Moral Theory

What makes things right or wrong?
What “rules” should society follow?

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

• We ought to act in ways that maximize the total amount of happiness.

• But what if....
  – Throwing a few Christians into a den of lions causes more pleasure in thousands of Roman spectators than the pain it causes a few Christians?
  – Enslaving some people brings more benefits to society at large than the harm it brings to the slaves?
Maximize Happiness

• Utilitarianism says that “maximize happiness” is the ultimate moral principle, and so …
  – it has no place for an independent concept of “justice.”
  – it has no place for an independent concept of individual “rights.”
  – as long as the total happiness outweighs the total unhappiness, the ends justify the means, no matter what.
Question:
Is This a Just Society?

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<tr>
<th>Quintile/Centile</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bottom fifth</td>
<td>-2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second fifth</td>
<td>-1.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle fifth</td>
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<td>80th–&lt;90th percentile</td>
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<td>16.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>95th–&lt;99th percentile</td>
<td>35.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 1 percent</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
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</tbody>
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74.2% to the top 5%
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?
  – Does “wealth make right?”

• How should wealth/individual rights be distributed?
  – Maximize overall happiness? Individual rights?
  – Who should get what?
“State of Nature”

• 17th c. philosopher Thomas Hobbes asked us to think about a society in which there were no rules, where everyone simply pursued their own self interests.
• He called this the “State of Nature.”
  – In it, everyone has a “natural right” to do whatever they think is necessary to advance their self interests.
  – Hobbes: This would amount a “war … of every man against every man.”
  – Life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”
Individual Rights

• This “State of Nature” is a “thought experiment.”
  – (Hobbes didn’t claim there ever was such a state.)

• In this thought experiment, we imagine how things would be if there were no limit to “individual rights.”

• Hobbes’ point is to say that we want “society” to exercise some limit over individual rights.
John Rawls: (1921—2002)

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

• Rawls’ position is a version of what is known as “social contract theory.”

• Social contract theory views limits on individual rights as being justified as a kind of agreement or “contract” that reasonable people would make with each other.
  – Exp.: you paint my house: I pay you.
  – You don’t steal from me, I won’t steal from you.
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.
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 you would agree to if you didn’t know how these rules would affect you individually.
  – This is what Rawls means by an “initial position of equality.”
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.”
We used slavery as potential counter-example to utilitarianism, as it seems possible to create a kind of slavery where the total benefits outweighed the total costs.

Rawls is arguing here that rational people wouldn’t agree to a system that makes some people bear costs simply to improve the total balance of costs and benefits.
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.
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.”
When is *Inequality* Just?

• 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 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.