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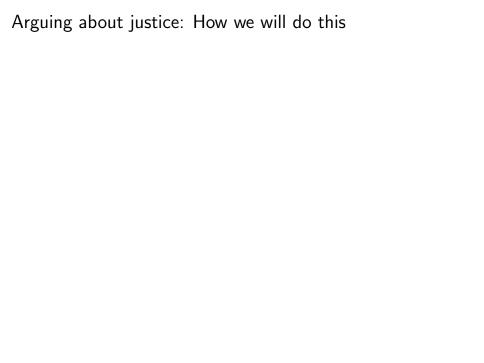
Today we ask: what kind of society should we want?

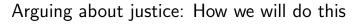
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Today we ask: what kind of society should we want?

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





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Arguing about justice: How we will do this

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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?

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?

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

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If we agree How then should we choose the principles of justice?

Rawls p. 12

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Imagine a setting where:

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Rawls p. 12

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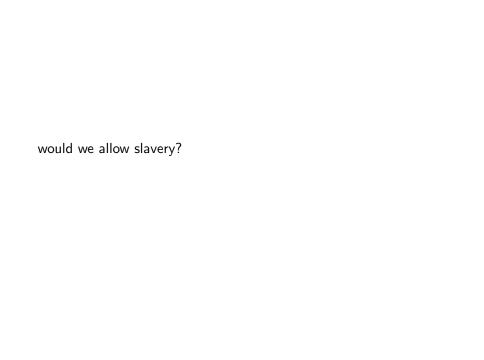
- ► "no one knows his place in society"
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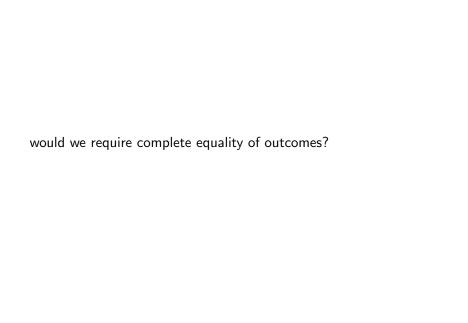
What principles would we choose?

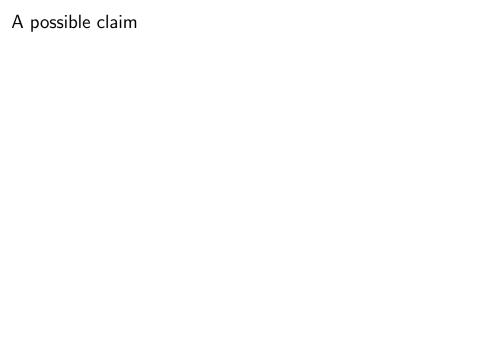


First principle: Equality of liberty

"each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others"

— Rawls p. 60





A possible claim

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

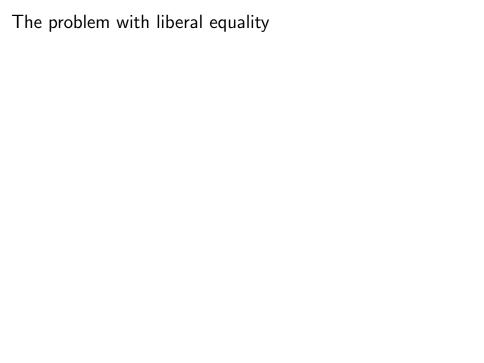
A possible claim

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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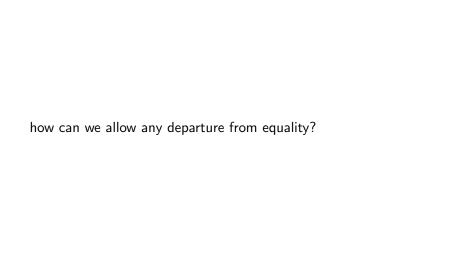
The problem with liberal equality

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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)



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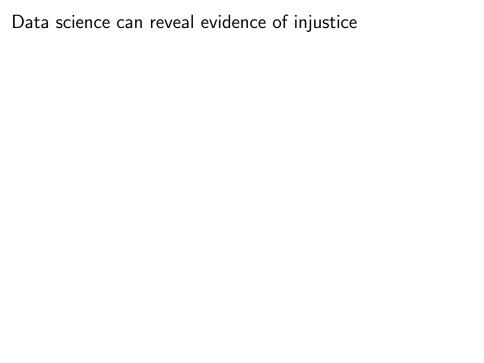
- ► Admit the talented people to Cornell to the degree that it helps the less talented
- Raise CEO pay only if that will reduce poverty

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

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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