RAWLS SECOND PRINCIPLE: DISTRIBUTIVE ECONOMIC JUSTICE
Rawls's account begins with the fact that people have different natural
endowments and are born into and grow up in different social circumstances. No
one can be said to be responsible for these factors in their own case.
Nonetheless, factors such as natural endowment and initial social circumstance
are not negligible; they powerfully affect a person's life prospects,
advantageously for some and disadvantageously for others. Indeed, they may be
the main sources of inequality between people.
Rawls believes that an absolute equality of opportunity with respect to such
starting points can never be achieved. And it is precisely where fundamental
equality in starting points is not fully and strictly achieved, or cannot be,
that concern for reducing the inequality of resultant outcomes is in order.
Thus, Rawls introduces a further idea to complement equality of opportunity
1. And complete the line of argument. Rawls calls this new idea the
â␣␣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 income 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
account of both starting points and end results.
We can get to Rawls's final specification of the difference principle by
repeatedly employing the set of ideas just sketched. The difference principle
can be represented, then, as proceeding through a series of stages each one of
which embodies a conscientious effort at achieving equality of opportunity and
each one of which then repeats the same theme: first satisfy the standard of
mutual benefit (or of efficiency) and then reduce differences in outcome between
the topmost and the bottom-most group. This repeated pattern continues at each
stage until we reach an optimum point, at which no further mutually improving
moves are possible: at this point we have minimized the difference in question
(without making any group worse off in the process), and those least well off
(the bottom 20 per cent, say) have here their greatest benefit. I believe the
argument just sketched becomes logically conclusive if we make certain
simplifying assumptions. We must first assume, as does Rawls, that we are
starting from a hypothetical point of strict equality between people. This 'zero
point' does not, of course, describe the way things actually are; rather, it is
used merely to orient and clarify our thinking. And, secondly, we must assume
that so long as the benefit of the least well-off group could possibly be
higher, that of the other groups could also be higher, right on up to the
optimum or goal point. The object of this second assumption is to identify a
zone or context in which the procedure (the repeated pattern described earlier)
can operate, with full effect, to achieve its intended end.
The question we must next consider is, 'How would the arguments for each of
Rawls's two principles fare as formal arguments? How would they do in the
original position?'