

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 7

What is justice? According to John Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles would be agreed to behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals. If we were unaware of these particular facts about ourselves, we would not propose social rules designed to give ourselves an unfair advantage over other people. Therefore, according to Rawls, the principles we would agree to behind a veil of ignorance would be fair and just.

Was Rawls right?

1.

If an agreement is entered into voluntarily, is it necessarily fair?

2.

Suppose you own a leaky toilet, and a plumber tells you that it will cost \$2000 to repair. You agree to this price, not knowing that the usual price for the same type of repair is \$200. Is the contract between you and the plumber voluntary? Is the contract fair?

3.

Suppose a man comes to your door and asks you to buy a newspaper subscription at a discounted price. You do not particularly enjoy the newspaper he's selling, but you have heard from your neighbors that the man will make a habit of stealing your mail out of spite if you refuse to buy a subscription. Reluctantly, you agree to buy a subscription, at a discounted price. Is the contract

voluntary? Is it fair?

4.

According to Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles we would all agree to govern our society if we were ignorant of our personal qualities and therefore unable to take advantage of one another. Is this the right way to think about principles of justice? Should we abstract from our personal qualities, strengths, and aspirations in choosing principles of justice to govern our society?

5.

Do you agree that no one should be able to propose a rule that benefits white men, just because he's a white man—or to propose a rule that benefits aristocrats, just because he's an aristocrat?

6.

Do you think you should be able to make reference to your religious beliefs, or your life goals, when proposing rules for society? Is it possible to make such an important decision without knowing who you are and what goals and beliefs you have?

7.

“A just person is blind to the differences between people, and treats everyone equally.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

8.

“A just law is blind to the differences between people, and treats everyone equally.” Do you agree? Why or why not?