**Rawls’ Theory of Distributive Justice**

(from http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/note100d.pdf)

I. **Important Concepts**

* **Distributive Justice**: Justice in the distribution of goods/wealth.
* **End-state conceptions** of distributive justice: Say there is some overall pattern of distribution we should aim at. Justice is a matter of closeness to the desired pattern. Examples:
  + Perfect equality
  + Distribution in accordance with need
  + Distribution in accordance with desert/merit
* **Historical conceptions** of distributive justice (e.g. Nozick): Say that whether a person is entitled to some bit of wealth depends on the process by which he got it. Justice is a matter of following the right rules in acquiring property.

II. **Important Ideas in Rawls’ Theory**

* **The Original Position**: A hypothetical situation in which the future members of a society meet to agree upon the general political principles to govern their society. Features of the OP:
  + The “*Veil of Ignorance*”: no one knows what their position in the society will be. In fact, they know no personal information about themselves (including the life plans/values they are going to have).
  + They have access to all relevant information about the society. Also, they are intelligent and make no errors in reasoning.
  + They will choose political principles on the basis of self-interest.
* Rawls’ **Two Principles of Justice**:
  + *First principle*: “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.”
  + *Second principle* (the “Difference Principle”): Social and economic inequalities are allowed only to the extent that they benefit those who are worst-off.
    - How might that happen? Perhaps if more productive people are rewarded with more wealth, then the society as a whole will be richer, so much so that even the (relatively) poor will be better off.

III. **Rawls’ Overall Argument**

1. What would be chosen in the Original Position is just.
   1. Why? Because the OP is set up in such a way as to guarantee a fair outcome. The parties start in a position of equality, and no one can unfairly privilege himself, since no one knows their position in the society.
2. Rawls’ Two Principles of justice would be chosen in the Original Position.

----------------------------

1. Therefore, Rawls’ Two Principles are just (and so should be adopted).

IV. **Why Choose the Two Principles?**

1. The first principle would be chosen because the parties don’t know what their plans and values will be; therefore, it makes sense to secure the most liberty possible, to allow for pursuing whatever goals they will have.
2. Why would the second principle be chosen? Two lines of reasoning:

*First:*

* First, there would be a natural default assumption of equality. Unless there was some

special reason for privileging someone, people would accept an even division of the

wealth.

* But obviously, it would be acceptable to allow some inequality if doing so benefitted

everyone. (It would not be acceptable otherwise, since those not benefitted would not agree to the distribution.)

* Inequalities obviously benefit the people who get more. They benefit everyone only if they benefit those who get less.
* Therefore, the parties would agree to allow economic inequalities (only) to the extent that they benefitted those worst off.

*Second:*

* For very poor people, money means a lot. Some minimum level of income is necessary for anyone to have a decent life.
* For the wealthy, money has less importance; if they lose some of their money, it won’t prevent them from having a good life.
* The parties in the Original Position would be more afraid of winding up poor, than they would be eager to wind up rich. They would want to minimize their risk of winding up very badly off. (Rawls has them put an absolute priority on this, i.e., they only look at what the worst possible outcome is, and try to improve that.)
* Therefore, they would choose the system that maximizes the position of the poorest people.

V. **Objections**

* Is premise (1) true?
  + What if people have rights to their property? The OP gives the ‘society’ a right to decide how to redistribute people’s property.
  + Nozick’s example: what if grades in a class were distributed according to a similar procedure? Is there reason to think that the resulting distribution would be correct?
* Is premise (2) true?
  + Some people say that the parties should choose utilitarianism: that everything should be arranged to maximize overall social welfare (no special attention given to the worst off).