

## 6. THE CASE FOR EQUALITY / JOHN RAWLS

Most of us Americans never signed a social contract. In fact, the only people in the United States who have actually agreed to abide by the Constitution (public officials aside) are naturalized citizens—immigrants who have taken an oath of allegiance as a condition of their citizenship. The rest of us are never required, or even asked, to give our consent. So why are we obligated to obey the law? And how can we say that our government rests on the consent of the governed?

John Locke says we've given tacit consent. Anyone who enjoys the benefits of a government, even by traveling on the highway, implicitly consents to the law, and is bound by it.<sup>1</sup> But tacit consent is a pale form of the real thing. It is hard to see how just passing through town is morally akin to ratifying the Constitution.

Immanuel Kant appeals to hypothetical consent. A law is just if it could have been agreed to by the public as a whole. But this, too, is a puzzling alternative to an actual social contract. How can a hypothetical agreement do the moral work of a real one?

John Rawls (1921–2002), an American political philosopher, offers an illuminating answer to this question. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), he argues that the way to think about justice is to ask what principles we would agree to in an initial situation of equality.<sup>2</sup>

Rawls reasons as follows: Suppose we gathered, just as we are, to choose the principles to govern our collective life—to write a social contract. What principles would we choose? We would probably find it difficult to agree. Different people would favor different principles, reflecting their various interests, moral and religious beliefs, and social positions. Some people are rich and some are poor; some are powerful and well connected; others, less so. Some are members of racial, ethnic, or religious minorities; others, not. We might settle on a compromise. But even the compromise would likely reflect the superior bargaining power of some over others. There is no reason to assume that a social contract arrived at in this way would be a just arrangement.

Now consider a thought experiment: Suppose that when we gather to choose the principles, we don't know where we will wind up in society. Imagine that we choose behind a "veil of ignorance" that temporarily prevents us from knowing anything about who in particular we are. We don't know our class or gender, our race or ethnicity, our political opinions or religious convictions. Nor do we know our advantages and disadvantages—whether we are healthy or frail, highly educated or a high-school dropout, born to a supportive family or a broken one. If no one knew any of these things, we would choose, in effect, from an original position of equality. Since no one would have a superior bargaining position, the principles we would agree to would be just.

This is Rawls's idea of the social contract—a hypothetical agreement in an original position of equality. Rawls invites us to ask what principles we—as rational, self-interested persons—would choose if we found ourselves in that position. He doesn't assume that we are all motivated by self-interest in real life; only that we set aside our moral and religious convictions for purposes of the thought experiment. What principles would we choose?

First of all, he reasons, we would not choose utilitarianism. Behind the veil of ignorance, each of us would think, "For all I know, I might wind up being a member of an oppressed minority." And no one would want to risk being the Christian thrown to the lions for the pleasure of the crowd. Nor would we choose a purely laissez-faire, libertarian principle that would give people a right to keep all the money they made in a market economy. "I might wind up being Bill Gates," each person would reason, "but then again, I might turn out to be a homeless person. So I'd better avoid a system that could leave me destitute and without help."

Rawls believes that two principles of justice would emerge from the hypothetical contract. The first provides equal basic liberties for all citizens, such as freedom of speech and religion. This principle takes priority over considerations of social utility and the general welfare. The second principle concerns social and economic equality. Although it does not require an equal distribution of income and wealth, it permits only those social and economic inequalities that work to the advantage of the least well off members of society.

Philosophers argue about whether or not the parties to Rawls's hypothetical social contract would

choose the principles he says they would. In a moment, we'll see why Rawls thinks these two principles would be chosen. But before turning to the principles, let's take up a prior question: Is Rawls's thought experiment the right way to think about justice? How can principles of justice possibly be derived from an agreement that never actually took place?

## The Moral Limits of Contracts

To appreciate the moral force of Rawls's hypothetical contract, it helps to notice the moral limits of actual contracts. We sometimes assume that, when two people make a deal, the terms of their agreement must be fair. We assume, in other words, that contracts justify the terms that they produce. But they don't—at least not on their own. Actual contracts are not self-sufficient moral instruments. The mere fact that you and I make a deal is not enough to make it fair. Of any actual contract, it can always be asked, "Is it fair, what they agreed to?" To answer this question, we can't simply point to the agreement itself; we need some independent standard of fairness.

Where could such a standard come from? Perhaps, you might think, from a bigger, prior contract—a constitution, for example. But constitutions are open to the same challenge as other agreements. The fact that a constitution is ratified by the people does not prove that its provisions are just. Consider the U.S. Constitution of 1787. Despite its many virtues, it was marred by its acceptance of slavery, a defect that persisted until after the Civil War. The fact that the Constitution was agreed to—by the delegates in Philadelphia and then by the states—was not enough to make it just.

It might be argued that this defect can be traced to a flaw in the consent. African American slaves were not included in the Constitutional Convention, nor were women, who didn't win the right to vote until more than a century later. It is certainly possible that a more representative convention would have produced a more just constitution. But that is a matter of speculation. No actual social contract or constitutional convention, however representative, is guaranteed to produce fair terms of social cooperation.

To those who believe that morality begins and ends with consent, this may seem a jarring claim. But it is not all that controversial. We often question the fairness of the deals people make. And we are familiar with the contingencies that can lead to bad deals: one of the parties may be a better negotiator, or have a stronger bargaining position, or know more about the value of the things being exchanged. The famous words of Don Corleone in *The Godfather*, "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse," suggest (in extreme form) the pressure that hovers, to some degree, over most negotiations.

To recognize that contracts do not confer fairness on the terms they produce doesn't mean we should violate our agreements whenever we please. We may be obligated to fulfill even an unfair bargain, at least up to a point. Consent matters, even if it's not all there is to justice. But it is less decisive than we sometimes think. We often confuse the moral work of consent with other sources of obligation.

Suppose we make a deal: You will bring me a hundred lobsters, and I will pay you \$1,000. You harvest and deliver the lobsters, I eat them and enjoy them, but refuse to pay. You say I owe you the money. Why, I ask? You might point to our agreement, but you might also point to the benefit I've enjoyed. You could very well say that I have an obligation to repay the benefit that, thanks to you, I've enjoyed.

Now suppose we make the same deal, but this time, after you've gone to the work of catching the lobsters and bringing them to my doorstep, I change my mind. I don't want them after all. You still try to collect. I say, "I don't owe you anything. This time, I haven't benefited." At this point, you might point to our agreement, but you might also point to the hard work you've done to trap the lobsters while relying on the expectation that I would buy them. You could say I'm obligated to pay by virtue of the efforts you've made on my behalf.

Now let's see if we can imagine a case where the obligation rests on consent alone—without the added moral weight of repaying a benefit or compensating you for the work you did on my behalf. This time, we make the same deal, but moments later, before you've spent any time gathering lobsters, I call you back and say, "I've changed my mind. I don't want any lobsters." Do I still owe you the \$1,000? Do you say, "A deal is a deal," and insist that my act of consent creates an obligation even without any benefit or reliance?

Legal thinkers have debated this question for a long time. Can consent create an obligation on its

own, or is some element of benefit or reliance also required?<sup>3</sup> This debate tells us something about the morality of contracts that we often overlook: actual contracts carry moral weight insofar as they realize two ideals—autonomy and reciprocity.

As voluntary acts, contracts express our autonomy; the obligations they create carry weight because they are self-imposed—we take them freely upon ourselves. As instruments of mutual benefit, contracts draw on the ideal of reciprocity; the obligation to fulfill them arises from the obligation to repay others for the benefits they provide us.

In practice, these ideals—autonomy and reciprocity—are imperfectly realized. Some agreements, though voluntary, are not mutually beneficial. And sometimes we can be obligated to repay a benefit simply on grounds of reciprocity, even in the absence of a contract. This points to the moral limits of consent: In some cases, consent may not be enough to create a morally binding obligation; in others, it may not be necessary.

## When Consent Is Not Enough: Baseball Cards and the Leaky Toilet

Consider two cases that show that consent alone is not enough: When my two sons were young, they collected baseball cards and traded them with each other. The older son knew more about the players and the value of the cards. He sometimes offered his younger brother trades that were unfair—two utility infielders, say, for Ken Griffey, Jr. So I instituted a rule that no trade was complete until I had approved it. You may think this was paternalistic, which it was. (That's what paternalism is for.) In circumstances like this one, voluntary exchanges can clearly be unfair.

Some years ago, I read a newspaper article about a more extreme case: An elderly widow in Chicago had a leaky toilet in her apartment. She hired a contractor to fix it—for \$50,000. She signed a contract that required her to pay \$25,000 as a down payment, and the remainder in installments. The scheme was discovered when she went to the bank to withdraw the \$25,000. The teller asked why she needed such a large withdrawal, and the woman replied that she had to pay the plumber. The teller contacted the police, who arrested the unscrupulous contractor for fraud.<sup>4</sup>

All but the most ardent contractarians would concede that the \$50,000 toilet repair was egregiously unfair—despite the fact that two willing parties agreed to it. This case illustrates two points about the moral limits of contracts: First, the fact of an agreement does not guarantee the fairness of the agreement. Second, consent is not enough to create a binding moral claim. Far from an instrument of mutual benefit, this contract mocks the ideal of reciprocity. This explains, I think, why few people would say that the elderly woman was morally obliged to pay the outrageous sum.

It might be replied that the toilet repair scam was not a truly voluntary contract, but a kind of exploitation, in which an unscrupulous plumber took advantage of an elderly woman who didn't know any better. I don't know the details of the case, but let's assume for the sake of argument that the plumber did not coerce the woman, and that she was of sound mind (though ill informed about the price of plumbing) when she agreed to the deal. The fact that the agreement was voluntary by no means ensures that it involves the exchange of equal or comparable benefits.

I've argued so far that consent is not a sufficient condition of moral obligation; a lopsided deal may fall so far short of mutual benefit that even its voluntary character can't redeem it. I'd now like to offer a further, more provocative claim: Consent is not a necessary condition of moral obligation. If the mutual benefit is clear enough, the moral claims of reciprocity may hold even without an act of consent.

## When Consent Is Not Essential: Hume's House and the Squeegee Men

The kind of case I have in mind once confronted David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosopher. When he was young, Hume wrote a scathing critique of Locke's idea of a social contract. He called it a "philosophical fiction which never had and never could have any reality,"<sup>5</sup> and "one of the most mysterious and incomprehensible operations that can possibly be imagined."<sup>6</sup> Years later, Hume had an experience that put to the test his rejection of consent as the basis of obligation.<sup>7</sup>

Hume owned a house in Edinburgh. He rented it to his friend James Boswell, who in turn sublet it to a

subtenant. The subtenant decided that the house needed some repairs. He hired a contractor to do the work, without consulting Hume. The contractor made the repairs and sent the bill to Hume. Hume refused to pay on the grounds that he hadn't consented. He hadn't hired the contractor. The case went to court. The contractor acknowledged that Hume hadn't consented. But the house needed the repairs, and he performed them.

Hume thought this was a bad argument. The contractor's claim was simply "that the work was necessary to be done," Hume told the court. But this is "no good answer, because by the same rule he may go through every house in Edinburgh, and do what he thinks proper to be done, without the landlord's consent . . . and give the same reason for what he did, that the work was necessary and that the house was the better of it." But this, Hume maintained, was "a doctrine quite new and . . . altogether untenable."<sup>8</sup>

When it came to his house repairs, Hume didn't like a purely benefit-based theory of obligation. But his defense failed, and the court ordered him to pay.

The idea that an obligation to repay a benefit can arise without consent is morally plausible in the case of Hume's house. But it can easily slide into high-pressure sales tactics and other abuses. In the 1980s and early '90s, "squeegee men" became an intimidating presence on New York City streets. Equipped with a squeegee and a bucket of water, they would descend upon a car stopped at a red light, wash the windshield (often without asking the driver's permission), and then ask for payment. They operated on the benefit-based theory of obligation invoked by Hume's contractor. But in the absence of consent, the line between performing a service and panhandling often blurred. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani decided to crack down on the squeegee men and ordered the police to arrest them.<sup>9</sup>

## Benefit or Consent? Sam's Mobile Auto Repair

Here is another example of the confusion that can arise when the consent-based and benefit-based aspects of obligation are not clearly distinguished. Many years ago, when I was a graduate student, I drove across the country with some friends. We stopped at a rest stop in Hammond, Indiana, and went into a convenience store. When we returned to our car, it wouldn't start. None of us knew much about car repair. As we wondered what to do, a van pulled up beside us. On the side was a sign that said, "Sam's Mobile Repair Van." Out of the van came a man, presumably Sam.

He approached us and asked if he could help. "Here's how I work," he explained. "I charge fifty dollars an hour. If I fix your car in five minutes, you will owe me fifty dollars. If I work on your car for an hour and can't fix it, you will still owe me fifty dollars."

"What are the odds you'll be able to fix the car?" I asked. He didn't answer me directly, but starting poking around under the steering column. I was unsure what to do. I looked to my friends to see what they thought. After a short time, the man emerged from under the steering column and said, "Well, there's nothing wrong with the ignition system, but you still have forty-five minutes left. Do you want me to look under the hood?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "I haven't hired you. We haven't made any agreement." The man became very angry and said, "Do you mean to say that if I had fixed your car just now while I was looking under the steering column you wouldn't have paid me?"

I said, "That's a different question."

I didn't go into the distinction between consent-based and benefit-based obligations. Somehow I don't think it would have helped. But the contretemps with Sam the repairman highlights a common confusion about consent. Sam believed that if he had fixed my car while he was poking around, I would have owed him the fifty dollars. I agree. But the reason I would have owed him the money is that he would have performed a benefit—namely, fixing my car. He inferred that, because I would have owed him, I must (implicitly) have agreed to hire him. But this inference is a mistake. It wrongly assumes that wherever there is an obligation, there must have been an agreement—some act of consent. It overlooks the possibility that obligation can arise without consent. If Sam had fixed my car, I would have owed him in the name of reciprocity. Simply thanking him and driving off would have been unfair. But this doesn't imply that I had hired him.

When I tell this story to my students, most agree that, under the circumstances, I didn't owe Sam the

fifty dollars. But many hold this view for reasons different from mine. They argue that, since I didn't explicitly hire Sam, I owed him nothing—and would have owed him nothing even if he had fixed my car. Any payment would have been an act of generosity—a gratuity, not a duty. So they come to my defense, not by embracing my expansive view of obligation, but by asserting a stringent view of consent.

Despite our tendency to read consent into every moral claim, it is hard to make sense of our moral lives without acknowledging the independent weight of reciprocity. Consider a marriage contract. Suppose I discover, after twenty years of faithfulness on my part, that my wife has been seeing another man. I would have two different grounds for moral outrage. One invokes consent: "But we had an agreement. You made a vow. You broke your promise." The second would invoke reciprocity: "But I've been so faithful for my part. Surely I deserve better than this. This is no way to repay my loyalty." And so on. The second complaint makes no reference to consent, and does not require it. It would be morally plausible even if we never exchanged marital vows, but lived together as partners for all those years.

## Imagining the Perfect Contract

What do these various misadventures tell us about the morality of contracts? Contracts derive their moral force from two different ideals, autonomy and reciprocity. But most actual contracts fall short of these ideals. If I'm up against someone with a superior bargaining position, my agreement may not be wholly voluntary, but pressured or, in the extreme case, coerced. If I'm negotiating with someone with greater knowledge of the things we are exchanging, the deal may not be mutually beneficial. In the extreme case, I may be defrauded or deceived.

In real life, persons are situated differently. This means that differences in bargaining power and knowledge are always possible. And as long as this is true, the fact of an agreement does not, by itself, guarantee the fairness of an agreement. This is why actual contracts are not self-sufficient moral instruments. It always makes sense to ask, "But is it fair, what they have agreed to?"

But imagine a contract among parties who were equal in power and knowledge, rather than unequal; who were identically situated, not differently situated. And imagine that the object of this contract was not plumbing or any ordinary deal, but the principles to govern our lives together, to assign our rights and duties as citizens. A contract like this, among parties like these, would leave no room for coercion or deception or other unfair advantages. Its terms would be just, whatever they were, by virtue of their agreement alone.

If you can imagine a contract like this, you have arrived at Rawls's idea of a hypothetical agreement in an initial situation of equality. The veil of ignorance ensures the equality of power and knowledge that the original position requires. By ensuring that no one knows his or her place in society, his strengths or weaknesses, his values or ends, the veil of ignorance ensures that no one can take advantage, even unwittingly, of a favorable bargaining position.

If a knowledge of particulars is allowed, then the outcome is biased by arbitrary contingencies . . . If the original position is to yield agreements that are just, the parties must be fairly situated and treated equally as moral persons. The arbitrariness of the world must be corrected for by adjusting the circumstances of the initial contract situation.<sup>10</sup>

The irony is that a hypothetical agreement behind a veil of ignorance is not a pale form of an actual contract and so a morally weaker thing; it's a pure form of an actual contract, and so a morally more powerful thing.

## Two Principles of Justice

Suppose Rawls is right: The way to think about justice is to ask what principles we would choose in an original position of equality, behind a veil of ignorance. What principles would emerge?

According to Rawls, we wouldn't choose utilitarianism. Behind the veil of ignorance, we don't know where we will wind up in society, but we do know that we will want to pursue our ends and be treated

with respect. In case we turn out to be a member of an ethnic or religious minority, we don't want to be oppressed, even if this gives pleasure to the majority. Once the veil of ignorance rises and real life begins, we don't want to find ourselves as victims of religious persecution or racial discrimination. In order to protect against these dangers, we would reject utilitarianism and agree to a principle of equal basic liberties for all citizens, including the right to liberty of conscience and freedom of thought. And we would insist that this principle take priority over attempts to maximize the general welfare. We would not sacrifice our fundamental rights and liberties for social and economic benefits.

What principle would we choose to govern social and economic inequalities? To guard against the risk of finding ourselves in crushing poverty, we might at first thought favor an equal distribution of income and wealth. But then it would occur to us that we could do better, even for those on the bottom. Suppose that by permitting certain inequalities, such as higher pay for doctors than for bus drivers, we could improve the situation of those who have the least—by increasing access to health care for the poor. Allowing for this possibility, we would adopt what Rawls calls “the difference principle”: only those social and economic inequalities are permitted that work to the benefit of the least advantaged members of society.

Exactly how egalitarian is the difference principle? It's hard to say, because the effect of pay differences depends on social and economic circumstances. Suppose higher pay for doctors led to more and better medical care in impoverished rural areas. In that case, the wage difference could be consistent with Rawls's principle. But suppose paying doctors more had no impact on health services in Appalachia, and simply produced more cosmetic surgeons in Beverly Hills. In that case, the wage difference would be hard to justify from Rawls's point of view.

What about the big earnings of Michael Jordan or the vast fortune of Bill Gates? Could these inequalities be consistent with the difference principle? Of course, Rawls's theory is not meant to assess the fairness of this or that person's salary; it is concerned with the basic structure of society, and the way it allocates rights and duties, income and wealth, power and opportunities. For Rawls, the question to ask is whether Gates's wealth arose as part of a system that, taken as a whole, works to the benefit of the least well off. For example, was it subject to a progressive tax system that taxed the rich to provide for the health, education, and welfare of the poor? If so, and if this system made the poor better off than they would have been under a more strictly equal arrangement, then such inequalities could be consistent with the difference principle.

Some people question whether the parties to the original position would choose the difference principle. How does Rawls know that, behind the veil of ignorance, people wouldn't be gamblers, willing to take their chances on a highly unequal society in hopes of landing on top? Maybe some would even opt for a feudal society, willing to risk being a landless serf in the hopes of being a king.

Rawls doesn't believe that people choosing principles to govern their fundamental life prospects would take such chances. Unless they knew themselves to be lovers of risk (a quality blocked from view by the veil of ignorance), people would not make risky bets at high stakes. But Rawls's case for the difference principle doesn't rest entirely on the assumption that people in the original position would be risk averse. Underlying the device of the veil of ignorance is a moral argument that can be presented independent of the thought experiment. Its main idea is that the distribution of income and opportunity should not be based on factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view.

## The Argument from Moral Arbitrariness

Rawls presents this argument by comparing several rival theories of justice, beginning with feudal aristocracy. These days, no one defends the justice of feudal aristocracies or caste systems. These systems are unfair, Rawls observes, because they distribute income, wealth, opportunity, and power according to the accident of birth. If you are born into nobility, you have rights and powers denied those born into serfdom. But the circumstances of your birth are no doing of yours. So it's unjust to make your life prospects depend on this arbitrary fact.

Market societies remedy this arbitrariness, at least to some degree. They open careers to those with the requisite talents and provide equality before the law. Citizens are assured equal basic liberties, and the distribution of income and wealth is determined by the free market. This system—a free market with formal equality of opportunity—corresponds to the libertarian theory of justice. It represents an

improvement over feudal and caste societies, since it rejects fixed hierarchies of birth. Legally, it allows everyone to strive and to compete. In practice, however, opportunities may be far from equal.

Those who have supportive families and a good education have obvious advantages over those who do not. Allowing everyone to enter the race is a good thing. But if the runners start from different starting points, the race is hardly fair. That is why, Rawls argues, the distribution of income and wealth that results from a free market with formal equality of opportunity cannot be considered just. The most obvious injustice of the libertarian system “is that it permits distributive shares to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a moral point of view.”<sup>11</sup>

One way of remedying this unfairness is to correct for social and economic disadvantage. A fair meritocracy attempts to do so by going beyond merely formal equality of opportunity. It removes obstacles to achievement by providing equal educational opportunities, so that those from poor families can compete on an equal basis with those from more privileged backgrounds. It institutes Head Start programs, childhood nutrition and health care programs, education and job training programs—whatever is needed to bring everyone, regardless of class or family background, to the same starting point. According to the meritocratic conception, the distribution of income and wealth that results from a free market is just, but only if everyone has the same opportunity to develop his or her talents. Only if everyone begins at the same starting line can it be said that the winners of the race deserve their rewards.

Rawls believes that the meritocratic conception corrects for certain morally arbitrary advantages, but still falls short of justice. For, even if you manage to bring everyone up to the same starting point, it is more or less predictable who will win the race—the fastest runners. But being a fast runner is not wholly my own doing. It is morally contingent in the same way that coming from an affluent family is contingent. “Even if it works to perfection in eliminating the influence of social contingencies,” Rawls writes, the meritocratic system “still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of abilities and talents.”<sup>12</sup>

If Rawls is right, even a free market operating in a society with equal educational opportunities does not produce a just distribution of income and wealth. The reason: “Distributive shares are decided by the outcome of the natural lottery; and this outcome is arbitrary from a moral perspective. There is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune.”<sup>13</sup>

Rawls concludes that the meritocratic conception of justice is flawed for the same reason (though to a lesser degree) as the libertarian conception; both base distributive shares on factors that are morally arbitrary. “Once we are troubled by the influence of either social contingencies or natural chance on the determination of the distributive shares, we are bound, on reflection, to be bothered by the influence of the other. From a moral standpoint the two seem equally arbitrary.”<sup>14</sup>

Once we notice the moral arbitrariness that taints both libertarian and the meritocratic theories of justice, Rawls argues, we can’t be satisfied short of a more egalitarian conception. But what could this conception be? It is one thing to remedy unequal educational opportunities, but quite another to remedy unequal native endowments. If we are bothered by the fact that some runners are faster than others, don’t we have to make the gifted runners wear lead shoes? Some critics of egalitarianism believe that the only alternative to a meritocratic market society is a leveling equality that imposes handicaps on the talented.

## An Egalitarian Nightmare

“Harrison Bergeron,” a short story by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., plays out this worry as dystopian science fiction. “The year was 2081,” the story begins, “and everybody was finally equal . . . Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else.” This thoroughgoing equality was enforced by agents of the United States Handicapper General. Citizens of above average intelligence were required to wear mental handicap radios in their ears. Every twenty seconds or so, a government transmitter would send out a sharp noise to prevent them “from taking unfair advantage of their brains.”<sup>15</sup>

Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen, is unusually smart, handsome, and gifted, and so has to be fitted

with heavier handicaps than most. Instead of the little ear radio, “he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses.” To disguise his good looks, Harrison is required to wear “a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random.” And to offset his physical strength, he has to walk around wearing heavy scrap metal. “In the race of life, Harrison carried three hundred pounds.”<sup>16</sup>

One day, Harrison sheds his handicaps in an act of heroic defiance against the egalitarian tyranny. I won’t spoil the story by revealing the conclusion. It should already be clear how Vonnegut’s story makes vivid a familiar complaint against egalitarian theories of justice.

Rawls’s theory of justice, however, is not open to that objection. He shows that a leveling equality is not the only alternative to a meritocratic market society. Rawls’s alternative, which he calls the difference principle, corrects for the unequal distribution of talents and endowments without handicapping the talented. How? Encourage the gifted to develop and exercise their talents, but with the understanding that the rewards these talents reap in the market belong to the community as a whole. Don’t handicap the best runners; let them run and do their best. Simply acknowledge in advance that the winnings don’t belong to them alone, but should be shared with those who lack similar gifts.

Although the difference principle does not require an equal distribution of income and wealth, its underlying idea expresses a powerful, even inspiring vision of equality:

The difference principle represents, in effect, an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out. The naturally advantaged are not to gain merely because they are more gifted, but only to cover the costs of training and education and for using their endowments in ways that help the less fortunate as well. No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society. But it does not follow that one should eliminate these distinctions. There is another way to deal with them. The basic structure of society can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate.<sup>17</sup>

Consider, then, four rival theories of distribution justice:

1. Feudal or caste system: fixed hierarchy based on birth.
2. Libertarian: free market with formal equality of opportunity.
3. Meritocratic: free market with fair equality of opportunity.
4. Egalitarian: Rawls’s difference principle.

Rawls argues that each of the first three theories bases distributive shares on factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view—whether accident of birth, or social and economic advantage, or natural talents and abilities. Only the difference principle avoids basing the distribution of income and wealth on these contingencies.

Although the argument from moral arbitrariness does not rely on the argument from the original position, it is similar in this respect: Both maintain that, in thinking about justice, we should abstract from, or set aside, contingent facts about persons and their social positions.

### ***Objection 1: Incentives***

Rawls’s case for the difference principle invites two main objections. First, what about incentives? If the talented can benefit from their talents only on terms that help the least well off, what if they decide to work less, or not to develop their skills in the first place? If tax rates are high or pay differentials small, won’t talented people who might have been surgeons go into less demanding lines of work? Won’t Michael Jordan work less hard on his jump shot, or retire sooner than he otherwise might?

Rawls’s reply is that the difference principle permits income inequalities for the sake of incentives, provided the incentives are needed to improve the lot of the least advantaged. Paying CEOs more or cutting taxes on the wealthy simply to increase the gross domestic product would not be enough. But if

the incentives generate economic growth that makes those at the bottom better off than they would be with a more equal arrangement, then the difference principle permits them.

It is important to notice that allowing wage differences for the sake of incentives is different from saying that the successful have a privileged moral claim to the fruits of their labor. If Rawls is right, income inequalities are just only insofar as they call forth efforts that ultimately help the disadvantaged, not because CEOs or sports stars deserve to make more money than factory workers.

### ***Objection 2: Effort***

This brings us to a second, more challenging objection to Rawls's theory of justice: What about effort? Rawls rejects the meritocratic theory of justice on the grounds that people's natural talents are not their own doing. But what about the hard work people devote to cultivating their talents? Bill Gates worked long and hard to develop Microsoft. Michael Jordan put in endless hours honing his basketball skills. Notwithstanding their talents and gifts, don't they deserve the rewards their efforts bring?

Rawls replies that even effort may be the product of a favorable upbringing. "Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances."<sup>18</sup> Like other factors in our success, effort is influenced by contingencies for which we can claim no credit. "It seems clear that the effort a person is willing to make is influenced by his natural abilities and skills and the alternatives open to him. The better endowed are more likely, other things equal, to strive conscientiously . . ."<sup>19</sup>

When my students encounter Rawls's argument about effort, many strenuously object. They argue that their achievements, including their admission to Harvard, reflect their own hard work, not morally arbitrary factors beyond their control. Many view with suspicion any theory of justice that suggests we don't morally deserve the rewards our efforts bring.

After we debate Rawls's claim about effort, I conduct an unscientific survey. I point out that psychologists say that birth order has an influence on effort and striving—such as the effort the students associate with getting into Harvard. The first-born reportedly have a stronger work ethic, make more money, and achieve more conventional success than their younger siblings. These studies are controversial, and I don't know if their findings are true. But just for the fun of it, I ask my students how many are first in birth order. About 75 to 80 percent raise their hands. The result has been the same every time I have taken the poll.

No one claims that being first in birth order is one's own doing. If something as morally arbitrary as birth order can influence our tendency to work hard and strive conscientiously, then Rawls may have a point. Even effort can't be the basis of moral desert.

The claim that people deserve the rewards that come from effort and hard work is questionable for a further reason: although proponents of meritocracy often invoke the virtues of effort, they don't really believe that effort alone should be the basis of income and wealth. Consider two construction workers. One is strong and brawny, and can build four walls in a day without breaking a sweat. The other is weak and scrawny, and can't carry more than two bricks at a time. Although he works very hard, it takes him a week to do what his muscular co-worker achieves, more or less effortlessly, in a day. No defender of meritocracy would say the weak but hardworking worker deserves to be paid more, in virtue of his superior effort, than the strong one.

Or consider Michael Jordan. It's true, he practiced hard. But some lesser basketball players practice even harder. No one would say they deserve a bigger contract than Jordan's as a reward for all the hours they put in. So, despite the talk about effort, it's really contribution, or achievement, that the meritocrat believes is worthy of reward. Whether or not our work ethic is our own doing, our contribution depends, at least in part, on natural talents for which we can claim no credit.

### **Rejecting Moral Desert**

If Rawls's argument about the moral arbitrariness of talents is right, it leads to a surprising conclusion: Distributive justice is not a matter of rewarding moral desert.

He recognizes that this conclusion is at odds with our ordinary way of thinking about justice: "There is

a tendency for common sense to suppose that income and wealth, and the good things in life generally, should be distributed according to moral desert. Justice is happiness according to virtue . . . Now justice as fairness rejects this conception.”<sup>20</sup>

Rawls undermines the meritocratic view by calling into question its basic premise, namely, that once we remove social and economic barriers to success, people can be said to deserve the rewards their talents bring:

We do not deserve our place in the distribution of native endowments, any more than we deserve our initial starting point in society. That we deserve the superior character than enables us to make the effort to cultivate our abilities is also problematic; for such character depends in good part upon fortunate family and social circumstances in early life for which can claim no credit. The notion of desert does not apply here.<sup>21</sup>

If distributive justice is not about rewarding moral desert, does this mean that people who work hard and play by the rules have no claim whatsoever on the rewards they get for their efforts? No, not exactly. Here Rawls makes an important but subtle distinction—between moral desert and what he calls “entitlements to legitimate expectations.” The difference is this: Unlike a desert claim, an entitlement can arise only once certain rules of the game are in place. It can’t tell us how to set up the rules in the first place.

The conflict between moral desert and entitlements underlies many of our most heated debates about justice: Some say that increasing tax rates on the wealthy deprives them of something they morally deserve; or that considering racial and ethnic diversity as a factor in college admissions deprives applicants with high SAT scores of an advantage they morally deserve. Others say no—people don’t morally deserve these advantages; we first have to decide what the rules of the game (the tax rates, the admissions criteria) should be. Only then can we say who is entitled to what.

Consider the difference between a game of chance and a game of skill. Suppose I play the state lottery. If my number comes up, I am entitled to my winnings. But I can’t say that I deserved to win, because a lottery is a game of chance. My winning or losing has nothing to do with my virtue or skill in playing the game.

Now imagine the Boston Red Sox winning the World Series. Having done so, they are entitled to the trophy. Whether or not they deserved to win would be a further question. The answer would depend on how they played the game. Did they win by a fluke (a bad call by the umpire at a decisive moment, for example) or because they actually played better than their opponents, displaying the excellences and virtues (good pitching, timely hitting, sparkling defense, etc.) that define baseball at its best?

With a game of skill, unlike a game of chance, there can be a difference between who is entitled to the winnings and who deserved to win. This is because games of skill reward the exercise and display of certain virtues.

Rawls argues that distributive justice is not about rewarding virtue or moral desert. Instead, it’s about meeting the legitimate expectations that arise once the rules of the game are in place. Once the principles of justice set the terms of social cooperation, people are entitled to the benefits they earn under the rules. But if the tax system requires them to hand over some portion of their income to help the disadvantaged, they can’t complain that this deprives them of something they morally deserve.

A just scheme, then, answers to what men are entitled to; it satisfies their legitimate expectations as founded upon social institutions. But what they are entitled to is not proportional to nor dependent upon their intrinsic worth. The principles of justice that regulate the basic structure of society . . . do not mention moral desert, and there is no tendency for distributive shares to correspond to it.<sup>22</sup>

Rawls rejects moral desert as the basis for distributive justice on two grounds. First, as we’ve already seen, my having the talents that enable me to compete more successfully than others is not entirely my own doing. But a second contingency is equally decisive: the qualities that a society happens to value at any given time also morally arbitrary. Even if I had sole, unproblematic claim to my talents, it would still be the case that the rewards these talents reap will depend on the contingencies of supply and demand. In medieval Tuscany, fresco painters were highly valued; in twenty-first-century California,

computer programmers are, and so on. Whether my skills yield a lot or a little depends on what the society happens to want. What counts as contributing depends on the qualities a given society happens to prize.

Consider these wage differentials:

- The average schoolteacher in the United States makes about \$43,000 per year. David Letterman, the late-night talk show host, earns \$31 million a year.
- John Roberts, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, is paid \$217,400 a year. Judge Judy, who has a reality television show, makes \$25 million a year.

Are these pay differentials fair? The answer, for Rawls, would depend on whether they arose within a system of taxation and redistribution that worked to the benefit of the least well off. If so, Letterman and Judge Judy would be entitled to their earnings. But it can't be said that Judge Judy deserves to make one hundred times more than Chief Justice Roberts, or that Letterman deserves to make seven hundred times as much as a schoolteacher. The fact that they happen to live in a society that lavishes huge sums on television stars is their good luck, not something they deserve.

The successful often overlook this contingent aspect of their success. Many of us are fortunate to possess, at least in some measure, the qualities our society happens to prize. In a capitalist society, it helps to have entrepreneurial drive. In a bureaucratic society, it helps to get on easily and smoothly with superiors. In a mass democratic society, it helps to look good on television, and to speak in short, superficial sound bites. In a litigious society, it helps to go to law school, and to have the logical and reasoning skills that will allow you to score well on the LSATs.

That our society values these things is not our doing. Suppose that we, with our talents, inhabited not a technologically advanced, highly litigious society like ours, but a hunting society, or a warrior society, or a society that conferred its highest rewards and prestige on those who displayed physical strength, or religious piety. What would become of our talents then? Clearly, they wouldn't get us very far. And no doubt some of us would develop others. But would we be less worthy or less virtuous than we are now?

Rawls's answer is no. We might receive less, and properly so. But while we would be entitled to less, we would be no less worthy, no less deserving than others. The same is true of those in our society who lack prestigious positions, and who possess fewer of the talents that our society happens to reward.

So, while we are entitled to the benefits that the rules of the game promise for the exercise of our talents, it is a mistake and a conceit to suppose that we deserve in the first place a society that values the qualities we have in abundance.

Woody Allen makes a similar point in his movie *Stardust Memories*. Allen, playing a character akin to himself, a celebrity comedian named Sandy, meets up with Jerry, a friend from his old neighborhood who is chagrined at being a taxi driver.

**SANDY:** So what are you doing? What are you up to?

**JERRY:** You know what I do? I drive a cab.

**SANDY:** Well, you look good. You—There's nothing wrong with that.

**JERRY:** Yeah. But look at me compared to you . . .

**SANDY:** What do you want me to say? I was the kid in the neighborhood who told the jokes, right?

**JERRY:** Yeah.

**SANDY:** So, so—we, you know, we live in a—in a society that puts a big value on jokes, you know?

If you think of it this way—(clearing his throat) if I had been an Apache Indian, those guys didn't need comedians at all, right? So I'd be out of work.

**JERRY:** So? Oh, come on, that doesn't help me feel any better.<sup>23</sup>

The taxi driver was not moved by the comedian's riff on the moral arbitrariness of fame and fortune. Viewing his meager lot as a matter of bad luck didn't lessen the sting. Perhaps that's because, in a meritocratic society, most people think that worldly success reflects what we deserve; the idea is not easy to dislodge. Whether distributive justice can be detached altogether from moral desert is a question we explore in the pages to come.

## Is Life Unfair?

In 1980, as Ronald Reagan ran for president, the economist Milton Friedman published a bestselling book, co-authored with his wife, Rose, called *Free to Choose*. It was a spirited, unapologetic defense of the free-market economy, and it became a textbook—even an anthem—for the Reagan years. In defending laissez-faire principles against egalitarian objections, Friedman made a surprising concession. He acknowledged that those who grow up in wealthy families and attend elite schools have an unfair advantage over those from less privileged backgrounds. He also conceded that those who, through no doing of their own, inherit talents and gifts have an unfair advantage over others. Unlike Rawls, however, Friedman insisted that we should not try to remedy this unfairness. Instead, we should learn to live with it, and enjoy the benefits it brings:

Life is not fair. It is tempting to believe that government can rectify what nature has spawned. But it is also important to recognize how much we benefit from the very unfairness we deplore. There's nothing fair . . . about Muhammad Ali's having been born with the skill that made him a great fighter . . . It is certainly not fair that Muhammad Ali should be able to earn millions of dollars in one night. But wouldn't it have been even more unfair to the people who enjoyed watching him if, in the pursuit of some abstract ideal of equality, Muhammad Ali had not been permitted to earn more for one night's fight . . . than the lowest man on the totem pole could get for a day's unskilled work on the docks?<sup>24</sup>

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls rejects the counsel of complacence that Friedman's view reflects. In a stirring passage, Rawls states a familiar truth that we often forget: The way things are does not determine the way they ought to be.

We should reject the contention that the ordering of institutions is always defective because the distribution of natural talents and the contingencies of social circumstance are unjust, and this injustice must inevitably carry over to human arrangements. Occasionally this reflection is offered as an excuse for ignoring injustice, as if the refusal to acquiesce in injustice is on a par with being unable to accept death. The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts.<sup>25</sup>

Rawls proposes that we deal with these facts by agreeing “to share one another’s fate,” and “to avail [ourselves] of the accidents of nature and social circumstance only when doing so is for the common benefit.”<sup>26</sup> Whether or not his theory of justice ultimately succeeds, it represents the most compelling case for a more equal society that American political philosophy has yet produced.