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From feminist movements to indigenous rights movements, inequality and injustice are at the forefront of contemporary political discourse. John Rawls has kickstarted a comeback in the popularity of political philosophy, the enrichment of
the concept of equity and justice, and a renewed interest in social democracy. This article looks into the way Rawls explores the concept of justice through a famous thought experiment: "the veil of ignorance." On John Rawls Black and white photograph of John Rawls 1987, via Tortoise Media. Once a devout Christian on the path to priesthood, the
horrors of the Second World War plunged John Rawls into liberalism. Rawls was born in the United States and enrolled in Kent School, which prepared students for priesthood. "Meaning of Sin and Faith" was Rawls faced in his time in the
military converted him into an atheist. The bombing of Hiroshima finally pushed Rawls over the edge, leading to his discharge from the military. Rawls would then go on to obtain a Ph.D. in moral philosophy at Princeton, receive a Fulbright Fellowship to Oxford, and teach at Cornell, MIT, and Harvard. In his time at Oxford, Rawls was greatly
influenced by liberal political and legal theorists Isaiah Berlin and H.L.A. Hart. Rawls' liberalism is constituted through his advocacy for social justice, constitutional democracy, and global justice in his books A Theory of Justice, Political Liberalism, and The Law of the Peoples. His works reinstated the necessity of political philosophy (particularly by
adding to the social contract theory) after its supposed death in the 18th century. Today, Rawls is noted as one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century. Today, Rawls is noted as one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century. Today, Rawls is noted as one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century. Today, Rawls is noted as one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the twentieth century.
distributive justice and attempted to illustrate that freedom and equality are not necessarily divorced. He argues for an idea of justice as the result of consensus within a group of persons, who operate as if in a "contract." The group starts from a position of ignorance of social contingencies or, as he calls it, a "veil of ignorance." We can take away
three key ideas from A Theory of Justice: Justice as Fairness, Original Position, and the Veil of Ignorance. His philosophical underpinnings lie in the general tenets of his social contract theory, within which he imagines an original position and the veil of Ignorance. Taken together, these elements construe Rawlsian justice. In the rest of this article, all
of these elements will be covered in more detail. Social Contract Theory Opening page of the book "Two Treatises of Government" by John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau attempted to scrutinize and justify the existence of an organized
government by comparing it to the "state of nature." The state of nature is taken to be a hypothetical pre-social condition, where every person is inherently self-interested and in conflict with one another because of the scarcity of resources. In such a state, these philosophers theorized, people would decide to form a society by entering into a "social condition," where every person is inherently self-interested and in conflict with one another because of the scarcity of resources.
contract." Shifting from the state of nature to a social contract would lead each person to, in a way, give up their rights so a sovereign can transform the initial state of conflict into one of cooperation. This is social contract theory in a nutshell. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all differ in their versions of the theory because of their varying support for
either governmental intervention or individual liberty. Rawls revived the social contract theory, and even political philosophy as a whole, when he used a Kantian version of this theory in A Theory of Justice. Rawls uses Kant to build on the assumption that persons have the moral capacity to judge principles impartially. Such persons are then plunged
into a rather abstract version of the state of nature: the Original Position. Rawls uses this imagined position to derive certain principles of justice, which are conceived behind a "veil of ignorance." After this step, the group of people has to enter into a contract to choose their first principles and set up other institutions accordingly. "The merit of the
contract terminology is that it conveys the idea that principles of justice may be conceived as principles that would be chosen by rational persons, and that in this way conceptions of justice may be explained and justified. (Rawls 16)" Justice as Fairness The Old Bailey, Known Also as the Central Criminal Court by Thomas Rowlandson and Augustus
Pugin, scan from the book "The Microcosm of London" by Rudolph Ackermann, 1808, via Wikimedia Commons. Rawls' version of liberalism is an egalitarian one, based on the use of justice to resolve the conflict between freedom and equality, or—more concretely put—between individual liberty and state intervention. For him, in a liberal political
order, justice provides the best possible arrangement of social institutions. This section is an overview of Rawls' concept of justice. Rawls assumes that society is a closed system, where one enters by birth and leaves at death. Institutions such as the family, the constitution, and the economy, constitute the "basic structure" of society, and for Rawls
individuals cannot easily opt out of it. Since these institutions determine the distribution of resources and income among people, for Rawls, their existence must be justified. Rawls pens two principles that underlie a justly constructed society. First, each person has the same claim to equal basic liberties, and such a claim is compatible with those
liberties being granted to all. Second, social and economic inequalities must come with fair equality of opportunity and must be of the greatest benefit to the least advantaged. The fulfillment of the first principle takes precedence over the second because it positively ensures that all citizens have basic rights and liberties under normal circumstances.
More politically intonated, the first principle provides that all persons be, at a fundamental level, equal, without any consideration for their specific social or cultural circumstances. Three Lawyers by Honoré Daumier, ca. 1855-1857, via The Phillips Collection. The second principle, on the other hand, deals with the exceptions of the first principle, i.e.,
with inequality. Rawls furthers that if there must be inequality, it should still have come as a consequence of equality of opportunities. Additionally, if we must create inequality as such, it should benefit the most disadvantaged. This means that in the
distribution of wealth and income, the rich cannot get richer at the expense of the poor. This is called the difference principle, where every person must act in a way that benefits everyone, and the least advantaged even more so. This places Rawls in stark contrast with utilitarianism, which he considers to be the competing ideology of justice as
fairness. In utilitarianism, the distribution of wealth is just if it benefits more people, disregarding the minority. To Rawls, this is unacceptable. Rawls gives the reader several arguments to establish why his version of justice, the group must, as citizens in the
original position, enter into a "social contract", and decide on the first principles that will govern them. Rawls then adds that these principles would be the foundation for the development of just institutions, because they would have been conceived in the public consensus, without any special consideration for any particular individual feature. The
original position is integral to the conclusion of this ideal contract. Original Position Storming of the Bastille, ca. 1789-1791, via Chateau Versailles. Widely acclaimed as a thought experiment, the Original Position is a precondition for Rawls' justice as fairness. Rawls imagines that his justice would have been conceived in the "state of nature," the
state before any social contracts had been entered into. Such a society would not contain any hierarchy, and consequently, no person would be aware of their social or economic standings. Rawls calls this the "original position" because people would not "originally" have had any awareness about their race, religion, gender, intelligence, skills, moral
positions, etc. It is, however, crucial that these persons have some idea about these features and structures, at least to the extent that they can identify persons who are disadvantaged because of them. So, persons in the original positions in
these systems. Rawls carefully opts out of consider only what is necessary when thinking about justice, and a generally just society. Features such as race, gender, intelligence, etc., are acquired through resources that are
available to each in different ways, creating obvious differences in standing. When no person ascribes to themselves any of these features, they are effectively ridding themselves any of these features, they are effectively ridding themselves are of any biases these features, they are effectively ridding themselves any of these features, they are effectively ridding themselves are of any biases these features.
could be assigned with either the most or the least favored features after they were done choosing their principles of justice. Crucially, this turn of events forces them into accepting a set of principles that would favor the most or the least favored features after they were done choosing their principles of justice. Crucially, this turn of events forces them into accepting a set of principles that would favor the most or the least favored features after they were done choosing their principles of justice.
moral one but a logical one. Ultimately, this position is used to ascertain that all fundamental rights achieved within it are fair, so the justice Punishing Injustice by Jean-Marc Nattier, 1737, via Sotheby's. This blissful state of Rawlsian
unawareness in the original position is called the "veil of ignorance." Without the elimination of specific contingencies which result in the exploitation of social and natural circumstances, it is impossible to create the original position. Thus, the "veil of ignorance" is used. This veil allows knowledge of general facts of life and primary goods such as
basic rights and liberties, freedom of movement, free choice, income and wealth, socially achievable self-respect, validation by social institutions, and the confidence to carry out plans (Fleming 58-59). This veil also blocks out the following matters: Particular Facts: Contracting parties do not know particular facts about their social existence. They
don't know what their "place" (class and social status) is, not what their "reserve" of natural assets, abilities, intelligence, and psychological features, such as the aversion to risk and their liability to optimism and pessimism.
Social Structure: Finally, they don't know which political or economic situation, level of civilization they are in, their cultural achievements, or the generation to which they belong. Justice statue bas-relief on Palace of Justice, Tehran, Iran, c.a. 1940, via Wikimedia Commons Ignorance of these conditions would create uncertainty about the distribution
of benefits and burdens that may result from their decisions. These contracting parties would by no rational means, create laws that would disadvantage anyone. The final picture we arrived to is the following: to create the fairest justice,
persons would have to be in the original position, behind the veil of ignorance. The veil would take away from them any social consciousness that would have to enter into a contract to exist in mutual cooperation, unaware of where they would stand
socially after concluding the contract. They would then have no choice but to choose principles that would be nefit everyone, and even more so the least advantaged. Given the lack of differences, the contract would be sustainable. Justice as fairness would then have been achieved, affording everyone basic liberties at the very least. The guiding
principle for treating any contingencies or inequalities would be to ensure that they only exist to benefit the least advantaged. Taking Rawls' Theory Into Practice Illustration of Justice to be a rather difficult work to read. Before
publishing it as a book, Rawls circulated its manuscripts several times to engage with criticisms and suggestions from peers and made revisions where he thought they were due. Because of this, the book features unprompted defenses of his own ideas, and even potential refutations. Followers and readers of Rawls, however, are understandably
forgiving of these difficulties, given Rawls' devotion to his own ideas and more generally, to justice. Rawls has since been used to construe the modern notion of equity, the most notable of which is the equal protection clause in the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution. Rawls largely moved the global political community at large to think about
methods of gradually dismantling socially and historically discriminatory structures. Research conducted on the sex-based selection of orchestra musicians in the US found a 50% increase in the probability of women musicians being selected when auditions were done behind blinds, actual "veils" (Goldin and Rouse 740). Subsidized health and
educational opportunities, quota systems, and social security schemes are all methods of ensuring equality, i.e., the second principle of justice as fairness. Canadian and American courts have often cited Rawls to guide their jurisprudence on freedom and equality, building systems which do not facilitate radical social change (to avoid
conflict), but gradual social change. Roundel with an allegory of Justice by Raphael, ca. 1508-1524, photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen, 2013, via Wikimedia Commons. John Rawls' philosophy has directly informed the tenets of social democracy. And so, Rawls, despite his apprehension about public appearances and interactions, became an esteemed
figure in American politics. Former US President Bill Clinton even rewarded Rawls with the National Humanities Medal in 1999 for reviving "the disciplines of political and ethical philosophy" by arguing that "a society in which the most fortunate is not only a moral society but a logical one." Rawls propounded two key ideas in
particular: that justice is fairness, and the means of getting to justice as fairness (the original position and the veil of ignorance). Although Rawls' ideas are not directly applicable, his aspirations for a just society inspire political and social change, but
majoritarian democratic structures cannot allow radicalism. Here Rawls becomes a guide to policy solutions, effectuating change by imagining a society that doesn't condition treatment and opportunity based on social circumstances and reverse engineering our way to it. Rawls' contribution to political theory, particularly to the American idea of
social democracy, is therefore conspicuous. With more nations becoming liberal democracies, Rawls is increasingly becoming a household name in global politics. The veil of ignorance is now an effective tool of legislative reform because it was the first idea that introduced "restraints" on social circumstances to create a more just society. Citations
Fleming, James E. "Rawls and the Law." Fordham Law Review, no. 72, 2004. Goldin, Claudia, and Cecilia Rouse. "Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians." Journal of Economic Literature, vol. 7, no. 16, pp. 715-740. Kymlicka, Will. Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction. Clarendon Press, 1991.
Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. Edited from the Book of Life, Political Theory: John Rawls Many of us feel that our societies are a little - or even plain totally - 'unfair'. But we have a hard time explaining our sense of injustice to the powers that be in a way that sounds rational and without
personal pique or bitterness. That's why we need John Rawls (1921-2002), a twentieth-century American philosopher who provides us with a failproof model for identifying what truly might be unfair - and how we might gather support for fixing things. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, USA in 1921, Rawls—nicknamed Jack—was exposed, and responded
to the injustices of the modern world from a very young age. As a child, he witnessed at first hand shockingly deprived areas of Maine, where many of his fellow Americans were evidently being denied the opportunities and support his loving attorney father and social activist mother were able to give him. He also saw the horrors and lawlessness of
the Second World War in the final stages of the European campaign. All this inspired him to go into academia with a far from arcane mission: he wanted to use the publication of A Theory of Justice in 1971 that properly made Rawls's name - and is why we continue to revere him
now. Having read and widely discussed his book, Bill Clinton was to label Rawls 'the greatest political philosopher of the twentieth century' - and had him over to the White House for dinner on a regular basis. What did Rawls say? The statistics all point to the radical unfairness of society. Comparative charts of life expectancy and income projections
direct us to a single overwhelming moral. And yet day-to-day, it can be hard to take this unfairness seriously, especially in relation to our own lives. That's because so many voices are on hand telling us that, if we work hard and have ambition, we can make it. Rawls was deeply aware of how the American Dream seeped through the political system
and into individual hearts - and he knew its corrosive, regressive influence. Sure enough, there seem to be lots of people who bear out the morality tale to perfection; presidents who came from nothing, entrepreneurs who were once penniless orphans... The media parades them before us with glee. How then can we complain about our lot when they
were able to get to the pinnacle? Rawls never accepted this. Certainly he was aware of the extraordinary success stories, but he was also a statistician who knew that the rags-to-riches tales were overall so negligible as not to warrant serious attention by political theorists. Indeed, to keep mentioning them was merely a clever political sleight of hand
designed to prevent the powerful from undertaking the necessary task of reforming society. As Rawls forcibly reminds us, in the modern United States and many parts of Europe too, if you are born poor, the chances of you remaining poor (and dying young) are simply overwhelming and incontestable. But what can we do about this? Rawls was
politically canny. He understood that debates about unfairness and what to do about it often get bogged down in arcane details and petty squabbling which mean that year after year, nothing quite gets done. What Rawls was therefore after was a simple, economical and polemical way to show people how their societies were unfair and what they
might do about it - in ways that could cut through the debate and touch people's hearts as well as minds (for he knew that emotion mattered a lot in politics). A lot of the reason why societies don't become fairer is that those who benefit from current injustice are spared the need to think too hard about what it would have been like to be born in
different circumstances. They resist change from a failure of the imagination. Rawls intuitively understood that he had to get these people on board first - and somehow manage to appeal to their imaginations and their imaginations. So he devised one of the greatest thought experiments in the history of
political thought, easily the equal of anything in the work of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant. This experiment is called 'the veil of ignorance' and through it Rawls asks us to imagine ourselves in a conscious, intelligent state before our own birth, but without any knowledge of what circumstances we were going to be born
into; our futures shrouded by a veil of ignorance. Standing high above the planet, we wouldn't know what sort of parents we'd have, what our neighbourhoods would be like, how the schools would perform, what the local hospital could do for us, how the police and judicial systems might treat us and so on... The question that Rawls asks us all to
contemplate is: if we knew nothing about where we'd end up, what sort of a society would it feel safe to enter? In what kind of political system would it be rational and sane for us to take root - and accept the challenge laid down by the veil of ignorance? Well, for one thing, certainly not the United States. Of course, the US has a great many
socioeconomic positions it would be truly delightful to be born into. Vast swathes of the country enjoy good schools, safe neighbourhoods, great access to colleges, fast tracks into prestigious jobs and some highly elegant country clubs... To be generous, at least 30 per cent of this vast and beautiful nation has privilege and opportunity. No wonder the
system doesn't change: there are simply too many people, millions of people, who benefit from it. But that's where the 'veil of ignorance' comes in handy: it stops us thinking about all those who have done well and draws our attention to the appalling risks involved in entering US society as if it were a lottery, behind the veil of ignorance - without
knowing if you'd wind up the child of an orthodontist in Scottsdale, Arizona or as the offspring of a black single mother in the rougher bits of eastern Detroit. Would any sane birth-lottery player really want to take the gamble of ending up in the 70 per cent of people who have substandard healthcare, inadequate housing, poor access to a good legal
in place: they'll want the schools to be very good (even the public ones), the hospitals to function brilliantly (all of them, even the free ones), they'll want the standard access to the law to be unimpeachable and fair and they'll want to be
born randomly into would be a version of Switzerland or Denmark - that is to say, a country where things are pretty good wherever you end up, where the local transport system, schools, hospitals and political systems are decent and fair whether you're at the top or bottom. In other words, you know what sort of a society you want to live in. You just
parents might have and what sort of neighbourhoods we might be born into. The fact that we simply couldn't sanely take on such a challenge now is a measure of how deeply unfair things remain - and therefore how much we still have left to achieve. Thanks for reading, Notes: Ben Davies Ben Davies is a Research Fellow at the Uehiro Centre for
the 20th century. The Veil of Ignorance is a way of working out the basic institutions and structures of a just society from the ground up, in a way that everyone who is reasonable can accept. We therefore need to imagine ourselves in a
situation before any particular society exists; Rawls calls this situation the Original Position. To be clear, Rawls does not think we can actually return to this original position, or even that it ever existed. It is a purely hypothetical idea: our job in thinking about justice is to imagine that we are designing a society from scratch. The idea is that social
justice will be whatever reasonable people would agree to in such a situation. We can then start thinking about how to make our actual society in the Original Position, people might try to ensure that it works in their favour. The process is thus vulnerable to
 biases, disagreements, and the potential for majority groups ganging up on minority groups. Rawls's solution to this problem comes in two parts. Firstly, he makes some assumptions about the people designing their own society. People in the Original Position are assumed to be free and equal, and to have certain motivations: they want to do well for
themselves, but they are prepared to adhere to reasonable terms of cooperation, so long as others do too. Rawls also simplifies his discussion by imagining that people in the Original Position do not have total freedom to design society as they see fit. Rather, they must choose from a menu of views taken from traditional Western philosophy on what
 ignoring these facts, Rawls hoped that we would be able to avoid the biases that might otherwise come into a group decision. For instance, if I were helping to design a society, I might be tempted to try to make sure that society is set up to benefit philosophers, or men, or people who love science fiction novels. But if I don't know any of those facts
about myself, I can't be tempted. The Veil is meant to ensure that people's concern for their personal benefit could translate into a set of arrangements that were fair for everyone, assuming that they had to stick to those choices once the Veil of Ignorance 'lifts', and they are given full information again. One set of facts hidden from you behind the Veil
any benefits or harms that come from them. By removing knowledge of the natural inequalities that give people unfair advantages, it becomes irrational to choose principles that discriminate against any particular group. The Veil also hides facts about society. You do not know anything other than general facts about human life, and in particular you
do not how their society is organised. Finally, the Veil hides facts about your "view of the good": your values, preferences about how your own life should be neutral between different views about value. So, Rawls
isn't afraid to make several significant assumptions about the people involved in making decisions behind the Veil. Some of his assumptions aim to turn the conflicts that arise between self-interested people into a fair decision procedure. As we'll see, however, others might be more fairly criticised as unreasonably narrowing the possible outcomes that
people can reach behind the Veil. I will outline Rawls's justification for the Veil of Ignorance, raise some potential challenges for the conclusions he thinks people will reach from behind it, and lastly consider three criticisms of the Veil of Ignorance as a theoretical device. While these criticisms differ in their substance, they are united by a common
feature: their scepticism of the way the Veil abstracts from real life in order to reach conclusions about justice. I'll conclude that these criticisms have merit; the Veil of Ignorance, considered by itself, does lead us to ignore the real world too much. However, I'll suggest that, at least in their strongest versions, these criticisms miss an important
benefit of the Veil: quite simply, the fact that our own personal concerns and values can bias our thinking about justice, and that we can make important progress by considering things from different points of view. The principles of justice Imagine that you find yourself behind the Veil of Ignorance. You might want to make sure that your life will go
well. If you had to design a good life for yourself, you'd go for the specific things you care about. But behind the Veil you don't know those specifics; you only know things like money and other resources; basic rights and freedoms; and finally, the "social
bases of self-respect": the things you need to feel like an equal member of society. In Rawls's view, a central challenge behind the Veil is the lack of probabilities available. If you knew that your society was 90% Catholic, you could set things up so that the rewards associated with being Catholic were much higher. That would be personally rational,
since you are very likely to end up in the better off group. The Veil prevents this type of reasoning because it hides the information. In the complete absence of probabilities, Rawls thinks you should play it safe and maximise the minimum you could get (a policy he calls Maximin). Translated into a society, that means that we should ensure that the
worst-off people in society do as well as possible. Rawls suggests two principles will emerge from discussion behind the Veil: First Principle: Each person has the same indefeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, compatible with the same liberties for all; Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities must be: Attached to
offices and positions open to all under fair equality of opportunity; To the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle). Rawls opts for equality of basic liberties in the First Principle because he thinks this is essential for seeing yourself as a moral equal in society. For other Primary Goods, though, equality is
less important. By allowing some inequality, we could make life better for everyone. If we attach higher salaries to certain jobs, they may attract the hardest working people, producing greater economic benefits for everyone. The two parts of Rawls's second principle of justice set limits on when inequalities are allowed. Fair equality of opportunity
says that positions which bring unequal payoffs must be open to people of equal talents and equal willingness to use them on an equal basis. If two people are just as capable of doing a job, and just as hardworking and willingness to use them on an equal basis. If two people are just as capable of equal talents and equal willingness to use them on an equal basis.
their race or religion. Of course, we might wonder (and Rawls does not give a clear answer about this) when we are supposed to judge whether two people are equally hardworking and talented. The talents you choose to develop, and the amount of effort you put in, are heavily affected by education; so it might seem unfair to judge people if they have
had very different educational experiences. Rawls's argument therefore seems to support ensuring broad equality of education, encouraging people to find and develop their talents to the fullest, even if this isn't a conclusion he explicitly draws. Finally, the Difference Principle sets a further restriction on inequalities. Even if a particular inequality
does not affect equality of opportunities, the Difference Principle tells us that it must be beneficial for the very worst off. For instance, it might be that by allowing inequalities, we motivate people to work harder, generating more Primary Goods overall. If these then benefit the worst off in society, making them better off than they would have been in
explicitly makes several assumptions that shape the nature of the discussion behind the Veil of Ignorance, and the outcomes that are likely to come out of it. However, one might challenge Rawls by disputing the fairness or intuitiveness of one or more of his assumptions. Probably the most famous example of this comes from Robert Nozick. Recall that
Rawls's principles establish rules to govern the institutions and principles that distribute goods. He thinks that if we work out what those institutions would look like in a perfectly just society, using the Veil of Ignorance, we can then start to move our current society in that direction. Nozick notes that in reality, most goods are already owned. Rawls's
both cases, we cannot simply redistribute these goods to fit our pattern, because people have rights. In Nozick's view, once you have ownership rights, you can do pretty much what you want with it, so long as you do not violate anyone else's rights. The fact that taking money you earned would benefit someone else cannot be the basis for government
forcibly taking your money. One possible basis for this is the idea of 'self-ownership'. Nozick thinks we will all agree that it would be wrong to force you to work if you didn't want to. The reason for this is that your body: your labour. If you make
something, or work for money, that thing is yours and nobody else's. Just as the state has no right to force you to do things with your other property, like giving it away to the less fortunate. That might be a nice thing to do, but it isn't something others can force you
to do. One problem with this argument, to which Rawls might appeal, is that my ability to work (and therefore gain property) depends on many other things: my education, my health that was guaranteed by a public health system, a stable society that affords me opportunities for employment, or for employing others. So it's not quite true that
              produce comes from me alone. Identity and 'Neutrality' A second criticism also concerns the fact that, behind the Veil, various facts are hidden from you. Rather than worrying about the substantive conclusions Rawls reaches, as Nozick does, this criticism worries about the very coherence of reasoned discussion behind the Veil of
Ignorance. Rawls's Veil of Ignorance is an example of a theory of justice that has universal aspirations. Since one of the facts that is hidden by the veil is the nature of the society you live in, we may assume that the resulting principles are supposed to be applicable in all societies, though this is a view that Rawls attempted to reject in later work. In
addition, people behind the Veil are supposed to come up with a view of how society should be structured while knowing almost nothing about themselves, and their lives. One broad group who criticise these ideas are the so-called 'communitarian' philosophers, which includes Charles Taylor,, Michael Walzer, and Alasdair MacIntyre. While their
views differ, they tend to agree that what justice requires cannot be decided abstractly, but must instead be informed by local considerations and culture. Communitarians also suggest that Rawls's conception of the individuals behind the Veil of Ignorance is problematic because they have so few defining features. Even if Rawls is right that people
behind the Veil would agree on his two principles, communitarians think that the hypothetical agreement ignores much that is important. Individuals behind the Veil are assumed to be largely self-interested, and to have a strong interest in retaining the ability to abandon their current social roles and pursuits and take up new ones. According to the
communitarians, however, we are born with existing social connections to particular people, cultures and social roles. Whereas Rawls emphasises our active engagement in shaping our own lives, communitarians want to remind us that our lives are unavoidably shaped by existing attachments that we do not choose. For instance, if you are born into
 Rawls does not think that real people are like this. His interest is in trying to formulate a neutral way to decide between competing groups. Certainly, it is a plausible worry that what justice requires may depend in part on the values of the society in question. As a liberal, Rawls is particularly worried about protecting individuals whose preferred lives
go against the grain of the society in which they find themselves. Communitarians will object that the Veil of Ignorance goes beyond this protection, and rules out the possibility of different ideas of justice, informed by local values. Perhaps we should acknowledge that people behind the Veil of Ignorance would recognise the possibility that their
society will turn out to be strongly attached to a particular set of values. A rational person behind the Veil might want to try to find a way to give a special place to such values, while protecting dissenters. Ideal justice? Our final challenge also concerns the real-world applicability of Rawls's principles. In brief, the claim from scholars of race and of the claim from scholars of the claim from s
gender is that Rawls's abstract Veil of Ignorance ends up ignoring much that is relevant to justice. The central criticism we consider here concerns the motivation of Rawls's overall project. Rawls's aim is to outline a theory of 'ideal' justice, or what a perfectly just society would look like. This ignores, purposefully, the many injustices that have
 happened and continue to happen, including the fact that most societies continue to exhibit racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. As critics argue, we then get at best an incomplete theory, which does not tell us how to fix existing injustice or, as it is sometimes called, 'non-ideal' justice (an issue that Rawls himself describes as a "pressing injustice").
Ignorance seems to give us no way to determine this important question. This maps onto a more general question in political philosophy: if a theory of justice does not tell us how to act in our actual societies, does it have any value? While some argue that Rawls's work can be used to draw concrete conclusions about issues such as racial profiling and
affirmative action, critics who reject this view may also argue that a theory of justice that is concerned only with the ideal ignores the most pressing issues of the day. In Rawls's case, we may wonder whether more radical changes (or even abandonment of
conclusion on this issue, though, should recognise the following insight from Rawls: that what seems just or fair or right to any person is influenced not just by our background but by our backgroun
 While the criticisms from communitarians, scholars of race, and feminist scholars demonstrate the importance of considering the concrete features of our societies and lives, this conclusion is consistent with recognising two mistakes in making use of the Veil of
Ignorance. Firstly, recognising the importance of abstraction should not come at the cost of considering the real, concrete impact of policies we adopt, or of the social and historical context they are part of. Much political philosophy, at least in the USA and UK, can be criticised for neglecting these latter issues. Secondly, acknowledging the
importance of the Veil of Ignorance does not mean that Rawls, and later philosophers, are right to have established an order of priority, where we first abstractly establish a view of ideal justice, and only then move on to non-ideal justice. It may be more productive to consider issues of justice from both the kind of abstracted view represented by the
Veil of Ignorance, and from the more concrete view advocated by its critics. The Difference Principle only allows inequalities if they benefit the worst off in society. Is this practical? Is it what people would agree to behind the Veil, we are not individuals.
and so any decision we reach is meaningless.' Do you agree? Why/why not? Since our talents and inclinations depend on what happens to us even before we are born, can we make sense of the idea of 'fair equality of opportunity'? Citation and Use This reading was taken from the following work. Davies, Ben. "John Rawls and the 'Veil
of Ignorance.'" In Introduction to Ethics: An Open Educational Resource, 92-97. Golden West College, Huntington Beach, CA: NGE Far Press, 2019. This work released under a CC-BY license. John Rawls What if we could get together to form a new kind of society ... and we did not even know who we would be in that society? This is a famous thought
experiment, proposed by the Harvard philosopher John Rawls in his 1971 book, Theory of Justice. Rawls was trying to justify democracy as fair as opposed to merely utilitarian (ie, "the greatest good of the greatest number"). How would we go about deciding what is fair? By imagining a situation that has never existed, and indeed can never exist.
Rawls called that situation the "original position": No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. I shall even assume that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological
propensities. The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. You have probably already grasped the power of the experiment. Normally, we think of justice with ourselves in mind. A single black mom in a public-housing project will have a very different view than a start-up entrepreneur in Silicon Valley or a trustafarian in prep school
or a prisoner or .... you get the point. But if we don't know whether we will be tall or short, male or female, smart or dumb, lazy or ambitious and all the rest of it, we have to test every principle against the possibility that we might be tall or short, male or female, smart or dumb, lazy or ambitious and all the rest of it, we have to test every principle against the possibility that we might be tall or short, male or female, smart or dumb, lazy or ambitious and all the rest of it. A simple example: Slavery in 19th-century America. Slave
owners considered America free and fair and were prepared to go to war for that "freedom". That's because the slave owners assumed that they were, well, slave owners assumed that they were prepared to go to war for that "freedom". That's because the slave owners. Using purely utilitarian reasoning, they might have concluded that slavery produced the maximum pleasure of the greatest number of people (ie, the white majority) and was
therefore right. But if they had played Rawls' thought experiment, they would have had to imagine that they might instead be slaves. Suddenly, slavery no longer looks so good. Getting liberté, egalité, fraternité onto one flag Now, some of you might remember that, back in April, I tried to figure out whether freedom and equality could ever coexist, as
the naked-boobed Marianne (pictured) was clearly hoping. In that post, I was thinking about biology. But perhaps the answer lies in Rawls' thought experiment. As we imagine a society without knowing what role we have in it, we will certainly agree that it should be free, and that we should not sacrifice that freedom by forcing everybody to be equal
But that leaves us having to imagine inequality, and, thanks to our veil of ignorance, we might be the ones ending up with the least (wealth, opportunity, beauty, power...). So how can we agree to inequality that is fair? The answer is First, that inequality must benefit even the least advantaged member of society (though obviously not in the same
proportion). So we do not mind that the Sergey and Larry at Google get astronomically rich because even a single black mom in a public-housing project can now google where to get her baby a flu shot. Second, that the cushy positions in society must be open to all. Intelligence and talent, for those playing the thought experiment rigorously, would
equation. Marianne would love him. For the power of this experiment, I'm hereby including Rawls in my pantheon of great thinkers. What does a just society look like? How can we best organize ourselves to ensure no one is treated unfairly? How should we distribute power, wealth, and freedom? These are difficult, complicated questions — and our
 answers to them are invariably shaped by our own life experiences, beliefs, and values. Indeed, when we discuss what's best for society, we are guided by our own conceptions of what 'goodness' means. Is there a way, then, to see beyond our
best way to define a just society is to introduce a so-called 'veil of ignorance'. Rawls asks us to imagine the laws we'd all agree upon if we had no idea who we'd be or where we'd end up in society: we could be born into any family, in any situation, raised by the ideals of any belief system. Starting from this 'original position' of ignorance about our
personal characteristics and social circumstances, Rawls thinks most people would see it as rational and reasonable to agree to a certain level of universal welfare, education, opportunity, and the protection of basic rights and liberties. After all, you could end up being anyone — rich or poor, healthy or sick. You're thus unlikely to propose a model
where some people receive huge inheritances, and others are born into abject poverty; where some are subject to discrimination due to their race, creed, sexuality, or gender; where those with certain health conditions don't get the support they need. One short philosophical email each Sunday. Unsubscribe any time. In fact, Rawls thinks people
operating under the veil of ignorance — if we assume they are motivated by rational self-interest — would eventually agree and build on two general principles of justice: Assigning Equality: everyone is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property, and so on. Handling Inequality: everyone is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property, and so on. Handling Inequality: if the property is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property, and so on. Handling Inequality: if the property is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association, a right to hold property is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, association is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought, speech, expression, as a finite freedom of thought, speech, expression is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought is guaranteed basic liberties including freedom of thought is guaranteed by a finite freedom of the property is guaranteed by a finite freedom of thought is guaranteed by a fin
 everyone receives fair access to education, the opportunity to fully develop their capacities, and the chance to genuinely compete for positions of office, responsibility, trade, etc., then inequalities in wealth and power are permissible so long as they benefit the least advantaged members of society. For example, if someone shows particular talent for
leadership, then they can enjoy the social and economic rewards that come with it, as long as this arrangement is structured in such a way that it is of maximal benefit to those lower in the hierarchy (i.e. it does not become harmful or exploitative, but improves the conditions of all, making everyone better off than they would be in any alternative
system). Of course, Rawls is not suggesting we literally implement a veil of ignorance and start society should be governed. In his
1971 work A Theory of Justice, Rawls uses it as the starting point, the original position, from which he builds his case that society that if you knew everything about it, you'd be willing to enter it in a random place. What do you make of this analysis? Do you agree with
Rawls' conception of justice here? Is the 'veil of ignorance' a useful thought experiment, or is it useless to pontificate about a situation so removed from our own? What kind of system would you propose if you had no idea where you'd end up in society? Learn more about political philosophy If you're interested in learning more about the principles
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John Rawls, whose groundbreaking work on justice and fairness has significantly shaped the way we think about ethics, society, and morality. One of his most influential perspective. In this article, we will delve into what the Veil of
Ignorance is, its importance in Rawls' theory of justice, and how it proposes a fair framework for designing just societies. We will explore its implications for political theory, social justice, and how we can apply this concept to real-world scenarios. What is the Veil of Ignorance is a thought experiment introduced by Iohn Rawls in
his seminal work A Theory of Justice (1971). It is designed to help people think about justice and fairness by stripping away personal biases and social inequalities. The central idea behind this concept is that in order to design a fair society, we should imagine ourselves ignorant of our own social status, abilities, or characteristics. In simpler terms, the
Veil of Ignorance asks us to imagine that we do not know where we would be like if we were unbiased and fair to all
members, regardless of their position in life. The Veil of Ignorance is a tool for thinking impartially about justice. By removing personal interests and policies that ensure fairness and equality for all people, regardless of their individual circumstances. The Original Position: A Key Concept in Rawls'
TheoryThe Veil of Ignorance is closely tied to another key concept in John Rawls' theory — the Original Position. This is a hypothetical scenario in which individuals, free from any knowledge of their personal attributes, come together to form the basic principles of justice that should govern society. In the Original Position, participants are placed
behind the Veil of Ignorance. They do not know whether they are rich or poor, male or female, healthy or disabled, or part of a majority or minority group. The goal is for these individuals to create principles of justice that would be fair and just for everyone, since they are unaware of their own personal circumstances. Related: Existentialism:
Definition and History of This Current of ThoughtRawls argues that the principles of justice that emerge from this original position would be grounded in fairness, as no one would design a system. How the Veil of Ignorance Works in PracticeTo better
understand how the Veil of Ignorance works, imagine you are tasked with designing the laws and social structures of a new society. You are asked to determine how wealth should be distributed, what rights people should have, and how opportunities should be allocated. However, before you start making these decisions, you must imagine yourself
behind the Veil of Ignorance. This means that: You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability or suffering from a disability. You don't know whether you are bearthy or suffering from a disability or suffer
blinders in place, you must think about what laws and social structures would be just for all individuals, knowing that you could end up in any possible situation. This thought experiment forces you to design a society that is fair for everyone, because you cannot favor your own interests if you don't know where you will end up. This is Rawls' way of
ensuring equality and fairness in social and political structures. The veil of ignorance and Rawls's "veil of ignorance" is and what it consists of. It was strictly necessary to briefly summarize his theory of justice (and, above all, his concept of "original position") in
order to properly understand it. Authors such as Kant and Hume had already proposed this concept as a condition sine qua non to establish the social contract. If the members of society are not somewhat ignorant of their future conditions, they will inevitably fall into self-interest when making agreements. Ignorance prior to the contract is therefore
necessary, so that it is as impartial as possible and is oriented towards the common good. The level of ignorance varies according to the authors. Kant advocated that the information given to the agreement be fair and necessary, and Rawls follows this path in his theory. According to the American philosopher, the "tighter" the veil, the
greater impartiality the decisions made by the parties are unaware of their place in society, as well as other issues that Rawls describes as their fate and distribution of natural talents, their decisions will not be based on personal interests, which is precisely what has led human beings to live in a utilitarian
society, where the only thing that prevails is individual benefit. In this way, Rawls's theory of justice contrasts with the so-called "principle of utility", where personal interests actually prevail. It is not that the philosopher completely renounces individual benefit, but that he proposes a new balance between the liberal tradition of the West (founded on
individualism) and the community tradition. Only in this way, according to him, can a truly just and fair society be built. Related: Population of the Continents: the 5 Stages of Human DispersionThe Principles of Justice According to RawlsJohn Rawls outlines two key principles of justice that he believes would emerge from the Original Position when
behind the Veil of Ignorance: 1. The Equal Liberty Principle is the Equal Liberty Principle, which states that everyone should be denied these
basic liberties based on their personal or social status. Why it matters: The Equal Liberty Principle is crucial because it ensures that everyone in society is treated equally under the law. It provides a foundation for political and civil rights, which are essential for a functioning democracy. 2. The Difference Principle is the Difference and civil rights, which are essential for a functioning democracy. 2.
Principle, which addresses social and economic inequalities. According to this principle, inequalities in society are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. In other words, any unequal distribution of wealth or resources must work to improve the situation of those who are worst off. For example, this principle would
allow for policies that promote economic growth or incentivize innovation, as long as the benefits are shared in a way that helps those who are at the bottom of the economic ladder. Why it matters: The Difference Principle seeks to address inequality in a way that ensures everyone's needs are met, particularly those who are most vulnerable. It
challenges the idea of unrestricted wealth accumulation and aims to create a society where social and economic advantages benefit everyone, particularly the disadvantaged. The Veil of Ignorance in Modern Society where social and economic advantages benefit everyone, particularly the disadvantages benefit everyone, particularly the disadvantaged. The Veil of Ignorance in Modern Society where social and economic advantages benefit everyone, particularly the disadvantaged. The Veil of Ignorance in Modern Society where social and economic advantages benefit everyone, particularly the disadvantaged.
and fairness in the real world. Rawls' ideas have been influential in shaping modern political thought and in guiding the development of more just societies. Social Policy and Economic SystemsIn practice, the Veil of Ignorance encourages policies that are designed to reduce inequality and promote fairness. It supports ideas such as: Universal
healthcare, where everyone has access to medical treatment regardless of their income or social status. Progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation, where wealthier individuals contribute a higher percentage of their income to support social progressive taxation.
to high-quality education. By considering what policies we would want if we didn't know our social standing, the Veil of Ignorance also has implications for global justice. Rawls argues that nations should adopt fair principles of
cooperation that promote the well-being of all, including the poorest and most disadvantaged countries. This would involve creating international systems of trade, aid, and diplomacy that ensure fairness and support for those who are in the greatest need. Criticisms and Limitations While Rawls' concept of the Veil of Ignorance has been highly
influential, it has also faced several criticisms. Related: Animals Put on Trial: Why Was This Done in the Past?1. Overemphasis on Equality Some critics argue that Rawls' focus on equality and fairness may overlook other important values, such as freedom of choice and individual responsibility. By emphasizing the role of social structures, Rawls may
diminish the role of personal agency in shaping one's life.2. Practicality in Complex Societies. Critics argue that human nature is not as impartial as Rawls suggests, and that true objectivity is difficult to achieve.3. Cultural RelativismSome
argue that Rawls' principles, based on Western ideals of justice, may not apply universally across different cultures. The Veil of Ignorance could be seen as imposing a particular worldview on people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The Veil of Ignorance could be seen as imposing a particular worldview on people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The Veil of Ignorance could be seen as imposing a particular worldview on people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The Veil of Ignorance could be seen as imposing a particular worldview on people from diverse cultural backgrounds.
imagining a society where we are unaware of our own personal circumstances, we are forced to consider what systems would be fair for everyone, especially the most vulnerable. Rawls' thought experiment helps us design policies and institutions that promote equality, freedom, and fairness, ultimately creating a more just and ethical society. While
the concept may have its limitations and criticisms, the Veil of Ignorance remains a profound and valuable tool for engaging with difficult questions about how we can ensure justice for all.FAOs about The Veil of Ignorance by John RawlsHow does the Veil of Ignorance promote fairness? The Veil of Ignorance promote fairness? The Veil of Ignorance promote fairness?
encourages us to think about what is fair for everyone, regardless of their position in society. By imagining that we don't know where we would end up, we are more likely to design systems that benefit everyone equally, especially those who are most disadvantaged. Can the Veil of Ignorance be applied in real life? While the Veil of Ignorance is a
thought experiment, its principles can still influence real-world policies. By considering what would be fair for everyone, we can push for changes in education, healthcare, and economic systems that reduce inequality and promote fairness. What are the two main principles of justice outlined
by Rawls are the Equal Liberty Principle, which ensures equal rights and freedoms for all, and the Difference Principle, which allows for inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. Why is the Veil of Ignorance important in political philosophy? The Veil of Ignorance is important because it provides a way to think about
justice impartially, helping us design a fair society that works for everyone, regardless of their social status, abilities, or personal circumstances. It removes biases and promotes equality and fairness in social systems.
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