

Discussion Guide, Beginner

Episode 8

According to the philosopher John Rawls, principles of justice are the outcome of a special kind of hypothetical agreement. They are the principles we would agree to if we were choosing rules for our society 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. Behind this “veil of ignorance,” it is impossible for anyone to propose social rules designed to benefit him more than other people. Therefore, Rawls argues, the principles we would agree to behind the veil of ignorance would be fair and just.

Rawls thinks that two principles would be agreed to behind this “veil of ignorance,” and these are his principles of justice. Let’s see if you agree with them.

1.

Rawls’s first principle says that everyone should have the same set of basic liberties, including the freedom of speech and conscience, the right to hold office and to vote for elected officials, freedom from arbitrary arrest, the right to hold personal property, and so on. Do you agree?

2.

Rawls’s first principle says that everyone should have an equal chance to run for public office. By law, however, U.S. citizens who were born outside of the United States are not eligible to run for president. Is this law inconsistent with Rawls’s first principle? Do you consider this law unjust?

3.

Rawls's first principle says that everyone should have an equal chance to influence legislation and political affairs. However, today wealthy individuals and corporations exercise much more influence on the government and the laws than the average citizen might. Is this unjust?

4.

Before the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, only white people were legally permitted to compete for the best jobs in many places in the United States. African Americans were often denied the same opportunities as whites, even if they were equally talented. Why, according to Rawls' theory of justice, was this unjust?

5.

Often poor children who are very talented have unequal opportunities because their parents lack the money to send them to good schools, to pay for private lessons, and so on. Compared to equally talented children of rich parents, poor kids have fewer opportunities to develop their talents. Why, according to Rawls' theory of justice, is this unjust?

6.

Why, according to Rawls, should talented and hard-working poor children have the same chances of success as rich children? Do you agree with him? Suppose that providing equal educational opportunity for all children would require substantial taxes on the rich. After all, it would cost a lot of money to provide schools of the same quality to everyone. Do you believe that such taxes are required as a matter of justice?

7.

Rawls' second principle says that people who are equally talented and equally motivated should have equal chances of success. This principle would likely require steep inheritance taxes. After all, children who inherit lots of money have a huge advantage in the competition for jobs, money, and success. Do you think that children should be able to inherit great wealth from their parents? Should they be allowed to get very expensive, private math lessons, or singing lessons, or basketball lessons? What if such lessons give them a huge, unearned

advantage in the race for jobs, careers, and wealth? Is it just for poor children to have much lower prospects as a result?

8.

Rawls's second principle also holds that social and economic inequality can be justified only if it works to the advantage of the least advantaged members of society. Not even superior effort makes a person deserving of special rewards. After all, argues Rawls, your ability to make a good effort is partly dependent on how good your childhood was, whether your parents loved you and provided encouragement, or whether you were neglected and abandoned. These are all factors over which you had no control. Therefore, if you are now able to make a good effort, you can't really claim credit for it.

Do you agree? Is it true that you can't really claim credit for your upbringing? Surely, your habits and temperaments today are partly the result of your upbringing. Does this mean that you don't really deserve what you get from making an effort?

1.

Think of some of the advantages that you have in your life. Do you deserve them more than other people who lack them? Why?

2.

Do you think it's unjust if some people do not get to vote merely because they are a woman or a member of a racial or ethnic minority?

3.

Do you think it's unjust if some people get paid less money for the same job merely because they are a woman or a member of a racial or ethnic minority?

4.

If you answered “yes” to the last two questions, do you think it’s also unjust if some people are much worse off than others merely because they were born with fewer talents or with a debilitating disease and the need for expensive medicines? Why should people be worse off merely because of the way they were born?