

John Rawls and The Veil of Ignorance



Send him mail.

"Food for Thought" is an original column appearing every other Tuesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Norman Imberman. Norman is a retired podiatrist who loves playing piano, writing music, lawn bowling, bridge, reading, classical music, going to movies, plays, concerts and traveling. He is not a member of any social network, nor does he plan on becoming one. Archived columns can be found here. FFT-only RSS feed available here.

After I asked a few of my liberal friends to recommend some articles or books about the basic principles of liberalism, one of them came back with a recommendation from a friend of his. Below is a short review of the writing of John Bordley Rawls followed by an explanation of the "veil of ignorance," then followed by my analysis of the "veil of ignorance."

John Bordley Rawls (February 21, 1921 - November 24, 2002) was an American philosopher and a leading figure in moral and political philosophy. He held the James Bryant Conant University Professorship at Harvard University.

His magnum opus, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), is now regarded as "one of the primary texts in political philosophy." His work in political philosophy, dubbed Rawlsianism, takes as its starting point the argument that "most reasonable principles of justice are those everyone would accept and agree to from a fair position." Rawls employs a number of thought experiments-including the famous veil of ignorance-to determine what constitutes a fair agreement in which "everyone is impartially situated as equals," in order to determine principles of social justice. He is one of the major thinkers in the tradition of liberal political philosophy. Rawls received both the Schock Prize for Logic and Philosophy and the National Humanities Medal in 1999, the latter presented by President Bill Clinton, in recognition of how Rawls' work "helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy itself."

The *veil of ignorance* and the original position are concepts introduced by John Harsanyi and later appropriated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. It is a method of determining the morality of a certain issue (e.g. slavery) based upon the following principle: imagine that societal roles were completely re-fashioned and redistributed, and that from behind

the veil of ignorance, one does not know what role they will be reassigned. Only then can one truly consider the morality of an issue. For example, whites in the southern United States, pre-Civil War, did indeed condone slavery, but they most likely would not have done so had there been a re-fashioning of society so that they would not know whether they would be the ones enslaved. An important feature of this thought experiment is that one doesn't get to keep any aspects of their current role, even aspects that are an integral part of their self. As put by John Rawls himself ... "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like" (Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*). For example, in the imaginary society, one might or might not be intelligent, rich or born into a preferred class. Since one may occupy any position in the society once the veil is lifted, this theory encourages thinking about society from the perspective of all members.

My Analysis of the "Veil of Ignorance"

1. Either the Rawls thought experiment to determine the morality of fairness is out of line with reality and as such has no value when it comes to the nature of man and reality, or,
2. The veil of ignorance hypothesis is valid, *but* if the voting liberals and the liberal politicians were to adopt its basic premises, they would have to stop proposing their communo-fascist-socialist policies and start allowing things to develop on their own and allow the free market to reign.

They can't have it both ways.

I'll not go into number 1 since it is just an imaginary thought experiment and as such is an ivory tower idea that seems to be a morality determined by consensus. He assumes that all people are equally moral.

Let's assume that number 2 is the correct one—that the veil of ignorance hypothesis is correct. Therefore, in the slavery case, since nobody would want to be enslaved by another, nobody would try to enslave another. ("Do unto others as you would have others do unto you") or ("Don't do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you"). Most of us believe in the golden rule. So far that's fine. To enslave someone is to force them into involuntary servitude, in other words, to force them to serve others involuntarily. With that in mind, aren't I being enslaved by having to pay taxes against my will in order to serve others? When I must serve the needs of the less fortunate against my will, aren't I being enslaved? When I cannot open a new business without the permission of the authorities, aren't I being enslaved? When I must pay an employee a wage that is dictated by the authorities and not what the employee and I agree upon, aren't I being enslaved?

When I want to raise my rents in a rent-controlled apartment and the raise is not approved by the authorities aren't I being enslaved? When I try to open my own post office to deliver first class mail and I am prevented, by force, aren't I being enslaved?

Everyone will agree that theft is defined as the taking of someone's property without his consent. But at the same time the consensus claims that taxation (the taking of my property without my permission) is *not* theft. Isn't that a clear example of a contradiction? With the veil of ignorance philosophy any contradiction can exist even though existence dictates that contradictions cannot exist in reality. To do away with the very nature of a contradiction is to do away with reality, whereby, Casey bar the door, anything goes, anything is possible, everything is relative, there no such thing as an absolute. It sounds like a schizophrenic-*Alice in Wonderland* world to me.

The Democratic Party has been in favor of such legislation for decades. Remember that if I defy their laws, I will be forced to pay some of my property to them as a fine and if I refuse, they will forcibly take away my property and if I resist and try to protect my property from their takeover, I will be incarcerated and if I try to escape, I will be shot. Of course it is not as severe as being enslaved as a cotton-picker on a southern plantation or being enslaved as a rower on an Egyptian slave ship or pyramid worker building the pyramids. The present day enslavement is a softer form of slavery, which makes it that more dangerous since it will creep upon the citizens until it eventually becomes recognizable, but when it may be too late.

It seems to me that even though both political parties favor policies antithetical to the Rawlsianism philosophy (if it is valid), the liberals are masters of abandoning its principles. The logical conclusion that emanates from the veil of ignorance hypothesis does not preach communism, fascism, socialism, democracy or any other form of slavery. It preaches anarchistic-libertarianism—voluntarism.

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