Theory of justice

by Rawl · Language: EN

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Overview

A Theory of Justice is a foundational work in political philosophy by John Rawls, first published in 1971. The book seeks to establish a principled basis for a just society, arguing that justice is the first virtue of social institutions, just as truth is of systems of thought. Rawls proposes that the principles of justice are those that free and rational persons would agree to in an initial position of equality, a hypothetical contract situation he calls the 'original position.' Behind a 'veil of ignorance,' individuals do not know their social status, natural talents, or personal conception of the good, which ensures that the chosen principles are fair to all.

The core of the book is the derivation and defense of two principles of justice: the first guarantees equal basic liberties for all, and the second, the difference principle, holds that social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society and are attached to positions open to all under fair equality of opportunity. Rawls argues that these principles would be chosen over alternatives like utilitarianism, which he critiques for allowing the sacrifice of individual rights for the greater good. He also introduces the concept of 'justice as fairness,' emphasizing that the basic structure of society should be arranged to ensure fair terms of cooperation among free and equal citizens.

The book is a landmark in moral and political philosophy, reviving social contract theory and shaping debates on distributive justice, equality, and liberal democracy. Its influence extends beyond philosophy to economics, law, and public policy. Rawls's work provides a rigorous alternative to utilitarian thinking and offers a compelling vision of a society that respects individual rights while addressing economic inequality. It remains essential reading for anyone interested in questions of fairness, justice, and the foundations of political order.

Key Takeaways

- Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, and laws and institutions must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust, even if they are efficient.
- The original position, with its veil of ignorance, is a fair procedure for choosing principles of justice because it prevents bias from self-interest.
- The two principles of justice are: (1) each person has an equal right to the most extensive basic liberties compatible with similar liberties for all, and (2) social and economic inequalities must be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and attached to offices open to all under fair equality of opportunity.

• The difference principle requires that inequalities work to the advantage of the worst-off members of society, not merely that they make everyone better off than in a hypothetical baseline.

• Rawls rejects utilitarianism because it can justify sacrificing the rights of minorities for the aggregate happiness of the majority.

• A just society is a system of cooperation among free and equal citizens, and the principles of justice are those that such citizens would agree to under fair conditions.

• The basic structure of society—its major institutions—is the primary subject of justice, as it profoundly affects individuals' life prospects from birth.

• Civil disobedience is justified in a nearly just society when there are serious violations of the first principle of justice, and after legal channels have been exhausted.

Chapter Summaries

Part I: Theory - Chapter 1: Justice as Fairness

Rawls introduces the idea of justice as fairness, contrasting it with utilitarianism and intuitionism. He argues that the principles of justice are those that free and rational persons would agree to in an initial position of equality. He sets out the two principles of justice and explains the role of the original position and the veil of ignorance. He also discusses the primary subject of justice, which is the basic structure of society.

Part I: Theory - Chapter 2: The Principles of Justice

Rawls elaborates on the two principles of justice, clarifying their content and priority. The first principle guarantees equal basic liberties, and the second addresses social and economic inequalities. He introduces the difference principle and fair equality of opportunity. He also discusses the lexical priority of liberty over other considerations and the idea that inequalities must benefit the least advantaged.

Part I: Theory - Chapter 3: The Original Position

This chapter explains the original position as a hypothetical contract situation. Rawls describes the veil of ignorance, which hides from parties their personal characteristics, social status, and conception of the good. He argues that rational parties would choose the two principles of justice over alternatives like utilitarianism. He also addresses objections and clarifies the nature of the choice situation.

Part II: Institutions - Chapter 4: Equal Liberty

Rawls applies the principles of justice to the basic structure of society, focusing on the first principle of equal liberty. He discusses the meaning of liberty, the justification of basic liberties, and the priority of liberty. He also examines the implications for political participation, freedom

of speech, and freedom of conscience. He argues that a just constitution must protect these liberties.

Part II: Institutions - Chapter 5: Distributive Shares

This chapter addresses the application of the difference principle to economic institutions. Rawls discusses the role of markets, the just savings principle, and the inheritance of wealth. He argues that the basic structure should be arranged to maximize the prospects of the least advantaged. He also considers the relationship between justice and efficiency, and the idea of a property-owning democracy.

Part II: Institutions - Chapter 6: Duty and Obligation

Rawls examines the principles of natural duty and obligation that apply to individuals. He distinguishes between obligations that arise from voluntary acts and natural duties that apply to all. He discusses the duty to comply with just institutions and the conditions for civil disobedience. He also considers the justification of political obligation in a nearly just society.

Part III: Ends - Chapter 7: Goodness as Rationality

Rawls develops a conception of the good based on rationality, which is needed to complete the theory of justice. He defines the good as the satisfaction of rational desire and introduces the idea of primary goods, which are things every rational person wants. He argues that the principles of justice are necessary to regulate the pursuit of the good in a way that is fair to all.

Part III: Ends - Chapter 8: The Sense of Justice

This chapter explores the psychological basis of justice. Rawls argues that a well-ordered society fosters a sense of justice in its members through moral development. He describes three stages: the morality of authority, the morality of association, and the morality of principles. He contends that a just society is stable because its citizens develop a desire to act justly.

Part III: Ends - Chapter 9: The Good of Justice

Rawls concludes by arguing that justice is a good for individuals and that a just society is a good society. He discusses the congruence of the right and the good, showing that rational persons would affirm their sense of justice. He also addresses the problem of stability and the role of justice in a well-ordered society. He ends with a reflection on the ideal of a just society.

Themes

- Justice as fairness
- Original position
- Veil of ignorance
- Difference principle

- Distributive justice
- Social contract

Notable Quotes

- "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought." — Opening of Chapter 1, where Rawls states the primacy of justice.
- "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." — Chapter 1, emphasizing the priority of individual rights over aggregate welfare.
- "The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance." — Chapter 3, describing the original position.
- "All social values—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone's advantage." — Chapter 2, summarizing the general conception of justice.
- "The difference principle is a strongly egalitarian conception in the sense that unless there is a distribution that makes both persons better off, an equal distribution is to be preferred." — Chapter 2, explaining the difference principle.
- "Injustice, then, is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all." — Chapter 2, defining injustice in relation to the principles.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Theory of justice about?

A Theory of Justice is a philosophical work by John Rawls that proposes a framework for a just society. It argues that the principles of justice are those that free and rational people would agree to in an original position of equality, behind a veil of ignorance. Rawls defends two principles: equal basic liberties and the difference principle, which requires inequalities to benefit the least advantaged. It is a foundational text in political philosophy.

Is Theory of justice worth reading?

Yes, if you are interested in political philosophy, ethics, or social justice. It is a challenging but rewarding read that has shaped modern debates on fairness and equality. Rawls's ideas are widely referenced in law, economics, and public policy. However, the prose is dense and analytical, so it may require patience and background knowledge. It is considered a classic and a must-read for philosophy students.

How does Theory of justice end?

Spoiler: The book ends with a discussion of the good of justice and the stability of a well-ordered society. Rawls argues that a just society is one where citizens develop a sense of justice and affirm the principles of justice as congruent with their own good. He concludes that justice as fairness provides a viable and compelling alternative to utilitarianism, and that a society based on his principles would be stable and desirable.

Who should read Theory of justice?

Students and scholars of philosophy, political science, law, and economics will find it essential. It is also valuable for anyone interested in debates about equality, fairness, and the foundations of democratic institutions. General readers with a strong interest in political theory may enjoy it, but be prepared for a rigorous and abstract argument. It is not a light read but a foundational text.

How long does it take to read Theory of justice?

The book is about 600 pages long, with an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take roughly 15-20 hours to read. Most readers take several weeks to finish it, given its dense philosophical content. It is often read in parts for academic courses. The time varies based on your familiarity with philosophy and your reading pace.