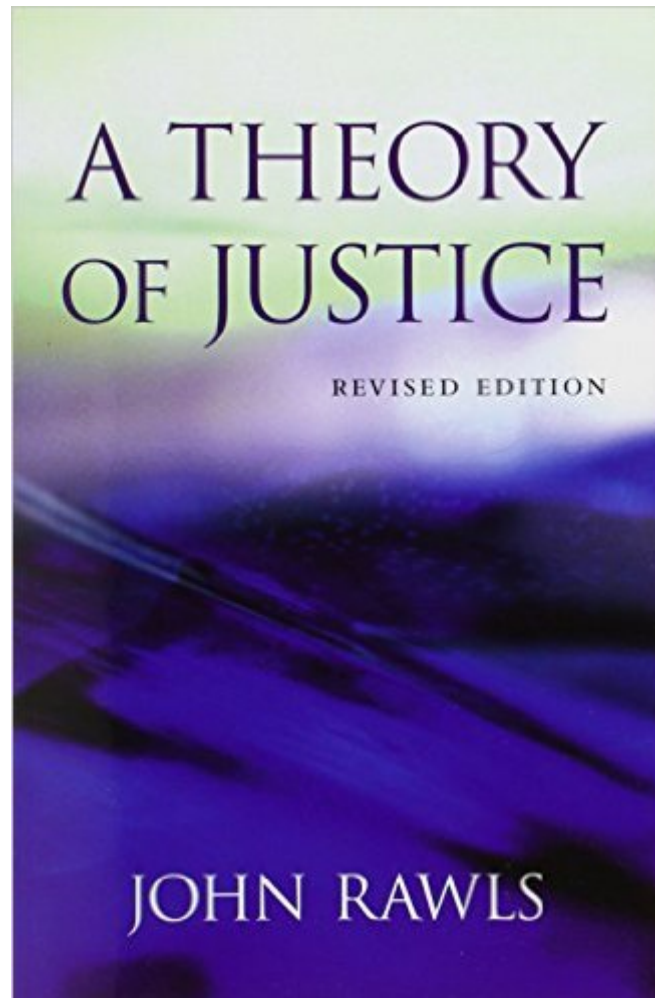


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A Theory Of Justice



Synopsis

Since it appeared in 1971, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* has become a classic. The author has now revised the original edition to clear up a number of difficulties he and others have found in the original book. Rawls aims to express an essential part of the common core of the democratic tradition--justice as fairness--and to provide an alternative to utilitarianism, which had dominated the Anglo-Saxon tradition of political thought since the nineteenth century. Rawls substitutes the ideal of the social contract as a more satisfactory account of the basic rights and liberties of citizens as free and equal persons. "Each person," writes Rawls, "possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." Advancing the ideas of Rousseau, Kant, Emerson, and Lincoln, Rawls's theory is as powerful today as it was when first published.

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Customer Reviews

I'm astonished at the tenor and number of negative reviews "*A Theory of Justice*" has garnered from the right. This is especially surprising because Rawls shares with American conservatives one fundamental principle: the inviolability of the individual. A "*Theory of Justice*" is a technical work aimed at professional philosophers, political scientists, and constitutional law specialists.

Nevertheless, the book is understandable by laymen, provided it is read as what it is, i.e. a technical work of moral philosophy and not as a political agenda. Rawls's simple and plain style also makes this book a relatively easy read. I suspect that the rejection of Rawls by even the more thoughtful conservatives stems from a serious misunderstanding of utilitarianism, which Rawls savagely

attacks from the start. Utilitarianism is the moral principle that the TOTAL welfare of a society is the highest value. In practice, the only measure of total welfare the government has is GDP, so that's what we maximize: GDP. This makes utilitarianism attractive to laissez-faire capitalist philosophies, and because Rawls attacks utilitarianism, both the left and the right imagine he is attacking markets, industry, and capitalism. The left have made him their angel, and so the right their demon. Rawls makes no attack on capitalism, only on utilitarianism. He asserts the inviolability of the individual as society's primary moral principle and demonstrates that this is incompatible with utilitarianism. For example, under utilitarianism, it makes sense to take Bob's heart, give it to Stan, and to give his lungs to John. You've saved two lives by sacrificing one, so society is on the whole better off with two members (Stan and John) rather than just one (Bob).

This is one of the most important books on social philosophy written in the last century. As the other mis-informed reviews illustrate, Rawls requires careful reading and a conviction to work through his arguments. Basically, Rawls tries to argue for a theory of Justice based on non-utilitarian principles. How can we have a Just Society that preserves individual rights and at the same time functions above the level of anarchy? Tilting too far one way results in a Communistic state that places the group above the individual. Tilting too far the other way results in a state that is a "war of all against all". Rawls proposes that we arrive at a conception of Justice using minimal assumptions. He uses something called the "Veil of Ignorance" to derive his principles of Justice. This "Veil of Ignorance" assumes we would act in our own self-interest, but we don't know where in society we would end up. Given these two principles, people act in their own self-interest but not knowing what place they might occupy in society, Rawls argues that we would come up with two principles of Justice; 1) each person has the most extensive basic liberties that are compatible for everyone having these liberties, and 2) social inequalities will be arranged so that they benefit everyone and such that we all have equal access to beneficial social positions. (Some reviews here apparently feel that Rawls was trying to describe an historical situation with the Veil of Ignorance. I would suggest that they actually read Rawls.) What Rawls is arguing is that taking a very minimal assumption about human nature (we rationally act in our own self interest) and assuming that no one knows his or her eventual social position, we will come up with these two principles of Justice (Justice as Fairness).

Surely, A Theory of Justice is among the most important and influential texts in contemporary philosophy. And it is, of course, the central text in contemporary political philosophy. Want just a few reasons to think this is an important text that you ought to read? Here you go: Rawls develops and

defends a new theory of justice, he provides a new way to extend some of the basic ideas in the social contract tradition, his text was crucial in resurrecting Kantian moral theory, his work has helped to bring constructivist meta-ethical positions back into prominence, the book develops some new and influential criticisms of utilitarianism, and it includes an explication of the method of reflective equilibrium and demonstrates how it can be applied in moral theory, etc. This is a long, intricate, and densely argued book, and there's no hope of summarizing even its main claims in this review. Consequently, I'll simply aim to give a very sketchy account of the structure of his main argument here. Rawls's theory is a theory of justice as it applies to the basic institutions of a single society. He calls his theory "justice as fairness." It is not that he thinks justice is simply fairness, or that a just society is a fair one. Rather, people choose principles of justice in a position that is supposed to be fair; their choices in this fair position determine the correct principles of justice. The principles of justice determine the nature of a just society; they apply to the basic structure of society--to its fundamental institutions.

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