Studying
Social Inequality
with Data Science

INFO 3370 / 5371 Spring 2024

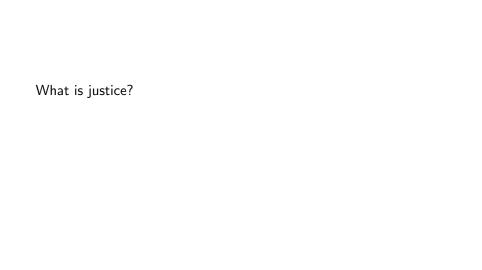
Rawls and Justice as Fairness

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



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

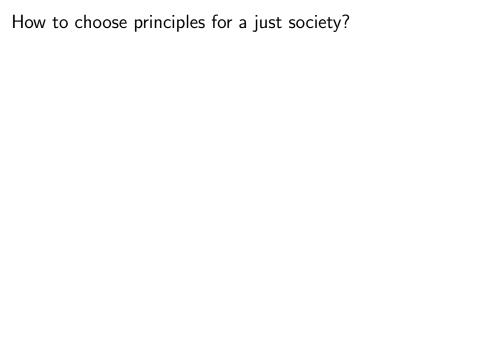
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If we want to agree about a just society, we cannot appeal to **our own place** within that society



Choose from an original position

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"no one knows his place in society"

Choose from an original position

- ► "no one knows his place in society"
- ► "his class position or social status"

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Choose from an original position

(Rawls p. 12)

- "no one knows his place in society"
- "his class position or social status"
- "his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities"
- "his intelligence, strength, and the like"

What principles for society would we choose from this position?

Choose from an original position

(Rawls p. 12)

- "no one knows his place in society"
- "his class position or social status"
- ▶ "his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities"
- "his intelligence, strength, and the like"

What principles for society would we choose from this position?

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

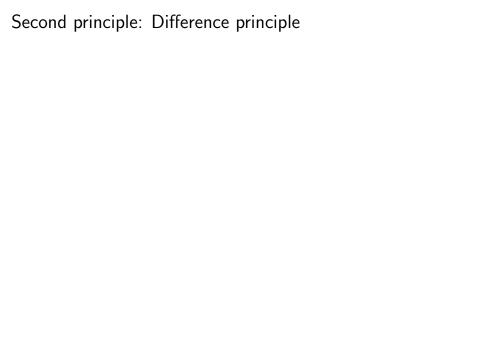
Two principles chosen in the original position

- 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



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

"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?	

"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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"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

- ► It pays really well to lift sandbags up a hill
- Sarah and Frank are both really strong
- ► We flip a coin. Sarah is prohibited from applying
- ► Sarah lives in poverty. Frank is wealthy

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- ► It pays really well to lift sandbags up a hill
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Is this a just allocation?

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Hypothetical:

- ► It pays really well to lift sandbags up a hill
- ► Sarah and Frank are both really strong
- ► Only men are allowed to lift sandbags
- ► Sarah lives in poverty. Frank is wealthy

Is this a just allocation?

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Is this a just allocation?

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



Rawls adds "fair equality of opportunity":

"those with similar abilities and skills should have similar life chances" p. 73

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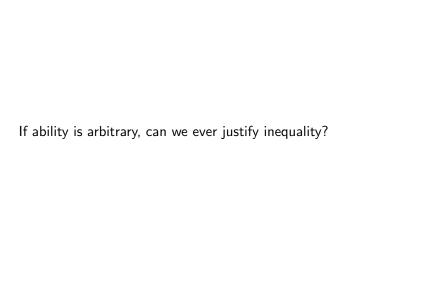
Is this fair?

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)



"The higher expectations of those better situated are just if and

— Rawls p. 75

only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society." Recap: Two principles of justice

From the original position, Rawls thinks we would choose

- 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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