

Rawls' difference principle



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Rawls' Difference Principle Rawls believed in the ideal of perfect equality. This meant, to him, that everyone should have equal opportunity and receive the same treatment. To Rawls, there was only one reason why anyone should be treated differently to any other person - to help the worst off members of society. He called this reason the difference principle, and in conjunction with his "Justice as Fairness" ideal it formed the basis of his claims about distributive justice. Rawls' natural lottery was the biological limitations that one is born with.

For example, some people are simply not capable of the intelligence and skill required to be a doctor. Rawls suggests a counter to this natural phenom, asserting that the difference principle is needed to counter the effects of the natural lottery ("The Law Of Peoples" p. 114, On Distributive Justice Among People). People who are biologically less able than others would be provided for to the same level as others, but it would take more of society's resources, so they would need a larger amount than the average person. This would create an inequality in terms of natural assets, but it would create equality in social order.

The person who was disadvantaged would be brought to the same level as everyone else because of the excess money given to them. The difference principle makes sense in a cut and dry hypothetical situation like giving more resources to someone who is biologically disinclined to be successful, but I feel that it fails in a few key areas. Throughout history, society has believed many different things to be biologically inferior to the norm at the time. A prime example is the discrimination that natives of basically any country in the world faced when confronted by settlers.

When settlers arrived in Australia, they believed that the natives were biologically incapable of being "civilised". Applying Rawls' theory to a situation such as this would not be appropriate, because the resources would be going to someone who did not need them and therefore would not be going to someone who did, like a child born with a permanent medical condition. We can see with perfect clarity in hindsight who the most disadvantaged group in society is, but at the time when we would have to decide how to best distribute natural resources we might not be so lucid.

This, to me, represents the biggest flaw in Rawls' difference principle - not that it would not help, but that we would not be able to decide who the most disadvantaged member of society is. Rawls' assertions about distributive justice are idealistic at best. If it would cost the community resources to get a person's equal share to them because they are physically remote, then they should not receive the same as everyone else. The trouble with equally distributing all natural assets is that some people will lose theirs. Just like with money, some people make poor decisions with it and will inevitably end up with none.

When that day comes, the person who lost everything expects that they will somehow be taken care of by society because everyone is equal but other people have more than they do. They feel a sense of entitlement to what everyone else has because they were meant to have the same. When a situation like this occurs, there isn't a right answer. You can't, morally, let this person live without any resources (whether it be money, food, shelter, etc) but you also would ruin the social construct if you were to give them an amount of resources from someone else.

This leads to the next big problem with Rawls' principle, that is; if people turn their resources into more resources, are they then morally indebted to society and expected to share their profits with everyone? If everyone starts from the same point, it could be argued that any profit made by any single person is still a natural resource and should therefore be distributed equally between everyone. This should definitely not be the case. The problem with it is that it is not as good as our society. Our society now thrives on people's natural desire to be successful.

Tax only works because people go out and make profits on things with the profits that they or their predecessors have made on other things. It is a continuing cycle and it works very effectively within the confines of our society. Were we to completely overhaul society and rebuild it in the image that Rawls describes, there would be issues on many levels. For example, whose job is it to build a school? With distributive justice, everyone gets the same share and no one person is more valuable than another, so does it become the students' job to build the school, since it is for them to learn?

Or is it the teachers' job since they need it for their income? Rawls argued that distributive justice would be fair above all else, but that people choosing to trade and barter and spend their resources would naturally destroy the principle, and that there should be some (unspecified) way of regulating this (" Beyond The Minimal State", p. 162, Distributive Justice). This, in my opinion, is an oxymoron. How can something be fair above all else but go against human nature? Humanity has evolved for centuries to be at the point where it flourishes; is that somehow not fair?

We are naturally inclined to do things that make us successful, whether it be because of evolution or God, like barter for things that are unavailable to us. Perhaps it is overly romantic to state that the human condition is the most apt way to live and that any overthought meddling in the way we conduct our affairs would desecrate the human race's beauty. The subtext of this whole debate with Rawls' difference principle is essentially socialism or capitalism. It's politics with philosophy at its root. Which is to say that while I do not agree with Rawls' principle, I do agree with its method.

The idea that a political stance is based on communal moral values is one that makes sense in the big picture. In government, we want to be led by the people who most represent us. If those people are basing their policies on our own moral guidelines then surely they represent us more accurately. The difference principle, in its way, provides people who believe in socialism with an effective policy to go hand in hand with their beliefs. While I don't personally agree, I feel it's a subjective matter and that there would be people who would argue fiercely for the principle's legitimacy and potency.

This just leads me to believe that it's irrelevant what I believe. I could be wrong and the difference principle could be the best thing for society, the morally relevant thing is that I'm not the one who gets to decide. That's why our society is successful. Because university students writing essays for a philosophy class do not get to decide what social reforms are and are not valid. It is reflective perhaps of a democratic society that the difference principle even exists in theory, because we have a well respected man in his later life who came up with a theory that has not been implemented.

He did not write it down and it automatically happened, he suggested that it might be a more reasonable way of running society, and people disagreed. This represents a greater morality than just his difference principle. It represents the equality between people right now. He was a highly respected man in the most powerful sect of society and he still could not get people to blindly accept his viewpoint. This political side to the philosophy is a moral good. The fact that we can decide which philosophies to implement socially and which we do not abide by is an example of how our moral codes all intertwine at some basic level.

It's wonderful that people try to hypothesise outside of that and challenge our beliefs and try to get new philosophies to become prominent, but at some level we will always be conservative in terms of philosophy. Rawls was one such free thinker and that warrants him respect, regardless of the fact that I disagree with his difference principle. Rawls believes the difference principle is necessary to counter the natural lottery's effects because he wants a socialist society. He wants a society wherein everyone is equal and fairness is above all, definitely a noble pursuit.

However, the difference principle isn't necessary to counter the effects of the natural lottery; rather, the natural lottery is there naturally and therefore cannot be unjust given the natural nature of everything else on the planet and the inherent cohesion of that which is natural. Rawls' notion of sharing the natural assets and the benefits of those natural assets is, to me, unfounded. I don't think that everyone should have a personal library just because one person wants a personal library. Nor do I think one person

should go without a personal library just because no-one else wants a personal library.

Either the former or the latter is the case with Rawls' theory; therefore I disagree with it. References “ The Difference Principle”, Political Philosophy . info [http://www. politicalphilosophy. info/differenceprinciple. html](http://www.politicalphilosophy.info/differenceprinciple.html) “ The Original Position”, Political Philosophy . info [http://www. politicalphilosophy. info/originalposition. html](http://www.politicalphilosophy.info/originalposition.html) “ Justice and Bad Luck” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Jun 20, 2005) [http://plato. stanford. edu/entries/justice-bad-luck/#2](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-bad-luck/#2) (“ The Law Of Peoples” p. 114, On Distributive Justice Among People) John Rawls, 1993 (“ A Theory Of Justice”, p. 162, Distributive Justice) John Rawls, 1971