



## Fairness through Ignorance

JOHN RAWLS

Perhaps you're wealthy. Perhaps you're super-rich. But most of us aren't, and some people are very poor, so poor that they spend most of their short lives hungry and sick. This doesn't seem fair or right – and it surely isn't. If there were true justice in the world no children would starve while others have so much money that they don't know what to do with it. Everyone who is sick would have access to good medical treatment. The poor of Africa wouldn't be so much worse off than the poor in the USA and Britain. The rich of the West wouldn't be so many thousand times as rich as those who through no fault of their own were born into disadvantage. Justice is about treating people fairly. There are people around us whose lives are filled with good things, and others who, through no fault of their own, get few choices about how they survive: they can't choose the job they do, or even the town where they live. Some people who think about these inequalities will just say, 'Oh well, life's

not fair' and shrug their shoulders. These are usually the ones who have been particularly lucky; others will spend time thinking about how society could be better organized and perhaps try to change it to make it fairer.

John Rawls (1921–2002), a modest, quiet Harvard academic, wrote a book that changed the way people thought about these things. That book was *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and the result of nearly twenty years of hard thinking. It's really a professor's book meant for other professors and written in a rather dry academic style. Unlike most books of this kind, though, it didn't sit gathering dust in a library – far from it. It became a bestseller. In some ways it's amazing that so many people read it. But its key ideas were so interesting that it was very quickly declared one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, read by philosophers, lawyers, politicians and many others – something Rawls himself had never dreamt was possible.

Rawls had fought in the Second World War, and was in the Pacific on 6 August 1945 when the atom bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. He was deeply affected by his wartime experiences and believed that it had been wrong to use nuclear weapons. Like many who lived through that period, he wanted to create a better world, a better society. But his way of bringing about change was through thinking and writing, rather than joining political causes and rallies. While he was writing *A Theory of Justice*, the Vietnam war was raging, and across the United States large-scale anti-war protests – not all of them peaceful – were taking place. Rawls chose to write about abstract general questions of justice rather than getting caught up in the issues of the moment. At the heart of his work was the idea that we need to think clearly about how we live together and the ways in which the state influences our lives. For our existence to be bearable we need to co-operate. But how?

Imagine you have to design a new and better society. One question you might ask is, 'Who gets what?' If you live in a beautiful mansion with an indoor swimming pool and servants, and have a private jet waiting to whisk you away to a tropical island, you might well conjure up a world in which some people are very rich – perhaps the ones who work hardest – and others much poorer. If you are living in poverty now, you'll probably design a society in which no one is allowed to be super-rich, one where everyone gets a more equal share of what is available: no private jets allowed, but better chances for people who are unfortunate. Human nature is like that: people tend to think of their own position when they describe a better world, whether they realize it or not. These prejudices and biases distort political thinking.

Rawls' stroke of genius was to come up with a thought experiment – he called it 'The Original Position' – that plays down some of the selfish biases we all have. His central idea is very simple: design a better society, but do it without knowing what position in society you'll occupy. You don't know whether you'll be rich, poor, have a disability, be good looking, male, female, ugly, intelligent or unintelligent, talented or unskilled, homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. He thinks you will choose fairer principles behind this imaginary 'veil of ignorance' because you won't know where you might end up, what kind of a person you might be. From this simple device of choosing without knowing your own place, Rawls developed his theory of justice. This was based on two principles he thought all reasonable people would accept, principles of freedom and equality.

The first principle was his Liberty Principle. This states that everyone should have the right to a range of basic freedoms that mustn't be taken away from them, such as freedom of belief, freedom to vote for their leaders, and extensive freedom of

expression. Even if restricting some of these freedoms improved the lives of a majority of people, Rawls thought, they were so important that the freedoms should be protected above all. Like all liberals, Rawls put a very high value on these basic liberties, believing that everyone had a right to them and that no one should take them away.

Rawls' second principle, the Difference Principle, is all about equality. Society should be arranged to give more equal wealth and opportunity to the most disadvantaged. If people receive different amounts of money, then this inequality is only allowed if it directly helps the worst off. A banker can only get 10,000 times more than the lowest-paid worker if the lowest-paid worker benefits directly and receives an increased amount of money that he or she wouldn't have had if the banker was paid less. If Rawls were in charge, no one would earn huge bonuses unless the poorest got more money as a result. Rawls thinks this is the kind of world reasonable people would choose if they didn't know whether they would be rich or poor themselves.

Before Rawls, philosophers and politicians who thought about who should get what often argued in favour of a situation which would produce the highest *average* amount of wealth. That could mean that some people could be super-rich, many moderately rich and few very poor. But for Rawls, such a situation was worse than one in which there were no super-rich, but everyone had a more equal share, even though the average amount of wealth was lower.

This is a challenging idea – particularly to those who are capable of earning high salaries in the world as it is. Robert Nozick (1938–2002), another important American political philosopher, further to the right politically than Rawls, questioned it. Surely fans who come to watch a brilliant basketball player should be free

to give a small part of their ticket money to that player. It's their right to spend their money in this way. And if millions come to watch him, then the sportsman will – fairly, Nozick thought – earn millions of dollars. Rawls entirely disagreed with this view. Unless the poorest got richer as a result of this deal, Rawls argued, then the basketball player's personal earnings shouldn't be allowed to increase to such high levels. Rawls, controversially, believed that being a gifted athlete or a highly intelligent person did not automatically entitle individuals to higher earnings. That was in part because he believed that such things as sporting ability and intelligence were a matter of good luck. You don't deserve more simply because you are fortunate enough to be a fast runner or a great ball player, or if you are very bright. Being athletically talented or intelligent is the result of winning in the 'natural lottery'. Many people disagree strongly with Rawls and feel that excellence should be rewarded. But Rawls thought that there was no automatic connection between being good at something and deserving more.

But what if from behind the veil of ignorance some people would prefer to take a gamble? What if they thought of life as a lottery and wanted to make sure that there were some very attractive positions to occupy in society? Presumably gamblers might take the risk of ending up poor if they had a chance to be extremely rich. So they'd prefer a world with a wider range of economic possibilities than the one Rawls described. Rawls believed that reasonable people would not want to gamble with their lives in this way. Perhaps he was wrong about this.

For much of the twentieth century philosophers had lost touch with the great thinkers of the past. Rawls' *Theory of Justice* was one of the very few works of political philosophy written in that century that are worth mentioning in the same breath as those by Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume and Kant.

Rawls himself would have been far too modest to agree. His example, though, has inspired a generation of philosophers writing today, including Michael Sandel, Thomas Pogge, Martha Nussbaum and Will Kymlicka: they all believe that philosophy should engage with the deep and difficult questions about how we can and should live together. Unlike some philosophers of the previous generation, they aren't afraid of trying to answer them and to stimulate social change. They believe philosophy should actually change how we live, not just change how we discuss how we live.

Another philosopher who holds this kind of view is Peter Singer. He's the subject of the final chapter of this book. But before looking at his ideas, we are going to explore a question that is becoming more pertinent daily: 'Can Computers Think?'



## Can Computers Think?

ALAN TURING AND JOHN SEARLE

You're sitting in a room. There is a door into the room with a letterbox. Every now and then a piece of card with a squiggle shape drawn on it comes through the door and drops on your doormat. Your task is to look up the squiggle in a book that is on the table in the room. Each squiggle is paired with another symbol in the book. You have to find your squiggle in the book, look at the symbol it is paired with, and then find a bit of card with a symbol that matches it from a pack in the room. You then carefully push that bit of card out through your letterbox. That's it. You do this for a while and wonder what's going on.

This is the Chinese Room thought experiment, the invention of the American philosopher John Searle (born 1932). It's an imaginary situation designed to show that a computer can't really think even if it seems to. In order to see what's going on here you need to understand the Turing Test.