Manchester Lit&Phil

Philosophy Forum

Getting Back To Moral Basics

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We all know the difference between right and wrong, what's just and what's fair – don't we? Apparently not, and this has been a focus area for philosophers over many years. Whilst these aspects are all contained within any discussion around ethics and morality, for this Forum we are going to enter into the realm of Political Philosophy. We will reflect on what we would need to develop a robust theory of justice and discuss what rules or codes you could establish to ensure a fairer society.

1   Justice

1.1   Is it right that some individuals have more than others? Is it fair that men kicking plastic balls around on grass get paid millions of pounds a year just because they have been born with a particular physical ability whilst others members of the community have to resort to foodbanks just to have enough to eat? Should the state allow individuals to keep hold of all of that they earn or should the better off in society be made to pay for those who don't, or can't, work? These are all aspects of the relationship between individuals and between individuals and the state that political philosophers have debated over many years.

1.2   To help bring the question of individual vs state responsibilities into more focus, philosophers have proposed a variety of models. The concept of what a social contract between a State and an individual should contain has been an area of discussion from Plato, through Hobbes, Locke and Hume to more modern Philosophers like Nozick and Rawls. The general starting point for any such model focuses on the relationships within any political community, ie a collection of people who are governed by a common set of rules, with some means of enforcing those rules. These models cover a wide political spectrum from those promoting a libertarian approach to ones arguing for a society which is more just and where resources are evenly shared out. Political philosophy covers a vast area and as a consequence this Forum paper is going to focus only on an egalitarian approach.

> **Libertarianism**: Political Philosophy meaning referring to the view that liberty is so important that there is no justification for state intervention in the interactions of individuals.
>
> **Egalitarianism**: a philosophical approach that attempts to ensure a just distribution of resources and reduce the impact of inequalities such a luck, inheritance and established hierarchies

1.3   The concept of justice, when applied to a community, is concerned with who should get what; in particular advocating positive intervention to ensure a more even distribution of the resources held within that community.

Michael Sandel (2009, *Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do*) suggests that to ask whether a society is just is to ask how it distributes the things we prize – income and wealth, duties and rights, powers and opportunities, offices and honours. A just society distributes these goods in the right way; it gives each person his or her dues. This does, however raise questions around how to recognize individual contribution to the

provision and growth of resources and acknowledge that some individuals may deserve more than others.

1.4   The egalitarian approach challenges existing allocations for the distribution of resources based on things such as inherited wealth, class, IQ, physical looks and ability, talent and geography. This process of distribution has resulted in a large percentage of resources being held by a small group of people with large inequalities across society. (Cf Appendix: statistics of wealth distribution section 7 below.) So, an egalitarian approach to justice advocates a society taking affirmative action to distribute resources and ensuring fairness. The main challenge to this approach is what moral codes or rules should be put in place to ensure a just distribution and how should these rules be applied? The other challenge is how best to agree these rules when different people would favour different principles reflecting their current position in society, capabilities, interests, moral and religious beliefs?

2   A Veil of Ignorance

2.1   John Rawls thought he had an answer to these questions when he detailed his model for developing a just society in his book *A Theory Of Justice*, first published in 1971. Rawls argues that we should get back to moral basics and look for 'a conception of justice that nullifies the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstances as counters in a quest for political and economic advantage'.

2.2   The central idea of his model is 'justice as fairness' and asks the reader to imagine having to decide what principles they would choose to see adopted in society if starting from an hypothetical 'original position'. This original position is one where each of us is ignorant of certain crucial facts about our personal characteristics and our actual situation in society. He proposed individuals having to make this choice of principles from behind a **'veil of ignorance'** as a way of ensuring that we make our decisions in an impartial and fair way and it prevents those choosing the principles from knowing whether they will be the ones who gain or lose by the principles they select. An example of this is that if I am a white male, when developing principles for a just society I may favour arrangements which position whites over blacks, males over females; but from behind the 'veil of ignorance' I will tend to avoid such unjust systems since I might myself turn out to be a member of a disadvantaged group.

2.3   A good example to explain how justice would come out from utilizing the 'veil of ignorance' is thinking about two people on a picnic with a pie. When it is time to divide up the pie, one suggests that the best way to divide it is for one to cut and the

other to choose which slice they will take. If both are hungry then they will both want to have the biggest slice. Effectively they are both behind a 'veil of ignorance' as neither knows which slice of pie they are going to get and as a consequence the cutter is going to cut the pie into equal slices. It is their ignorance of the outcome that makes the overall distribution of the pie as equal, and as fair, as possible.

2.4   One common misunderstanding of Rawls' model is that it is never going to be able to get people together in his original position and agree the principles of justice. However, Rawls' approach is a thought experiment rather than suggesting a real event and it is designed to get people to model the sorts of situations that could generate principles of justice.

3   Rawls' Two Principles of Justice

3.1   Rawls' **concept of the original position** is his attempt to strip away any individual aspects that are not justified by desert and get back to a basic moral position with a just society where everyone is equal. A criticism of Rawls' original position, and the requirement to make a rational choice under conditions of uncertainty, is that it would be rational to vote for whatever system produces the greatest good for all – a version of utilitarianism which can, however, have winners and losers. Another criticism of the principles made from behind the 'veil of ignorance', and the removal of privilege resulting in a just society, is the potential downgrading of individual responsibility – if everyone is going to get an equal amount of resources then what incentives are there for them to go out of their way to do more for themselves? This approach could paradoxically result in equality damaging the interests of the worst off due to the disincentive effort amongst those individuals who would otherwise improve the overall benefits within a society.

> **Desert**: from a political philosophy perspective this refers to anything that benefits an individual that they have obtained through an accident of birth eg, inherited wealth, high IQ, physical capabilities etc.

3.2   Rawls acknowledged this criticism and he recognised that some inequalities can lead to everyone being better off, an example being rewarding a doctor more for the time and effort of going through the necessary training so that everyone can benefit from a better health system. To incorporate this into his model he proposed that rather than rewarding benefits obtained through desert it would be beneficial to meet individual legitimate expectations once the basic principles have been established. This would allow individuals to expect a greater share of society's resources if they contributed more whilst staying within the agreed principles.

3.3   As a consequence of the need to meet individual legitimate expectations Rawls identified **two principles of justice**:
1. That there be maximum equality in the assignment of basic liberties and duties
2. That economic inequalities be permitted only if on balance they benefit the least advantaged members of society

3.4   Rawls was clear that the 1st principle was lexically prior to the 2nd principle – we have to put the 1st principle of justice in place and then and only then do we work within these constraints to allow some individuals to achieve their legitimate expectations and obtain economic benefits over and above others. The 2nd principle would no doubt require some sacrifices on the part of the more fortunate but this does require us to choose the principles of justice so as to counterbalance those accidents of birth that are, as Rawls puts it, 'arbitrary from the moral point of view'.

> **Lexical Priority**: refers to priority rules like those found in a dictionary or lexicography eg, all words beginning with A precede those beginning with B.

4   Summary

Rawls' **original position model** adopts a social contract approach that acknowledges the need for individuals within a just society to 'share one another's fate'. It attempts to minimise the individual benefits obtained through an accident of birth and to reward them only when they would provide a common benefit for all society, in particular the worst off. In the 1970s his egalitarian approach to establishing a just society ignited a debate with the libertarians that continues to rumble to this day

So what's your view?

5   Areas For Exploration (or not)

Below are some areas for exploration in our Forum discussion groups. Choose from the list (or completely ignore it if they have other ideas):
1. Can we agree what a just society looks like?
2. What changes to our society do you think adopting Rawls' approach would bring?
3. What challenges would adopting an original position behind a 'veil of ignorance' provide?
4. How to overcome the requirement where Rawls's model advocates for some individuals to acquiesce in an enduring loss for themselves in order to bring about a more equitable society?
5. Does Rawls' 2nd principle of justice address the issues on how individuals can be motivated to perform if they see others in an egalitarian society not 'pulling their weight'?

6   Supporting information and Further Reading

For those of you who have found this topic interesting, I have provided below references to information that I have used both in producing this paper.

YouTube Videos

I find YouTube a rich source of information on all sorts of topics, not just philosophy. However some specifics on Justice I have found helpful are:

- *Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?*
  A series of lectures given by Professor Michael Sandel to one of his classes at Harvard. The link below goes to the first lecture and you can then work your way through the 12 episodes, each around 55mins.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBdfcR-8hEY
- *What is Justice?*
  A Philosophy Crash Course episode aimed at high school students looking at philosophy for the first time. Over 40 episodes each giving a general introduction to philosophical topics, each one only lasting 10mins or so.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0CTHVCkm90&list=PLUHoo4L8qXthO958RfdrAL8XAHvk5xuu9&index=40
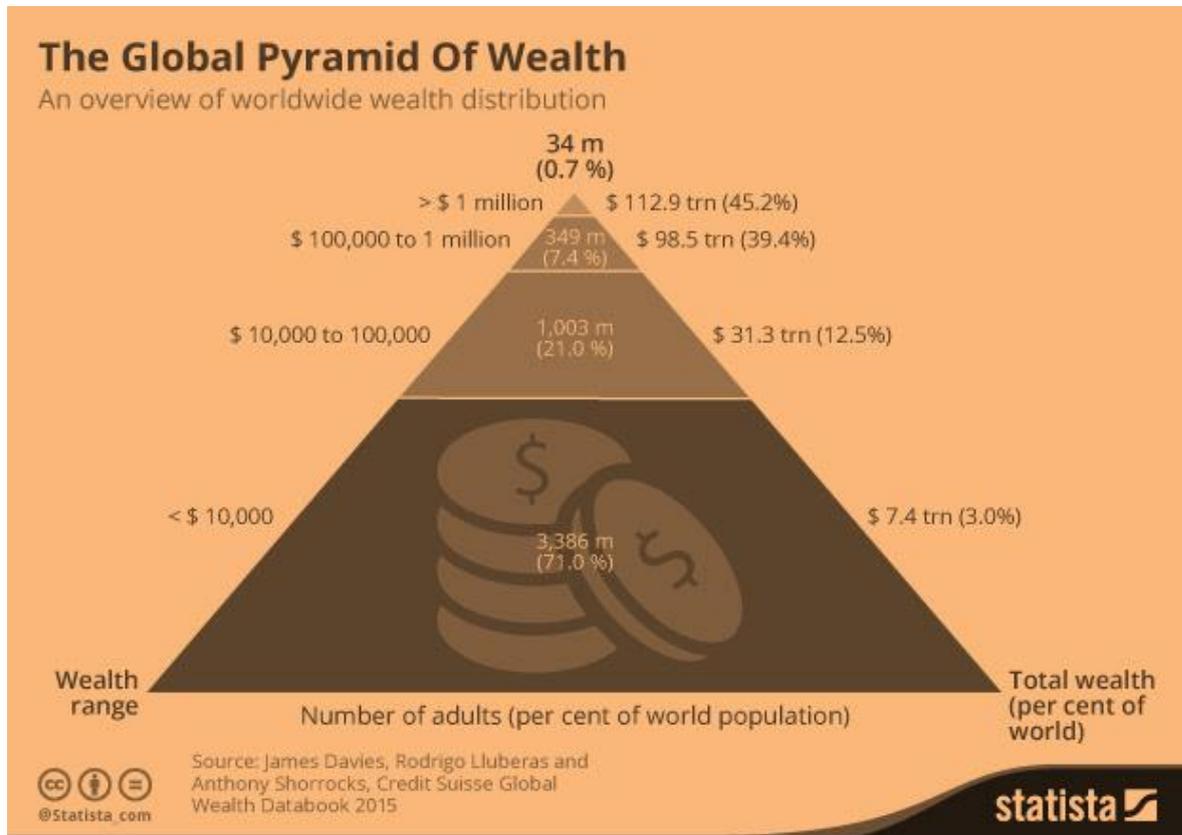
Books

- John Rawls, 1971, *A Theory Of Justice*
  Not an easy book to read as it contains lots of references to earlier philosophical ideas and assumes the reader has an in depth understanding of these ideas.
- Michael Sandel, 2009, *Justice*
  I found this easy to digest whilst discussing several areas associated with the topic of Justice.
- Robert Nozich, 1974, *Anarchy, State & Utopia*
  A difficult read putting forward the Libertarianism position and a contemporary counter to John Rawls Theory of Justice
- Peter Singer, 2011, *Practical Ethics*
  A wide ranging thought-provoking book with some interesting ideas around equality and what could constitute a just society.

Websites

- Julian Lamont & Christi Favor, 2017, Distributive Justice, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
  https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-distributive/
- Helen McCabe, 2012, John Rawls & Justice, *Philosophy Now* – Issue 92
  Article providing more detail on Rawls' model and counter arguments from Robert Nozick
  https://philosophynow.org/issues/92/John_Rawls_and_Justice

7 Appendix: statistics of wealth distribution

7.1 This chart gives some idea of how unequal is the world distribution of wealth:

The Global Pyramid Of Wealth
An overview of worldwide wealth distribution

34 m (0.7 %)
> $ 1 million — $ 112.9 trn (45.2%)
$ 100,000 to 1 million — 349 m (7.4 %) — $ 98.5 trn (39.4%)
$ 10,000 to 100,000 — 1,003 m (21.0 %) — $ 31.3 trn (12.5%)
< $ 10,000 — 3,386 m (71.0 %) — $ 7.4 trn (3.0%)

Wealth range
Number of adults (per cent of world population)
Total wealth (per cent of world)

Source: James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Anthony Shorrocks, Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2015

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Source: *Global Wealth Report from Credit Suisse* (2015): https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/how-is-wealth-distributed-world/.

It shows that:
- 71% of the world's adults own financial assets of less than $10,000 which all adds up to 3% of the world's wealth
- 21% own between $10,000 and $100,000 which adds up to 12.5% of the world's wealth
- 7.4% own between $100,000 and $1M which adds up to 39.4% of the world's wealth
- 0.7% own $1 million or more which adds up to 45.2% of the world's wealth (ie less than 1% of the global population own getting on for half of the global wealth).

7.2   The distribution of wealth in the UK is even more skewed:

Wealth decile	Percentage
1st (lowest)	0.02
2nd	0.38
3rd	0.79
4th	1.60
5th	3.11
6th	5.24
7th	8.17
8th	12.35
9th	19.76
10th (highest)	48.58

Source: *Office for National Statistics -* Wealth and Assets Survey (2018-2020)

So in the UK, the poorest 10% own almost none of the UK's wealth, whereas the richest 10% own nearly half of it.

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Your notes

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