

WHAT JUSTICE MEANS

Justice ... the qu...
concept of moral...
according to the...
principle of...

MARK LITTLEWOOD highlights a seminal work on equality of opportunity, removal of poverty, and freedom

In 1971, American political philosopher John Rawls published his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*.

Rawls was seeking to provide a coherent intellectual framework to explain our liberal intuitions.

In particular, his tome can be seen as a rebuttal of utilitarianism, the belief that the moral thing to do is whatever maximises the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

Utilitarianism has never sat comfortably with those who subscribe to individual rights or freedoms.

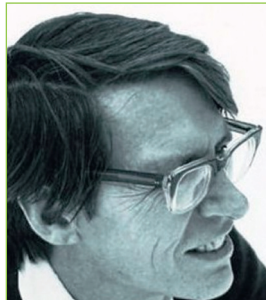
In theory, a utilitarian believes that some members of society can be legitimately,

even arbitrarily, impoverished, trampled upon or killed, if the overall impact on aggregate human happiness is positive. The 1% can be brutally sacrificed for the betterment of the 99%.

Rawls devised an alternative moral construct which seemed to better capture

our essential moral intuitions and to answer key questions about how we should organise society.

His conclusions have specific relevance to the debate about inequalities of wealth and income which dominate much of contemporary political debate.



HIS CONCLUSIONS HAVE SPECIFIC RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE ABOUT INEQUALITIES OF WEALTH AND INCOME

A *Theory of Justice* posits that the institutions and arrangements human beings should adopt would be those that we would agree to in an “original position” behind a “veil of ignorance”.

If we strip away all of the things that might make us partial or biased – the talents or skills we will be born with, our gender, sexuality, religious or political views – then we can fairly determine how we would approach the rules which would govern how we will be governed in the lottery of life.

Behind this veil of ignorance, we are rational and self-interested human beings. We want the best outcome for ourselves, but we don’t yet know what our lot will be as we enter the world.

Rawls doesn’t suggest that this pre-birth ceremony or contemplation actually takes place, simply that this is a sound basis upon which to determine the fundamental principles of society.

Rawls contends that we would favour a system of universal basic rights and liberties and of equality of opportunity.

When it comes to who has what level of resources – either wealth or income – he suggests we would adopt the “difference principle”.

We would choose a distribution of resources which is of most benefit to the poorest member of society. Inequalities are acceptable according to Rawls, but only in so far as the poorest person benefits.

Let’s imagine a simple society of just three people. Behind the veil of ignorance, we don’t yet know whether we will be born as Tom, Dick or Harry. Imagine we need to choose between two possible

distributions of income:

D1: Tom 20 Dick 7 Harry 6

D2: Tom 7 Dick 6 Harry 5

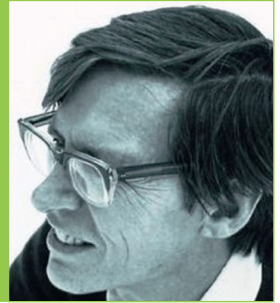
Rawls is clear we would pick D1. It is a much less equal distribution of resources than D2, but Harry, the poorest member of society

rewarded him 11 points as in D3 and we would instead slip into a D2 situation where things are more equal but everyone is worse off.

Rawls’ theory is not without its critics.

Some argue he places rather too much emphasis on

INEQUALITIES ARE ACCEPTABLE ACCORDING TO RAWLS, BUT ONLY IN SO FAR AS THE POOREST PERSON BENEFITS



fares better under the first scenario.

It doesn’t matter to Rawls that affluent Tom is much better off as long as impoverished Harry is somewhat better off.

Of course, some will look at the thirty-three “points” available to distribute in D1 and argue that the ideal solution would be to agree to:

D3: Tom 11 Dick 11 Harry 11

But it might well be that D3 simply isn’t an option.

Perhaps to get to the 33 points we have in D1 as opposed to the mere 18 in D2, we need to unleash Tom’s supreme entrepreneurial talents and offer him substantial rewards.

Perhaps we wouldn’t manage to do this if we only

the position of the poorest as opposed to the average member of society. But his approach remains a useful tool in potentially justifying inequalities.

In deciding whether a distribution is fair, we should ask ourselves not whether it is equal, but whether it benefits the poor, even if it benefits the rich to an even greater degree●

Mark Littlewood

Director General

Institute of Economic Affairs

mlittlewood@iea.org.uk

FOR MORE

A Theory of Justice is available in a Harvard University Press paperback

