



Philosophy: Morality and Justice - Audio

Rawls on distributive justice

Winifred

In this audio recording we're going to discuss John Rawls and distributive justice. I'm joined by Zofia Stemplowska from the University of Reading and the author of Book Six, Jon Pike

Jon Pike

Could you say just very quickly what the key ideas are that are presented by Rawls that kick off this debate?

Zofia Stemplowska

Yes. Rawls is a key figure with many key ideas. So through ideas that sound really bizarre the first time you encounter them such as the hypothetical contract, the original position, the veil of ignorance, he actually shows something very important and very simple, namely that we can argue with some precision over what impartial and fair distribution would require. So we can recognise for example that we might be biased in various ways. And Rawls's suggestion was what types of steps we might take to get rid of these biases when we are being asked how we should distribute goods in society. And of course we are familiar with the thought that we should eliminate religious, gender, racial biases. What Rawls also says is that we should eliminate talent biases. So he suggests that when we face the question how to distribute goods in society we should imagine that we don't know whether we are talented. And if you don't know whether you are talented and how well you are going to fair in the market for example you might be more willing to accept that even the untalented should get jobs that are well remunerated. And even add the cost to salaries to the very talented. Why you might ask should we eliminate talent bias? Well Rawls gives us the story mainly that much of our talent isn't actually within our control. It's a function of our family background, our class, the native talent we are born with. And so we should be wary of thinking about people who are lucky to have been born talented should therefore end up scooping the best prizes that market might offer. There is however much to Rawls that goes beyond his contribution to distributive justice. I think most fundamentally he revived the debate because he showed that even in societies in which we have widespread and serious disagreements about values we can still have rational arguments about what justice requires. That is we can try to persuade one another with reasons rather than just digging in our heels and see who shouts the loudest. So you can imagine political philosophers and everyone else really who worries about the justice of society like that idea.

Jon Pike

Let me put a couple of objections to what you've just suggested in your account of Rawls. One is this idea that we ought not to have a bias for talent. Now that does seem quite a crazy idea in some respects because talented people are presumably productive. They generate things. They do stuff. They add to the common wealth and we want to encourage that don't we? So giving them rewards that gives them an incentive for exercising their talents is good for us all. Isn't that a strong argument? If you like it's an argument about efficiency, the way in which rewarding the talented is efficient and that efficient sort of society acts to everyone's benefit.

Zofia Stemplowska

That's right. So Rawls also observed that we seem to face a dilemma in some sense. On the one hand we are worried about rewarding those who just happen to be talented. How could justice require that? On the other hand we want to reward them if it means that we can make our societies have more things that then make our lives go better. And so Rawls proposed a way of reconciling these two ideals. And this is famously known as the difference principle. It's one of the principles of distributive justice that Rawls suggests. Mainly he says that inequalities can be justified provided that they are to the benefit of the worst off. So to put it crudely in terms of talent we can reward the talented more provided that this will benefit then those who are at the bottom of our society. But incidentally Rawls did not think that the current trickle down economy would be realising that ideal.

Winifred

Could you give me an example then of someone who might have thought it was worth rewarding?

Zofia Stemplowska

Yes so you might say if we went for strict equality then some people might not volunteer to take on difficult jobs that benefit us all. So the example that is often given is that of a doctor. So let's assume that these doctors have to slave over textbooks and go through a very demanding training procedure. Well, you might not be willing to do that unless you think that you will be rewarded for the effort. But of course we want the doctors and they will benefit the worst off in society so let's reward them in order to make sure that medical provision is available to us.

Winifred

By contrast who wouldn't you reward?

Zofia Stemplowska

On the other hand you might say that certain types of speculative behaviour in the markets - we've heard much about it in the context of the crises in 2009, that this was not beneficial – well pretty much to anyone except those who engaged in it. But certainly not beneficial to the worst off who as a result of such conduct, so the story goes, face actually harsher conditions in the market, find it harder to get credit in order to go along with their lives, purchase a place to live in.

Winifred

And as you were saying this is nothing to do with the separate theory of trickle down which is that if the people at the top are very rich and they have loads of money to spend they will spend some of it hiring the people at the bottom to clean their kitchens and dig their gardens over. It's nothing to do with that.

Zofia Stemplowska

Right. So there is an element of that which is similar namely some of the benefits trickle down to the worst off but Rawls's idea is much more radical. The idea is you can only have inequality, you can only enjoy riches if you like, if it is to the benefit of the worst off not if a tiny share of that will be to the benefit of the worst off.

Jon Pike

“Dr Avia Pasternak”, thank you very much.