

# Studying Social Inequality with Data Science

INFO 3370 / 5371  
Spring 2024

## Rawls and Justice as Fairness

All page numbers refer to Rawls, John. 1971.  
*A Theory of Justice*. Harvard University Press.

# Learning goals for today

By the end of class, you will be able to explain

- ▶ the original position
- ▶ the equality principle
- ▶ the difference principle

What is justice?

Hypothetical American businessman:

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In America, I get to keep it.

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In America, I get to keep it.  
In Sweden, I'd pay high taxes.  
Therefore, I think America is more just.

What makes it hard take the businessman's view  
as an objective assessment of the justice of society?

If we want to agree about a just society,  
we cannot appeal to **our own place** within that society

How to choose principles for a just society?



# How to choose principles for a just society?

Choose from an **original position**

(Rawls p. 12)

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What principles for society would we choose from this position?

- ▶ would we allow slavery?
- ▶ would we require complete equality?

## Two principles chosen in the original position

1. Equality principle
2. Difference principle



## First principle: Equality of liberty

“each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others”

— Rawls p. 60

Second principle: Difference principle

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Suppose that (Rawls p. 78)

1. Some are born in a property-owning entrepreneurial class
2. Some are born in a class of unskilled laborers

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1. Some are born in a property-owning entrepreneurial class
2. Some are born in a class of unskilled laborers
3. Set (1) has better economic prospects

Is there any way that such a society could be just?

## Second principle: Difference principle

“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 open to all”

— Rawls p. 60

How does this depart from other conceptions of justice?

# Natural liberty

“a basic structure satisfying the principle of efficiency and in which positions are open to those able and willing to strive for them will lead to a just distribution”

p. 66



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- ▶ It pays really well to lift sandbags up a hill
- ▶ Sarah and Frank are both really strong

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- ▶ Sarah lives in poverty. Frank is wealthy

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Is this a just allocation?

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Rawls: “social circumstances and such chance contingencies as accident and good fortune” are “arbitrary from a moral point of view” (p. 72)



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p. 73

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- ▶ Frank lives in poverty. Sarah is wealthy

Is this fair?

Social and natural chance are **both** arbitrary

“For once we are troubled by the influence of either social contingencies or natural chance on the determination of distributive shares, we are bound, on reflection, to be bothered by the influence of the other.

From a moral standpoint the two seem to be equally arbitrary.”

(Rawls p. 75)



If ability is arbitrary, can we ever justify inequality?

“The higher expectations of those better situated are just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society.”

— Rawls p. 75

## Recap: Two principles of justice

From the original position, Rawls thinks we would choose

1. **Equality of liberty:** “each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others”
2. **Difference principle:** “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 open to all”

Discussion. Is this justice?

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