

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Original Position

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Rawls, J. (1999). [Sections 24–26]. In *A theory of justice* (Revised ed., pp. 118–139). Belknap. (Original work from 1971)

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. Within John Rawls' veil of ignorance, what are people ignorant of? Why should they not know those things? What things do they actually know? Why should they know these things?
2. Since the original position is hypothetical, how is it possible that tell what people would agree to when in it?
3. Why does John Rawls think everyone in the original position would reach a unanimous decision about what principles of justice ought to govern the basic structure of society?
4. In what sense and in what ways are members of the original position rational?
5. What does it mean that those in the original position are "mutually disinterested"? How does Rawls justify this requirement for selecting principles of justice?
6. Rawls provides two arguments justifying why those in the original position would agree to the two principles of justice and their relative priority. The first is informal and intuitive, and the second is based on a discussion of the "maximin" choice rule.
What are these two arguments?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.