

Reading/Study Guide:
Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*

- I. Justice as Fairness (Ch. 1, #s 1-6)
- A. Why is it crucial that the principles of a just society be principles that could be *rationally* and *freely* agreed by everyone as *equals*? (#3)
 - B. What does Rawls mean by the “original position”? What does he mean by “the veil of ignorance”? Why is it important to know what people in the original position, situated behind a veil of ignorance would decide as their principles of justice? Why is this kind of agreement fair in a way that actual agreements may not be?
 - C. What is it important to consider our “considered convictions” about justice as well as our theoretical conclusions as to what principles of justice would be chosen in a position of original equality (the original position) in determining our theory of justice? What does Rawls mean by “reflective equilibrium”?
 - D. In what way does utilitarianism make what is right contingent on what is good? What problems does this create for our sense of the “inviolability” of the rights of individuals? How does Rawls address this problem with his idea of the priority of the right over the good? (#s 5-6)
- II. "The Principles of Justice" (Ch. II, #s 10 - 17, except “The principle of Efficiency”, pp 59-60, “The Difference Principle”, pp. 65-70 and “Chain Connection”, pp. 70-71)
- A. Rawls proposes to consider the principles of justice he believes could be fairly chosen under conditions of equality before considering his argument that these would be the ones so chosen. Beginning with the simplest version (rather than the first he presents), what is Rawls’s conception of justice as he presents it on p. 54?
 - B. Why does he distinguish that basic principle into two separate ones (see p. 53)? Is there a greater problem with accepting inequalities with our basic personal and political liberties if they are advantageous to all that there is with accepting social and economic inequalities that are advantageous to all? (#11)
 - C. Part B of Rawls’s second principle of justice articulates an ideal of equality of opportunity that ought to be guaranteed everyone in a just society (“social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are ... (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.” - p. 53). (#12)
 - 1. How is that ideal understood in what he calls the “system of natural liberty” and what are the problems with this interpretation of equality of opportunity?
 - 2. How is that ideal understood in what Rawls calls the system of “liberal equality” and what are the problems with this interpretation of equality of opportunity?
 - 3. Why does Rawls think it is unfair to allow one’s opportunities to be determined by what he calls natural and social contingencies?
 - D. What does Rawls mean by “the difference principle”? How does it correct for the unfairness that remains under a “liberal” understanding of equality of opportunity? (#13)
 - E. What is Rawls final formulation of the two principles of justice after his consideration of equality of opportunity and the difference principle? (p. 72)
 - F. What does Rawls mean by “primary social goods”? (#15)

- G. Why does Rawls consider the difference principle to be a principle of mutual benefit? (#17, esp. p. 88)
- III. The Original Position and Rawls's Argument for the Two Principles of Justice (Ch. III, #s 20-26 & Ch IV, # 33)
- A. Rawls uses the idea of an "original position" to sketch a position of initial equality in which people could fairly choose principles of justice.
 - 1. What are the objective circumstances of justice and how do they help to define the original position? (#22)
 - 2. What are the subjective circumstances of justice and how do they help to define the original position? (#22)
 - 3. What sorts of things must we be ignorant of in the original position (the "veil of ignorance")? (#24)
 - 4. How does the veil of ignorance correct for the "arbitrariness of the world" (p. 122) in a way that guarantees fairness in the original position?
 - B. Rawls's argument for the two principles of justice.
 - 1. What is Rawls's argument for why the parties to the original position would choose the two principles of justice as he has outlined them? (# 26, especially p. 130-131)
 - 2. How does Rawls's consideration of equal liberty of conscience shed light on why he believes the parties to the original position would give priority to the first principle of justice over the second, refusing to trade inequalities in their basic personal and political liberties for greater social-economic advantage? (# 33)