

John Rawls (1921-2002) – A Theory of Justice

Attempt to establish a contract that all would agree on if we were to start society again

The principles that would govern this contract are to be found by people in the “original position”

Original position – people to choose what principles would make a just society

People are behind a “veil of ignorance”

Ignorant of:

Class position

Gender

Race

Abilities

Strengths

Their view of the “good”

Technological level of civilisation

Aware of:

Importance of primary goods such as:

Liberties

Opportunities

Wealth

Income

Self respect

People in the original position would choose the following principles and these principles are therefore just:

1. **Liberty principle** – equal right to the most extensive set of liberties compatible with a similar system for all

2. **Difference principle** – economic inequalities are arranged so that

a) they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged

b) they are attached to positions open to all under conditions of equality of opportunity (meritocracy)

Problems

1. The concepts of primary goods in the original position is very specific to a particular culture

2. Might we take a risk in the original position and opt for greater inequality?

3. Nozick states that the liberty principle clashes with the difference principle. Any pattern of justice will be affected by individual free actions. Some people will choose to spend, some to save. To reassert the pattern (i.e. redistribute the wealth) would break the liberty principle.