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DEPARTMENT: IRD

LEVEL: 300

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ASSIGNMENT:

Read the chapter on Rawls and write short explanatory notes on:

1 John Rawls first principle

The first principle which is on equal and basic liberties was used to discuss his theory of justice in order to provide a convincing account of basic rights and liberties, and their priority.

In his first principle of justice, Rawls claims that that for every individual citizen there are two important capacities or powers and, correspondingly, two 'higher-order interests' in the realization of those capacities. Thus, each person has, over that person's entire life, (i) an interest in being able to formulate and live according to some particular conception of the good and (ii) an interest in exercising one's 'sense of justice' and being motivated by it, providing others do so as well. The notion of the two powers of the citizen means the idea that in a democratic society citizens are both equal and free. People are usually conceived as having the two powers at a sufficient level to be able to be a fully contributing member of society over that person's entire adult life or, at least, the working years. In having these powers at some such level, all the citizens are on the same footing. This, then, is the grounding idea behind Rawls's notion that the citizens are equal: they are equal in having reached what might be called this same minimum threshold level.

Rawls uses the idea of the two powers and the corresponding interests of the citizen to ground his elaboration of the concrete basic liberties that each citizen is to have equally. In conclusion, Rawls's first principle of justice: 'Each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme for all; and in this scheme the equal political liberties.

2 THE SECOND PRINCIPLE : DISTRIBUTIVE ECONOMIC JUSTICE

According to Rawl the account and formulation of his second principle of justice, as found in A Theory of Justice (1971), was substantially sound.

Rawls account begins with the fact that people have different natural backgrounds and are born into different social circumstances that shapes them as individuals. He stated that, individuals are usually a product of their immediate societies which can either be positive or negative. Therefore, the individual reflects his or her social background to the world, which is not necessarily the fault of the individual. This brings to light that there may be a sense or existence of inequality among people in the society. The main idea is to try to make people somewhat less unequal at the point where they actually enter into adult life, as citizens and as workers. And to make sure that everyone there, so far as possible, has the basic capabilities required to be contributing members of society

The basic aim behind this is to make sure that everyone there, so far as possible, has the basic capabilities required to be contributing members of society. Rawls admits that achieving an equal right to opportunities in a society is impossible but the inequality can be reduced to an extent. Thus, Rawls introduces a further idea to complement equality of opportunity and complete the line of argument. Rawls calls this new idea the difference principle'; it adds two further remedial steps to the picture; it adds (2) the principle of everyone's continual benefit, which in turn is constrained by the idea that, where there are several mutually improving (that is, efficient) options available, (3) we should choose that option which most reduces the resultant inequality in outcomes (as measured in terms of average in- come over a five-year period, say) between the topmost and bottom-most groups. The object of this three-step process is to reduce, ideally to minimize, the gap between persons by taking accounts of both starting points and end result.

In conclusion, Rawl’s argument means the 'Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.

3 THE ORIGINAL POSITION

Rawls continued to include even in his later writings that the 'parties' to the contract are placed (in what he calls the 'original position') behind a thick veil of ignorance. Here they are instructed in their subsequent reasoning to ignore their own particular traits (traits that distinguish them from most or, at least, many other people), to be unaware of (or to ignore) their actual place in society, to be unaware of their society's place in history or in institutional evolution, and so on. The point of the metaphor of the veil is to indicate that the parties should remove sources of bias and irrelevancy from their deliberations.

In simple terms the original position is an arena for deliberation and decision about principles of justice; its various features are meant to frame and constrain the debate about such principles. 'The idea of the original position is to set up a fair procedure so that any principles agreed to will be just. Rawls envisions two main roles for the original position. In its first role the original position is to serve as a screening device for the candidate principles, that is, principles taken from a short list of main, historically available theories of justice-such as Plato's republic, various versions of utilitarianism, and so on. Here the features of the original position serve as a checklist against which the candidate principles are to be measured and to be assessed. This basically means the original position serves as a judge to examine or resolve the excesses of principles in order to keep them in check.

The second main role of the original position is to rank the remaining eligible candidates, after the preliminary screening has been accomplished. In performing this second role, of ranking, the parties rely on the balance of reasons (determined in light of assessments that could be reached in the original position) to decide which of the remaining eligible candidates is best. If they can do so unanimously, there should be no real doubt about that particular ranking. Rawls's view is that utilitarians and others, especially in the setting afforded by the original position, would allow the sacrifice or the serious weakening of some of the demands of justice as fairness, or would do so for some people at least.

4. Rawls theory of justice revolves round two fundamental principles of justice which would provide a much more acceptable and just and morally acceptable society in order to provide a conducive environment for all individuals. The first principle guarantees the right of each person to have the most extensive basic liberty compatible with the liberty of others. The second principle states that social and economic positions are to be a) to everyone’s advantage and b) open to all.

A key problem to Rawls is to show how such principles would be universally adopted and here the work borders on general ethical issues.  He introduces a theoretical “veil of ignorance” in which all the “players” in the social game would be placed in a situation which is called the “original position”. Having only a general knowledge of the facts of “life and society”, each player is to abide based on their moral obligation. By denying the players any specific information about themselves it forces them to adopt a generalized point of view that bears a strong resemblance to the moral point of view.

Rawls proposes that the most reasonable principles of justice for a society are those that individuals would themselves agree to behind the “veil of ignorance”, in circumstances in which each is represented as a moral person, endowed with the basic moral powers. What this position supports is that while each person has different ends and goals, different backgrounds and talents, each ought to have a fair chance to develop his or her talents and to pursue those goals – fair equality for opportunity. It is not a race or contest where the talented or gifted prevail, it should be complete cooperation among all so that there may be reasonable life for all.