

What does Rawls mean by the 'Original Position'? Is his account of the knowledge and ignorance features of the Original Position justified?

John Rawls was a political philosopher best known for his work; '*A Theory of Justice*' in which he revived the concept of social contract via his notion of an 'Original Position' - and through which, he defended the belief of "justice as a fairness". Conceived under a hypothetical scenario of "perfect" equality; 'Rawls imagines a group of individuals who have been made ignorant of the social, economic, and historical circumstances from which they came' - and are thus, placed within their "Original Position" - a name applied to assert its nature as being 'before all-else'.¹ Essentially in short, much like a scientific experiment, Rawls' method begins by creating a clinical environment, in which participants are placed, so as to restrict any possible outside interference (so as not to potentially invalidate any findings). Coined, "the veil of ignorance" this distinguishing feature, in which, imaginary subjects are deprived of their present perceptions, aims to ensure an impartiality of judgment by removing any prior bias the participants held. Following such, the subjects would then be 'presented with a list of *varying* conceptions of justice, *which were to be* drawn from the traditions of *social-political* philosophy' - after which they would assert their ordered preferences through the medium of a intermediary, who also acts as a referee, prohibiting the formation of coalitions.²³ The purpose of this essay is to ascertain what Rawls means by his 'Original Position' and whether or not his accounts of 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' are justified?

To ensure we understand the 'Original Position' as-well-as that which he terms 'knowledge' and 'ignorance'; we must first-of-all explore the reasons for such a creation; i.e. what was Rawls' agenda, or "philosophy" - i.e. what is the underlying factor that upstands his position? Its title; '*A Theory of Justice*' is somewhat self explanatory, but more specifically (as is the question he himself proposes) it seeks to deliver 'a theory of justice that represents an alternative to utilitarian thought'⁴ by applying 'the notion of pure procedural practice as the basis of *his* theory'⁵. Therefore, in opposition to theorists such as Hume, Adam Smith, Bentham and Mill; regarded by Rawls as opportunists whose philosophical constructs were built only as a means to suit the needs of some other comprehensive scheme - he instead sets out to be more "prudent" with his own method by constructing a 'workable and systematic moral conception to oppose' the latter, rather than contrary approaches of a narrower front, as he so chooses to brand (although failing to stipulate idea or author) other critics of

¹ B. Duignan, *John Rawls*, *American Philosopher*, 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Rawls>> [Accessed 7th March 2019].

² S. Freeman, *Original Position*, 1996/2014, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>> [Accessed 7th March 2019].

³ J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Bristol: J.W. Arrowsmith Ltd., 1972) p. 139.

⁴ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 22.

⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 136.

utilitarianism. His self proposed intention is to 'generalise, and carry to a higher order of abstraction, by using simplifying devices - the social contract theory as presented by the likes of 'Locke, Rousseau, and Kant' whilst avoiding 'extensive methodological discussions'⁶. One could say however that the entire basis of his "theory" does in-fact derive largely from a methodological approach; for is the creation of his self-named 'veil of ignorance' not simply that?

The purpose of his hypothetical method is to discover the initial agreement (original position) that all subsequent contracts (responsible perhaps, for moulding our entire societal spectrum of principles) thereby derive from; that is to say; 'the state of nature in the traditional theory of the social contract'. What Rawls therefore means for us to ascertain from his concept of an 'Original Position' is the possibility of attaining a fair system of justice based on the essence of human inhibition; evidenced via the use of his experiment which he uses to bring-about such "intrinsic" agreement through uprooting the subjectivities responsible for social-inequality, and that 'once we grasp this conception, we can at any time look at the social world from the required point of view'.⁷ Here he affirms this:

No society can, of course be a scheme of cooperation which men enter voluntarily in a literal sense; each person finds himself placed at birth in some particular position in some particular society, and the nature of his position materially effects his life prospects. Yet a society satisfying the principles of justice as a fairness comes as close as a society can to being a voluntary scheme, for it meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair.⁸

Now to answer the question of whether or not his 'Original Position' theory is justified, inclusive of the features of 'ignorance' and 'knowledge' - the answer is a resounding no. Rawls' self-proclaimed "theory" is no-more than an idealistic flutter without any solid analytical substance to justify his belief. To return to the base-line of the discussion, 'the idea of the original position is to set up a fair procedure so that any principles agreed will be just.'⁹ From a purely logical standpoint using a method of deduction, there is a seemingly obvious flaw in Rawls' interpretation of 'impartiality'. For although he details the formulation of such; whereby, he stipulates that; 'among the essential features; no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status' - this is by his own words incorrect; for there is a clear power structure in place, to which all within the context of the scenario are aware; for does the referee not hold sway over the proceedings; having been instructed with the task of forbidding any 'attempt to form coalitions, as-well-as to inform the parties when they have come to

⁶ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. VII-VIII.

⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 587.

⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 13.

⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 136.

an understanding'; and furthermore does the distribution of such rights not derive in-turn from a higher source of authority? Moreover if one pursues the sequence of the origin of authority; eventually one arrives at the sole arbiter, who cannot have undergone the same ritual that Rawls advocates is the means by which to attain a "fair" perspective of justice, thus it could be argued that those ideas of a "true" and "fair" state of nature that Rawls believes his experiment will conceive are only the "natural" inclinations of the process of sway, which stems from the instigator(s) of such - i.e. Rawls himself!

Another issue that seems to prevail quite blatantly within this same framework, would be the measurement of "acceptable" knowledge - i.e. ensuring that enough knowledge is retained to assure a level of intellectual capacity capable for "rationalising" between the various approaches, whilst simultaneously barring any socially-implanted inclinations adopted prior to the experiment. He states that:

It is taken for granted however, that they know the general facts about human society. They understand political affairs and the principles of economic theory; they know the basis of social organisation and the laws of human psychology.¹⁰

This vast unspecified realm of knowledge to allow for this so-called "rationality" for the determination of "truth" over "falsity" is another clear example of Rawls' inability to expand on his projection of ideas; therefore compromising entirely once again the object of discussion; i.e. his hypothetical method, as one of pure delusion, without any logical precedence for its claims. As touched upon earlier in this essay - Rawls negatively taunts those philosophers he believes are too narrow with their philosophizing and subsequently pursues a more generalised route. I put it to the former gentleman, that if there was no need for particulars within the field of philosophy then its virtue would certainly not be that of 'philosophizing' - and in addition - within the realm of academia; where critical analysis is key; where has generality ever held value? And finally, before concluding; Rawls places emphasis on the interconnectedness of rational-choice and justice theory and attempts to layout a method by which to create his 'rationality' so that it may be applied to the creation of a less-flawed or indeed flawless bi-product - that being 'justice as fairness'. The fact that the scenario he creates to solve this issue is hypothetical and cannot possibly be applied due to the many flaws, some of which have been highlighted already; only goes to show the self-defeating core of his theory - for everyone rationalises uniquely; and therefore has a different perception of justice. Hobbs addressed such issues, but concluded with his belief with that of 'self interest' being the primary source of all; Rawls however has concluded nought.

¹⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 137.

In the preface, Rawls states that 'My ambitions for the book will be completely realised if it enables one to see more clearly the chief structural features of the alternative conception of justice'.¹¹ At the very least, Rawls was honest in his inability to distinguish clearly conclusive results; for he self confessed prior to the start of his own book, in the final page (XII) of his preface that 'Regrettably he was unable to deal with all the faults that he was aware remained'¹² In this respect he was right.

To finalise this essay I shall end with a contradictory quote, which I believe summarises my take on the nature of Rawls arguments - i.e. one riddled with contradictions.

The conditions embodied in the description of the original position are ones that we do in fact accept. Or if we do not, then perhaps we can be persuaded to do so by philosophical reflection.¹³

Bibliography

Duignan, B. (2019) *John Rawls, American Philosopher*,
<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Rawls>> [Accessed 7th March 2019].

Freeman, S. *Original Position*, (1996/2014),
<<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>> [Accessed 7th March 2019].

Rawls, J. (1972) *A Theory of Justice*. Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith Ltd.

¹¹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. VIII

¹² Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. XI.

¹³ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 21.