

*Political Liberalism [1993] &
A Theory of Justice [1971]*

IN THE TWO WORKS A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism, John Rawls develops a structure for a liberal government which aims toward justice for its people. A **liberal** government, according to Rawls, is one that principally views its citizens as “**free and equal**, and fully cooperating members of society over a complete life, from one generation to the next.”(*Political Liberalism*, p. 5)

A Question about Freedom

Q: When people act freely, they each act in accordance with what they think it would be good for them to do. In addition to each acting toward their own life goals (happiness, virtue, etc.), each has their own idea about how it would be just for them to act.¹ Not only will people’s ideas about what is good and just differ, but many of them will be contradictory or incompatible. How can it be made consistent with everyone’s freedom for us to choose *just one* form of justice for our government?

A: Despite differences in the particulars, we will be able to find shared higher-order principles² which underly our judgments about justice. These are the views that 1. arbitrary distinctions should not be the basis for determining distribution, and 2. competing claims should be treated with equal weight.

¹ In TOJ, Rawls calls these different opinions about what it is just to do different ‘conceptions’ of justice.

² In TOJ, Rawls calls this a ‘concept’ of justice.

A Question about Equality

Q: The basic structure of any society is that people in it occupy certain positions with regard to one another (head of family, neighbor, employer). These different positions will be in principle unequal. A government which is committed to the equality of its citizens as a component of justice will need to work to rectify these inequalities among its citizens. But how to do this?

A: The way a *government* can work towards the equality of its people is in the way that it distributes the resources of the society to its people. Rawls thinks we can use an intellectual tool called the ‘original position’ in order to help identify a distribution of resources which distributes them equally and also protects the freedom of citizens to choose how their government should act.

The original position is a thought experiment where each citizen imagines themselves as in a relationship to one another *immediately prior* to joining together to form a society. In the original position, no one knows what role they will have in a future society: people do not know what resources or positions they will inherit, nor what roles they might come to occupy.³ When we are in the original position, we cannot be informed by interests based on the future position we might hold in society, since we don’t yet know what those interests are. When we decide how resources will be divided up in the future, we have to make a decision based on uninformed self-interest. Rawls thinks that when reasonable people do this, they will arrive at two principles of distribution:

³ Rawls refers to this lack of knowledge as a kind of ‘veil of ignorance.’ When we are in the original position, the veil of ignorance hides facts about our future in a civil society from us.

1. “equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties,” and
2. **maximization of the minimum position:** “social and economic inequalities...are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone, and in particular for the least advantaged members of society.” (*Theory of Justice*, pp. 14-15)