

# The difference principle

The dynamics of human societies are enormously complex, but it is reasonable to suppose that, in general, just societies are more stable and longer-lasting than unjust ones. The members of a society must believe that it is, by and large, fair if they are to abide by the rules that hold it together and to maintain its institutions. So how should the burdens and benefits of a society be distributed amongst its members in such a way as to make it just?

We might suppose that the only truly fair distribution of society's goods is one that is equal across all its members. Equality can mean different things, however. Do we mean equality of outcome, such that everyone has an equal share of the wealth and benefits that society has to offer and everyone has to shoulder an equal share of the burdens? But some people's shoulders are broader and stronger than others, and society as a whole may profit from the greater efforts that some of its members are able to make. If people are willing to make more effort, is it not reasonable for them to take a larger share of the benefits? Otherwise, those with greater natural talents may not exploit their gifts to the full, and society as a whole may be the loser. So perhaps the important thing is equality of opportunity, such that everyone in society has the same opportunities to prosper, even if some

## Rawlsian versus utilitarian

Much of the dynamic of Rawlsian justice comes from its opposition to a classic utilitarian approach to the same issues (see page 69). From a utilitarian perspective, any amount of inequality is justified provided that it results in a net gain in utility (e.g. happiness). So, for instance, the interests of the majority could be sacrificed in return for a massive gain for a minority; or a massive loss for a minority could be justified provided that it resulted in a sufficient gain for the majority. Both of these possibilities would be ruled out by Rawls's difference principle, which prohibits

the interests of the worst-off being sacrificed in this way.

Another important contrast is that utilitarians are impartial in considering everyone's interests; each is required in effect to pool their interests with those of others and seek whatever outcome results in the highest net gain in utility. Rawlsians, on the other hand, placed in the original position, are acting egotistically; it is self-interest combined with ignorance of their future place in society that leads to prudential assent to the difference principle.

people make more of them than others and accrue more of the benefits in doing so.

In his *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, the US philosopher John Rawls made a highly influential contribution to the debate over social justice and equality. At the core of his theory lies the so-called 'difference principle', according to which inequalities in society are justified only if they result in its worst off members being better off than they would otherwise have been. Rawls's principle has generated a vast amount of criticism, positive and negative,

**A society that puts equality – in the sense of equality of outcome – ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom.**

Milton Friedman, 1980

## Horse-and-sparrow economics

Rawls's difference principle stipulates equality unless inequality benefits all, and so does not allow the interests of one group to be subordinated to those of another. The principle does not, however, have anything to say about the relative gains of the various beneficiaries, so a very small improvement for the worst-off would justify a huge windfall for those who already enjoy the lion's share of society's goods. This has allowed the principle to be invoked by some who are very far removed from Rawls's own essentially egalitarian position. Thus

Rawlsian corroboration was sometimes sought for the so-called 'trickle-down economics' of the Reagan and Thatcher administrations of the 1980s, in which tax cuts for the wealthiest were claimed to lead to increased investment and economic growth, so allegedly improving the fortunes of the less advantaged. This claim was disparagingly described by the economist J.K. Galbraith as 'horse-and-sparrow economics': 'if you feed enough oats to the horse, some will pass through to feed the sparrows.'

and it has been invoked (not always in ways that Rawls himself would have welcomed) in support of ideological positions across the political spectrum.

**Behind the veil of ignorance** Any conception of social justice comprises, implicitly at least, the notion of impartiality. Any suggestion that the principles and structures on which a social system is based are skewed towards a particular group (a social class or caste, for instance, or a political party) automatically renders that system unjust. To capture this idea of impartiality and to ground his principles of justice on fairness, Rawls introduces a thought experiment which has its origins in the social-contract theories of Hobbes and Rousseau (see page 184). We are asked to imagine ourselves in what he calls the 'original position', in which all personal interests and allegiances are forgotten: '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.' Though we might seek to further our own interests, we do not know where our interests lie, so special pleading is ruled out. Ignorant of what role in society we will be given, we are obliged to play

safe and to ensure that no one group is disadvantaged in order to give advantage to another.

Impartiality, then, in a paradox that is apparent only, is the rational and inevitable choice of self-interested agents in the original position. Social and economic structures and arrangements can only be said to be distinctively just, Rawls claims, if they were contracted into from behind this imaginary 'veil of ignorance'. Moreover, whatever would be agreed to in such circumstances is the only thing that could be agreed to by individuals acting rationally and prudentially. And the best and most prudent thing that the rational decision-maker can do, to safeguard her own future (unknown) interests, is to embrace the difference principle.

**«The difference principle is a strongly egalitarian conception in the sense that unless there is a distribution that makes both persons better off . . . an equal distribution is to be preferred.»**

John Rawls, 1971

The corollary of the difference principle – the idea that inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the worst-off – is that under any other circumstances inequalities are unacceptable. In other words, conditions of equality should exist except where the difference principle indicates that an inequality is permissible. Thus, for instance, economic arrangements that greatly enhance the position of the better-off but leave the standing of the worst-off unchanged would not count as just. People may, by accident of birth, have greater natural talents than others, but they should enjoy some social or economic advantage on that account only if their doing so leads to an improvement in the condition of the worst-off. In sum, inequality is just only if everyone profits by it; otherwise equality should prevail.

**the condensed idea  
Justice as fairness**