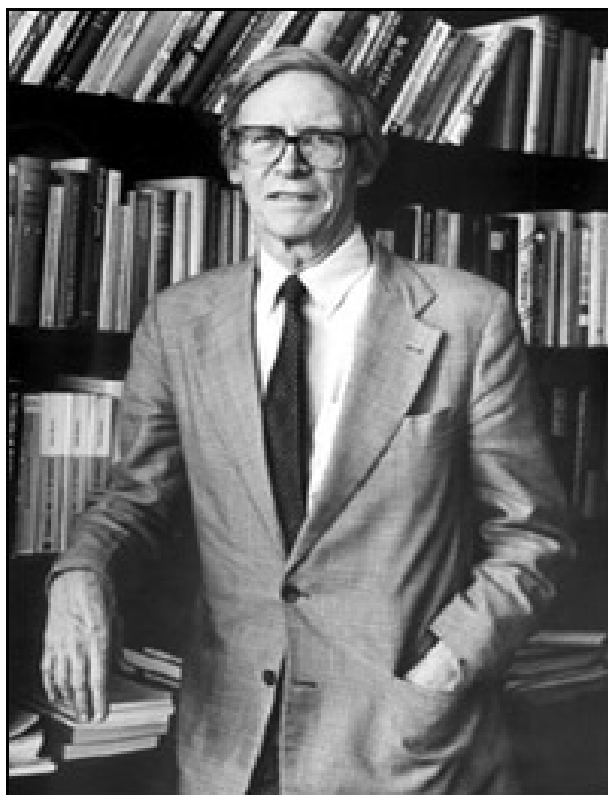


# JOHN RAWLS – A TRIBUTE

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John Rawls, who died last November at the age of 81, has been described as the most significant moral philosopher of our age. I will not dispute that assessment. He was certainly the most significant contemporary philosopher in my life, but that is understandable since the title of my doctoral dissertation was “Rawls and the Duty to Posterity.” (1976).

In the Preface to his masterpiece, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971) Rawls wrote, with characteristic modesty, “I must disclaim any originality for the views I put forward. The leading ideas are classical and well known.” Few philosophers familiar with his work will agree that it is unoriginal. True, while he developed his ideas in the tradition of the “well known” contract theory, he did so with extraordinary brilliance, drawing, as none had done before, from such diverse fields as economics, decision theory, linguistics, and cognitive psychology. It is a work, not oriented

to the “classical” past, but to present-day scholarship and to contemporary political issues.

When he submitted his manuscript for publication, Rawls could not have imagined the impact that it would have, not only in moral and political philosophy, but in numerous other disciplines. When I last checked, some fifteen years ago, this book had generated over five hundred refereed scholarly publications. A Google search, just completed, yielded 37,500 entries for “John Rawls.” In a seminar I once attended, Rawls’s friend and former student, Thomas Nagel, referred to this activity as “the Rawls industry.”

*A Theory of Justice* is a long (587 pages), often difficult, and meticulously argued work, divided into three main sections: The first deals with political theory (“Justice as Fairness”), the second with applications of that theory (“Institutions”), and the third with an examination of “the good life” for

the individual. It was Rawls's aim, largely successful I believe, to demonstrate that "justice for society" and "the good for the individual" are "congruent" – that the good life is most likely to be achieved in a just society, and that such a society will more likely endure if its citizens are "good" individuals. Primary scholarly attention has been directed to his first task – a determination of "the Principles of Justice." And this is probably as it should be. Still, it is quite possible that his analysis of "moral psychology" (the moral sense, moral sentiments, motivations, and moral judgments) will be equally enduring.

For all the wide expanse of sources and applications, and the exquisite nuance of his arguments, the central project of *A Theory of Justice* can be stated rather simply. In fact, in a lecture that I heard before the publication of Rawls's book, Canadian philosopher Kai Nielsen put it this way (in paraphrase): "If you were given the choice of a society to live in, not knowing your status in that society, what kind of a society would you choose?"

It is with those simple phrases, "what kind of a society" and "not knowing your status," along with the implied question, "by what rules of rational choice and according to what knowledge might one make the best choice," that the subtlety and complication, not to mention the controversy, of Rawls's theory arises. Put another way, Rawls attempted to construct what moral philosophers call "the moral point of view" (though Rawls does not use that phrase, preferring instead "The Original Position"). It is the perspective of what John Stuart Mill called "the ideal observer" – from which this hypothetical observer can best determine the rules that are "best" for the society in general, and for the individuals within. Briefly, Rawls concluded that from "the original position," the fundamental rules of justice would mandate equal justice and equal opportunity, and would allow unequal distributions of wealth provided such distributions are "to the advantage of the least favored."

*A Theory of Justice* helped to bring to a close a rather barren era in moral philosophy, an era in which ethical philosophy was captivated and confined by conceptual analysis. Its publication in 1971 came at a time of revival of "normative ethics" – of engagement with issues of public policy and personal conduct -- and it significantly advanced that revival.

Tall, slim, and mild-mannered, John Rawls was both a commanding and an endearing figure, much admired by his profession, and personally esteemed by those who knew him. By all accounts, his life exemplified the philosophy of tolerance, compassion and duty that he articulated. I met him only a few times, and had just one lengthy conversation with him – some ten years ago, at a symposium on his philosophy at the University of California, Riverside. In that conversation, the preceding reputation of his gentleness, wisdom and humanity was fully confirmed.

Rawls agreed, without hesitation, that his brand of liberalism has not recently fared well in the arena of American politics, which has moved decidedly in the direction of such libertarians as Milton Friedman and Rawls's late Harvard Colleague, Robert Nozick. This fact bespeaks poorly, I am convinced, not for political liberalism, but for the current condition of American politics. Rawls's theory, "justice as fairness," stands as a beacon of rationality and common decency, as we strive to find our way out of the morass of greed, malice and callousness that now besmirches our political landscape.

Twenty six years ago, I closed my dissertation with these words. They seem equally appropriate today:

[John] Rawls has introduced a provocative conception of justice into contemporary thought.... Surely, through his successful effort to restore to philosophical discourse these recently neglected, yet enduring and substantive moral issues, John Rawls has ably and admirably fulfilled his duty to posterity.

*His life was gentle; and the elements so mix'd in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, This was a man!*

Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override. For this reason, justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others.

John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*