

# John Rawls' theory of justice

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⌘ In *A Theory of Justice* - 1971

- 1. The basis for the theory

➤ A revised version of the social contract theory

↙ hypothetical -- a mental experiment

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- ⚡ under the “veil of ignorance”  
the purpose of the veil:  
to assure fairness & to  
compensate for the natural  
lottery

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## - 2. Rejection of utilitarianism

### ▣ Background

- Jeremy Bentham (English, 1748-1832)
- John Stuart Mill (English, 1806-1873)
- Utilitarianism
  - ↳ an ethical theory
  - ↳ consequentialist

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- ↙ must take into account all affected by the action
- ↙ what determines whether an action is good or bad?
- ↙ the pleasure-pain calculus

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- ✚ Rawls' reason for rejecting a utilitarian theory of justice:  
Utilitarianism requires "lesser life prospects for some . . . for the sake of a greater sum of advantages enjoyed by others" (456)

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- 3. Moving from the "original position . . . under the veil of ignorance" to principles of justice
  - Maximin reasoning (465) - trying to make the minimal life maximally good

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- 4. The two principles of justice
  - ☒ (1) "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others." (460)
    - Concerned with basic rights or liberties
    - Calls for strict equality in this area

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☒(2) “All social values--liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases for self-respect--are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage.”  
(461)

➤ Concerned with wealth & social status



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- Justifies departures from strict equality in this area
- Note that the burden is on departures from equality

## ⌘ Critique of Rawls' theory

- Is the use of a hypothetical situation a good basis for an ethical theory?
- Is Rawls justified in assuming that the members of the original position under the veil of ignorance are risk-averse?
- Assumes that reason transcends culture? Is this a justifiable assumption?