as there are no social limits on behavior.

State of Nature

- In the state of nature everyone is free to do whatever they think is in their best interest.
 - Everyone has maximum individual rights—to do whatever they can get away with.
- Hobbes notes that this would amount to a kind of **war** “*of all against all.*”
 - There would be no reason to *keep* promises, and so no reason to *believe* them.
- In such a state of nature, there is no basis for social cooperation, and so, Hobbes argues, we are all worse off.

“Nasty, brutish, and short.”

- Without social cooperation, Hobbes thinks, life would be “nasty, brutish, and short.”
- Hobbes is arguing that we would all be better off individually if we placed limits on our individual rights to do whatever we pleased.
- Hobbes advocated a “sovereign” (or “king”) to enforce social rules. The sovereign would act as a kind of “enforcer,” making it against our interest to violate social norms by *punishing* violators.
- By mutually agreeing to limit our individual rights, Hobbes thinks, we benefit from social cooperation, and so are better off. This is the basis of a “social contract.”

Social Contract Theory

- Social contract theory tries to explain how to justify social limits on individual rights.
- According to social contract theory, limitations on individual rights are just if they are the limits that rational people *would* agree to (even if we have not in fact “voted” to enact them) as being in their self-interest.

Rawls and the “Veil of Ignorance”

Rawls' Social Contract Theory

- *“The principles that free and rational persons would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association.”*
 - i.e., to obtain social justice, the rules that society ought to establish are those that rational people would agree to, were they to voluntarily enter into a contract with one another, beginning from “an initial position of equality.”

“Initial Position of Equality”

- “... no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength and the like.”
- “I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities.”

A “Veil of Ignorance”

- Rawls says that just social principles are those that people would agree to “from behind a veil of ignorance.”
 - *“This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances.”*
- This is the core of his notion of justice as *fairness*.
- This is what he means by “an initial position of equality.”

“Justice is Blind”

- Rawls talks about adopting principles from “an initial position of equality,” or from behind a “veil of ignorance.”
- He is trying to capture here what we mean by saying that “justice is blind.”
- He claims that the rules that make for a just society are those we would agree to were we “blind” to how they would affect us personally.

Behind the Veil

- If you didn't know your personal conditions in society (wealth, race, gender, etc.), you wouldn't agree to rules that advantaged/disadvantaged people because of these conditions.
- So, just social rules are those that rational people would agree to if they didn't know how these rules would affect them individually.
- For Rawls, this is what makes for a "just" society. These are the limitations on individual rights that are morally acceptable.

Not Utilitarianism

- Rawls thinks it unlikely that “*persons who view themselves as equals ... would agree to a principle which may require [sacrifices from] some simply for the sake of a greater sum of advantages enjoyed by others.*”
 - “*... a rational man would not accept a basic structure merely because it maximized the algebraic sum of advantages irrespective of its ... effects on his own rights and interests.*”

What would we agree to?

- Rawls has thus far described *how* we could arrive at “just” social arrangements.
 - By this kind of hypothetical social contract from behind a veil of ignorance about how these arrangements would affect us individually.
- But he hasn’t told us *what* those principles would be.
- He offers two very general basic principles.

Rawls'
Two Principles of Justice

Two Principles of Justice

- 1) *“Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others.*
- 2) *Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both*
 - *(a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and*
 - *(b) attached to positions and offices available to all.”*

Equality of Rights

- *“Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others.”*
 - I should be able to do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t interfere with other people’s ability to do what they want.
 - “My right to swing my fist ends at your nose.”

Social and Economic Inequalities

Second Principle of Justice

- 1) *“Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others.*
- 2) *Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both*
 - *(a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and*
 - *(b) attached to positions and offices available to all.”*

Economic Inequality

- Rawls does not oppose an unequal distribution of economic wealth.
 - He is not advocating Marxism.
- But he thinks there should be limits on social arrangements that create such inequality.
- He thinks that *opportunities* to gain more wealth than others should be equally available to all.
- And that arrangements that allow unequal wealth are acceptable only if *no one* is hurt by them.

Is Economic *Inequality* Always Unjust?

- Rawls does *not* believe that in a just society, all the benefits (“wealth”) must be equally distributed.
- An unequal distribution of wealth is just only if it this arrangement benefits *everyone*, and when “positions” that come with greater wealth are available to everyone.
 - Not equal *outcome*, but equal *opportunity*.

Economic Inequality

- “*Social and economic inequalities ... are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society.*”
- So, inequality is not unjust only if the “greater benefits earned by a few” come along with *improved conditions for the less fortunate.*
- Social arrangements that allow/create inequality are OK only if they benefit *everyone*, not (like the utilitarian) if they merely maximize *overall* good.

Unequal Distribution of Wealth

Utilitarianism:

An unequal distribution of wealth is good as long as the *total amount* of wealth increases.

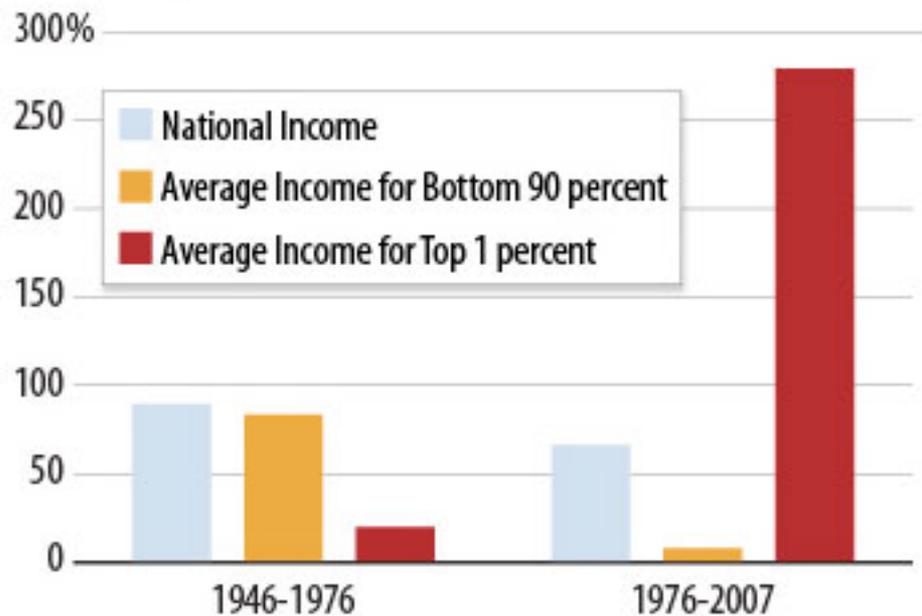
Rawls Theory of Justice:

An unequal distribution of wealth is just only if greater wealth for a few come with “improved conditions for the less fortunate”, i.e., only if this unequal distribution of wealth doesn’t come at a *cost to anyone*; only if *everyone* benefits.

So, this discussion of moral theory and justice gives us ways to ask questions about our nation’s current economic situation.

Rising Inequality Since 1970s a Sharp Break From Shared Prosperity of Earlier Era

Cumulative growth



Source: CBPP calculations based on data from Piketty & Saez, BEA, and the Census Bureau.

The top 0.0000003%

- According to a Jan. 2019 report by Oxfam, the combined wealth of the worlds richest **26** individuals is equal to the combined wealth of bottom half of the world's population.
- That means that 26 people have the same combined wealth of the poorest 3.8 billion.
- So, about *three millionths of one percent* of the world's population has the same wealth as the poorest *fifty percent* of people in the world.