

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

- ▶ argue normatively about what society ought to look like
- ▶ outline one definition of justice
- ▶ apply that definition to make us care about evidence that may come from data

Arguing about justice

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“what is the median income?”

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Today we ask: what kind of society should we want?

- ▶ our claims have been objective (what is)
- ▶ this claim is normative (what should be)

Arguing about justice: How we will do this

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We will begin with considered judgments

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- ▶ what seems just?

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- ▶ what seems unjust?

Arguing about justice: How we will do this

We will begin with considered judgments

- ▶ what seems just?
- ▶ what seems unjust?

Then we will try to codify some
formal principles of justice

Which society is more just?

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Hypothetical American businessperson:

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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Can both be right?

What society is just?

Whether society is just is a question about society as a whole

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My own place within society is morally irrelevant to the choice

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If we agree

How then should we choose the principles of justice?

The original position

Rawls p. 12

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Imagine a setting where:

- ▶ “no one knows his place in society”

The original position

Rawls p. 12

Imagine a setting where:

- ▶ “no one knows his place in society”
- ▶ “his class position or social status”

The original position

Rawls p. 12

Imagine a setting where:

- ▶ “no one knows his place in society”
- ▶ “his class position or social status”
- ▶ “his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities”

The original position

Rawls p. 12

Imagine a setting where:

- ▶ “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”

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Rawls p. 12

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- ▶ “no one knows his place in society”
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What principles would we choose?

would we allow slavery?

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

would we require complete equality of outcomes?

A possible claim

A possible claim

if admission to Cornell depends
only on talent to succeed at Cornell,
then society is just for this outcome

A possible claim

if admission to Cornell depends
only on talent to succeed at Cornell,
and we modify K–12 education to
equally develop all children's talents,
then society is just for this outcome

Taken to its extreme: Liberal equality

Children born with better talents will be admitted to Cornell.
Others will not.

Is that just?

The problem with liberal equality

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The luck of natural ability is also arbitrary.

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“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)

how can we allow any departure from equality?

Second principle: Difference principle

“social and economic inequalities, for example inequalities of wealth and authority, are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society”

— Rawls p. 14–15

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Example implications:

- ▶ Admit the talented people to Cornell to the degree that it helps the less talented
- ▶ Raise CEO pay only if that will reduce poverty

Two principles of justice

according to Rawls

A just society is the one we would choose if we did not know our place in society

Rawls thinks we would choose two principles:

1. maximal liberty compatible with similar liberty for others
2. inequality only if it benefits everyone

Data science can reveal evidence of injustice

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With justice as defined by Rawls,
how have our exercises revealed injustice?

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Exercises in the course:

- ▶ percentiles of the income distribution
- ▶ salaries of baseball players
- ▶ gender gaps in the labor market
- ▶ predicting income given family background
- ▶ racial residential segregation
- ▶ racial wealth gap
- ▶ class gaps in pay

Beyond our course

Can you think of other settings where the original position can help us decide what is just?

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