

Rawls and arendt on freedom



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Philosophers John Rawls and Hannah Arendt each establish different definitions of freedom that help to judge the legitimacy and purpose of political institutions. And while these definitions are not the same, they do not necessarily directly oppose one another. Rather, Arendt's theory seems to be more comprehensive and appears almost as a prerequisite condition of society before Rawls' perception of freedom can become a reality.

To understand Rawls' perspective on freedom, one must first look to his conception of the "original position" (A Theory of Justice 1039). This state in society's development is where there is an "initial position of equality" across all people who have come together to collectively attempt to improve the lot of the individual. The original position is important according to Rawls, because it is when the people establish the principles of justice that "regulate all further agreements" (1038).

In further explaining the importance of the original position in conveying what freedom is, Rawls highlights that the principles of justice are "chosen behind a veil of ignorance" (1039). This is important, as given that all people are equal and now are also unaware of their "place[s] in society" or even "their conceptions of the good," no one individual can influence the choosing of principles of justice or "fairness" to bring exclusive advantages to themselves.

One may assert that someone born generations into a society's existence has not necessarily agreed to that society's rules; however, Rawls poses a sort of tacit agreement counterpoint. He states that "a society satisfying the principles of justice as fairness comes as close as a society can to being a

voluntary scheme” insofar that it “ meets the principles which free and equal persons would assent to under circumstances that are fair” (1039). Thus, perhaps Rawls believes that one must inherently agree to a fair society’s rules of justice as they themselves would always choose those rules given that they were living during the time of the original position.

The aforementioned ideas of equality and rational choice are important to Rawls’ theory, because they allow for a people to establish a fair and objective public “ conception of justice” and “ conception of the good” (1041). Moreover, in the initial position, people would adopt two principles that are to make these conceptions realities. The first principle “ requires equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties” and the second “ holds that social and economic inequalities...are just only if they result in compensating benefits for everyone...” (1040). To Rawls, the first principle—which highlights an equality of liberty—includes “ political liberty...and freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought,” the right to bodily and property integrity and protection from others, and freedom from “ arbitrary arrest and seizure” (1046). These freedoms or liberties are important as they enable society to properly reach and act upon its conceptions of justice and the good.

Rawls’ second principle regarding equality of opportunity is also important in his conception of freedom and justice. In noting that the “ rules” of society are to define “ basic liberties” and must “ apply to everyone equally,” Rawls claims there is no just “ exchange between basic liberties and economic and social gains” (1047). Yet even though the first principle enumerates that a man is entitled to his riches, the focus on equality seems to imply that with

freedom comes obligation to the rest of society. While Rawls does not advocate for exact wealth redistribution, he notes that an individual can only justifiably increase their personal wealth so long as the “least favored” individuals in society advance as well (1049).

Moreover, Rawls’ conceptions of freedom and equality serves as general guides to the principles of justice. The philosopher specifies that the principles are “analogous” to Immanuel Kant’s “categorical imperatives,” which indicates “conduct that applies to [every] person in virtue of his nature as a free and equal rational being” (1055). Again, Rawls reaffirms his point that with freedom and equality comes justice and thus fairness. In fact, these principles are to regulate “human freedom” (1057). Therefore, it is important to recognize that according to Rawls’ theory, freedom is essential to and brings rise to justice and equality helps guarantee the fairness of its principles in practice.

On the other hand, Arendt perceives freedom as the capacity to begin anew. At the individual level, she notes how one is free when in possession of the “exhilarating awareness of the human capacity of beginning” (On Revolution 223). The philosopher believes that all people have the ability to realize freedom due to simply being born and thus becoming “something new on earth.”

If freedom is the bringing about of something new and unexpected, then revolution in society seems to be a main driver in maintaining that very freedom. Yet in looking at the American Revolution, Arendt finds a sort of paradox: while establishing a new “foundation was the aim and the end of

the revolution...the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring..." (232). In other words, while the revolution itself was an action taken out of the realization of freedom, its goal to establish a "lasting institution" is somewhat "self-defeating." Arendt points to this as the source of France's Robespierre's struggle in distinguishing between "revolutionary and constitutional government."

Arendt cites Thomas Jefferson as being a thinker on how to resolve this dilemma. At first, Jefferson believed that there should be a revolution every twenty years to shake the "tree of liberty" and maintain society's realization of freedom as starting anew (233). However, after concluding that the violence exhibited in the French Revolution seemed unnecessary to keep freedom alive, Jefferson proposed that there should be constitutional revisions, "which would roughly correspond to the periods of the coming and going of generations" (234). Thus, Arendt suggests that freedom only survives if posterity can make new and cater what they bring about to their needs.

Arendt seems to point to a failure in the U. S. Constitution which is the lack of incorporating a Jeffersonian "ward" system. True republican government should allow for the "creation of 'small republics' through which 'every man in the State' could become 'an acting member of the Common government..." (253). Thus the division of counties into wards would lead to the strengthening of the power of "everyone" as "acting members of the Common government" (254). This system would help a revolution meet and maintain its goal of establishing a "public space where freedom could

appear...[and be] the only tangible place where everyone could be free” and thus allow people to be in control of their own destiny (255). This point is critical to Arendt’s theory, because one can only realize freedom in “participating, and having a share, in public power.”

While both philosophers define freedom differently, Arendt’s theory does not fall into the Rawls’ classification of a government acting on behalf of the “good” instead of the “right”; and therefore, Rawls would not disagree with Arendt’s point that one can judge political matters based on the practice of realized freedom. According to Rawls, utilitarianism is not a proper way to base a government on as they are exclusively focused on the “right” as “which...available alternatives produce the most good...” (A Theory of Justice 1044). This, perhaps, poses a problem in Rawls’ mind, as people may have different views of the good—and as such, there is no recognition of any set categorical imperatives that define absolute right acts. Considering that Arendt does not base her criterion for judging political matters on how much good a government produces as a measure of right, Rawls’ view would not rule hers out.

Moreover, Arendt’s theory does not fall into Rawls’ conception of “perfectionism,” because she does not have a single vision for what the good is. Instead practicing realized freedom is the ability to not be locked into the “principle of rational choice for one man,” fixed in a specific time and place in history (1045). Furthermore, Arendt explicitly decries democracy in practice as having the “popular welfare and private happiness” as its “chief goals” (On Revolution 269). In doubting the ability for a few to truly

represent the interest many, Arendt's theory is not trapped in Rawls' perception of perfectionism or implementation of a single good.

Rawls, perhaps, has confused the liberties connected with "civil rights" with what Arendt sees as the only type of freedom that should matter. Given that Arendt believes that everyone should have access to the public freedom as they should to the public happiness, Rawls' enumerated liberties should come about under Arendt's more general and comprehensive view freedom. In fact, by confining freedom as existing only when everyone has access to controlling their own destiny, it may be more possible for Rawls' civil rights to actually exist in practice in an Arendtian free society.

Ultimately, Arendt's theory is better than Rawls' as it is more comprehensive. Arendt does not deny the existence of civil rights in a free society, but also does not confuse those civil rights for what freedom is. If people are able to start something new and cater that new to their needs as Jefferson described in his hopes for America's future, then Arendt's theory makes it possible for Rawls' civil liberties to exist. Moreover, freedom as the ability to continuously affect change is important in preventing a government from acting on a single perception of the good or utility—which both philosophers advocate against. And thus it is Arendt's definition of freedom that inherently prevents rise to this corruption of society.

Overall, while both philosophers have different definitions of freedom, both of their theories largely agree with one another. However, Arendt's perception of freedom as the ability to bring about something new and

unexpected is more comprehensive and seems to be a prerequisite to establish in practice the civil liberties Rawls lists.